

THE WILLINGBORO NJ SCHOOL DISTRICT AND THE POLITICS OF DECLINE

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BY

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION: The Willingboro New Jersey School District and the Politics of Decline

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Boyd (1976; 1982a; 1983b) examined a concept called “decline” as it applies to school districts. From this perspective, as communities lose resources to support their schools, there are inevitably cut backs to programs and personnel. While school districts are supposed to operate as harmonious organizations that make the best, rational decisions (Callahan 1962; Tyack, 1974), the decline of resources makes that difficult, if not impossible. As a school district is forced to make decisions about how to use limited resources, conflicts occur that tear at the fabric of the harmonious, rational school district.

While Boyd (1976; 1982; 1983b) identified how political decline can impact a school district, he did not examine how a school district reacts to the politics of decline. Often the causes of decline are larger economic and demographic issues outside of the control of the school district (Orfield, 2002). Nonetheless, the school district must cope with these forces and manage the challenges they present in the best way possible. This dissertation examined how a particular school district, Willingboro, New Jersey, navigated the politics of decline during the 1970s.

Willingboro was examined using historical research during the decade in question. Many of Boyd’s (1976; 1982; 1983b) original findings were confirmed. Furthermore, race and racial conflict played a role in Willingboro’s decline. Finally, the failure of the board or the district superintendent to manage the conflict prevented the Willingboro school district from navigating the decade of decline without

damaging the school district. As a result, the Willingboro of the 1970s was crippled and followed a downward spiral as both a community and school district.

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Chapter I - Willingboro

Introduction

Willingboro's programs were solid; high school graduates garnered more than their share of scholarships. The arts thrived; musical organizations – the choirs, jazz band, marching band, concert ensembles and the like – were outstanding and won recognition far beyond Willingboro's borders.

Sports teams were a power in the state. The district was remarkably successful in obtaining federal and state grants to support its programs. Despite the trouble at the top, the school system was operating well and setting examples for the rest of the country in the atmosphere of relative calm. It was not to last. (Suplee, 1995, p. 129)

I began my academic career in the Willingboro Public School District, entering kindergarten in the fall of 1978. My father, a teacher in a nearby school district, referred to Willingboro as a “lighthouse district.” I stayed in the Willingboro Public School District until the fall of my sixth grade year. I thought it was a good place to go to school. However, my parents had a different impression. They believed the best years of the Willingboro school system were behind it and relocated our family to a nearby school district in the mid-1980s.

My parents were right; the district was on the way down. In 2009 it still had not hit rock bottom as it struggled to reverse course and improve after failing to meet goals in state testing, struggling with budget shortfalls, and missing state benchmarks for its operation (Hayes, July 12, 2009 & July 22, 2009).

Willingboro's school district underwent what Boyd (1979b) referred to as decline meaning it was "faced with declining enrollments and funds" and the politics that went with addressing these problems, collectively known as the politics of decline (p. 334). Decline then, is the loss of resources in the form of finances and population. Yet declining enrollments and funds did not occur solely because of issues within the district. These factors were exacerbated by national and state trends, as well as local factors like birthrate, migration, and local economics. As a professional educator, I wondered how the Willingboro School District managed these challenges.

While the school district did not have any control over the economic and demographic forces that caused the decline, it did control how it would react to these developments. The question then is how did the Willingboro Public School District navigate its decline?

While the time frame under study is almost forty years in the past, it has relevance for today. Well into the twenty-first century, school districts within New Jersey, as well as across the nation, are grappling with many of these same forces that cause declining financial fortunes. The case of Willingboro can provide some insight into how one suburban district managed these challenges.

The Rise of Willingboro

The story of the Willingboro Public School District has its roots in the end of the Second World War. After demonstrating military might across the globe, the United States had to follow up a victorious war effort by providing jobs and housing for the returning veterans. Government programs like the GI Bill provided college

education for many of the soldiers who came home and established the basis for post war prosperity (Chafe, 1995).

Housing for the millions of families enjoying the post war prosperity came in the form of suburban homes. While social critics dismissed suburban housing as overly uniform, the inexpensive loans from the VA and FHA made the massive tracts of suburban housing possible and popular (Chafe, 1995). By 1960, twenty-five percent of the nation's population lived in one of these new housing tracts (Chafe, 1995). These new suburbs transformed empty fields to densely populated communities in a short time. The people living in these communities needed social services such as schools. Whereas the children living in the community before its expansion often attended a school in a neighboring community, the new suburban children had the numbers to either transform the existing schools or justify the creation of brand new ones.

One such community was Willingboro, New Jersey. The builder, William Levitt, not only built houses, but also constructed a self-contained community designed to be affordable in New Jersey and in other states. Levitt's formula for Willingboro called for a community of modestly priced homes organized into neighborhoods built around an elementary school, along with shared community shopping, and high schools (Gans, 1967). Here was what could be considered to be a model community comprised of affordable, single-family homes. It would attract hard working families and provide them with a community filled with amenities in close proximity. It afforded the privacy of living in the country with the services of the city.

In 1955, Levitt announced he had purchased all of the land in Willingboro Township, which had consisted largely of small farms (Gans, 1967). He intentionally acquired an entire township to avoid having to deal with multiple political entities (Gans, 1967). By June of 1958 Levitt opened the community to potential buyers and in October of that same year the first residents began to move into their houses (Gans, 1967). This building continued for over a decade, but by 1970 almost all of the building was complete (New Jersey State Legislature Office of Fiscal Affairs, 1976).

Yet initially, Levitt did not provide these amenities for all. His company followed a policy of refusing to sell to African Americans (Gans, 1967). It was not until a 1960 New Jersey State Supreme Court decision affirmed the rights of African Americans to purchase a house in Willingboro did Levitt finally open the community to African Americans (Gans, 1967). African Americans began to move in, but they remained a small minority at the start of the decade (approximately fifty families) (Gans, 1967).

Levitt's new development included the creation of a public school district to serve these new families. The superintendent of the district had a vision of a "middle of the road" school system that he described as "the teaching of traditional skills with individual treatment of the children" (Gans, 1967, p. 87). The school system would balance between the traditional "learn by rote" pedagogy and the more open progressive education. Reflecting this moderate educational philosophy, the superintendent made a commitment to help the average to below average students receive opportunities formerly denied to them (Gans, 1967). He did this by bringing

together both college prep students with those focusing on general education or vocational training (Gans, 1967).

Here was a public school system designed to provide an education for all students. In many ways some of the issues addressed foreshadowed the educational movements in the decades to come, like inclusion and the full service high school. Willingboro was a community where families could move into an affordable house and their children would receive a solid education (Gans, 1967).

The Decline of Willingboro

The sociologist Herbert Gans (1967) spent several years living in Willingboro, and he offers a very comprehensive description of the town and its population as it began. Gans (1967) categorized the people of Willingboro as “lower middle class and working class,” who would be described by the more affluent as rejecting “the ‘good government’ that would create a better community” (p. vi). Willingboro, then, moved from farming community to working class housing development as a result of Levitt’s construction.

As Boyd (1976) indicates, a community consisting primarily of working class citizens is more likely to have conflict relative to its political culture. An early description of the school board in Willingboro lends credence to that idea. The board, dominated by blue-collar community members, struggled with the upper middle class families who lived in the development (Gans, 1967).

There was a time early in the history of the town when the upper-middle class moved to dominate the school board. “Highly educated Levittowners [Willingboro residents] with bright children did not take long to realize that the new school was not

giving their children high priority” (Gans, 1967, p. 92). The particular issue involved the age when students could begin kindergarten; the upper class residents wanted it to be earlier to give their children an academic advantage while the lower status citizens and the board members opposed, stating it would rush children out of the house (Gans, 1967). The superintendent at the time discovered, to his relief, that the advocates for change were an upper-class minority in the school district, and then he felt strong enough to resist the push for a change (Gans, 1967).

By 1960, when it was time for school board and budget elections, class tensions came to the forefront (Gans, 1967). The budget was defeated and three board members were replaced with individuals associated with the Democratic/Catholic political organization that was primarily composed of working class residents (Gans, 1967). The board began the decade of the 1960s dominated by individuals representing the interests of blue collar and lower middle class families.

The stage was set. On the one hand, there was a solid school system in place that appeared to balance traditionalism with progressivism. “The teachers gave their students individual attention and demanded neither superior intellectual achievement nor oppressive memorizing” (Gans, 1967, p. 101). However, the school board was dominated by working class individuals, and such a make up would lead to a greater possibility of a political culture based on conflict (Boyd, 1976).

Willingboro’s decline is also tied to national economic trends. The United States was subject to economic changes during the 1970s that reduced the number of well paying industrial jobs further magnified by a lack of economic growth (Chafe, 1995). As a community of working class and lower middle class families,

Willingboro would have felt the results of deindustrialization most closely, further reducing the resources available to the school district.

By 2008, fifty years after its founding, Willingboro has a very different reputation as a school district. At its peak in 1972-73, Willingboro had nearly 16,000 students enrolled (the State of New Jersey Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Education, 1972-73). By the year 2008-2009, the student enrollment had fallen to less than 5,000 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Furthermore, from a peak of 14 schools in 1977-78, the school district has only eight schools in operation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009; Suplee, 1995).

In Burlington County the district has been labeled as a “bad district,” noted for its rancorous school board meetings, revolving superintendents, and low performing schools; it has reached a point where the district sponsors a “funday” on the first day of school in an effort to reduce some of the negativity from the previous years (Hayes, 2008). In 2008, observers noted “Willingboro desperately needs to improve its schools if it is to continue attracting affluent settlers. Yet it is finding it ever harder to persuade residents to pay for them” (An Age of Transformation, 2008, p. 30).

This dissertation examined the case of the Willingboro Public School District and its decline. In particular, *how did the school district in Willingboro navigate through its decline?* The term “decline” is borrowed from Boyd (1976; 1979b; 1982; 1983b) to mean the trend of declining enrollment and resources that a school district goes through over a period of time and the resulting political activity that accompanies the community’s efforts to address the decline. It is a process rather than

a singular event. The dissertation begins with a review of the extant research on declining communities as well as school board conflict to place the case of Willingboro in context of the research literature. Later the dissertation undertakes an historical examination of the politics of decline that the Willingboro public school district experienced from 1970 through 1979. From this narrative, the actions of various educational leaders, as well as politicians, are analyzed and critiqued, providing insight into how this district wrestled with the politics of declining fortunes. Furthermore, the district's actions are examined in light of larger state level and national economic, social, and political events.

Currently within New Jersey, as tough economic times and tight budgets predominate, communities are faced with declining economic resources. No matter how affluent the district may be today, the specter of economic decline looms. In fact, by 2008, many affluent communities had “been hammered by foreclosures and falling house prices. As a result, their budgets are a mess” (An Age of Transformation, 2008, p. 30). School leaders, working to preserve quality public school systems, need to understand how to navigate the politics of that decline. The case of Willingboro provides an instructional opportunity for intensive historical study. The proposal may provide insight into how a district might manage (or not manage) decline.

Conceptual Framework

Decline

One of the leading causes of conflict within a school board is community decline. The decline of an apparently stable community may have several causes. Orfield (2002) provides insight into this phenomenon. In an aging suburban

community, competition from more recent housing developments with nicer houses and the decline of the baby-boomer population reduces demand for existing housing (Orfield, 2002). This opens the way for less affluent families to enter the community, creating a vicious circle because, “as the number of poor school children grows, demand for local housing gradually declines” (Orfield, 2002, p. 9). As the number of poor families increases, this may create a situation where “middle class families of all races with children that have residential choices will leave the community, and they will eventually be followed by other middle-class segments of the housing market” (Orfield, 2002, p. 10). This whole process reduces the demand for houses, further weakening the real estate market in a community.

In the United States, this process of decline is difficult to separate from the issue of racism and white flight. Latino and black families looking for middle class housing outside of cities are typically channeled into less affluent communities. The result is a process that brings about a decline of a community with previously adequate levels of resources. When the percentage of minority residents reaches a “tipping point” that causes white home owners to perceive a decline in the community, they move out triggering a downward spiral in housing prices which further reduces community resources and solidifies the perceptions of a declining community (Orfield, 2002).

So, through a combination of factors like changing demographics, competing suburban communities, and racially motivated white-flight, a formerly economically sound suburban community can find itself in decline. Whites have shown a disinclination to remain in neighborhoods with large percentages of minorities and

will leave (Emerson, Chai, & Yancey, 2001; Liska, Logan, & Bellair, 1998). The movement of African Americans and other minorities into the suburbs is a nationwide trend with suburban minority populations growing from 19% to 27% even in the 1990s, but these suburbs are fiscally stressed with neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (Anyon, 2005). Dropping property values and the exodus of ratepayers, such as local businesses that would have paid more in property taxes, means less money for providing community services, including public education.

The school board then must try to support the public schools with a less affluent community. Furthermore, “most of the suburban places experiencing rapid school change and decline also have relatively few tax resources” (Orfield, 2002, p. 16). So the community will have far fewer resources to support its schools.

Conflict

One possible result of decline is conflict. Conflict is seen as “troubling” when describing school boards and the research on that subject goes back many years (Boyd, 1979b; 1982a; 1983a; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Conflict is not in of itself a bad thing since people may disagree, but frequent conflict that is poorly managed can lead to a dysfunctional school district (Boyd, 1976).

The roots of the modern school board are found in the Progressive Era where reformers sought to apply reason and scientific methods to government; from this perspective school boards should consist of rational, non-partisan, professionals who make the right decisions for the right reasons (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1974). According to this viewpoint, for school board members, “there was no partisan way

to build streets or schools, only a right way” (Boyd, 1983b, p. 10). For political elites, partisan dissension and conflict had no place in the running of a school district since rational people should be able to look at the different options and choose the one best option available (Boyd, 1979b; Boyd, 1982; Boyd, 1983b; Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1974).

Yet it is easy for school leaders and school board members to be rational when there are abundant resources since one can afford to be detached and reflective when there is no concern about whether there will be a roof over one’s head or a meal on one’s table. Ultimately, it is possible to give something to everyone in such a scenario. However, when there are declining resources, rationality becomes more of a challenge. As Boyd (1982a) found, retrenchment decisions do “produce emotion, conflict, and complex cascades of secondary issues and demands” (p. 65). Furthermore, Boyd (1983b) argued that “the overall effect of the context of decline is inevitably a scramble for scarce resources, intensifying special interest-group activity and politicisation [sic] of education” (p. 10). Whether the decision is reached rationally or not, there are clear winners and losers. As a result, school boards that were intended to be dispassionate bodies who create policy for the “public good” can become focus points for conflict as different groups squabble over limited, even vanishing, resources. A school board that is intended to function as a rational decision making body may not be able to prevent conflict.

While conflict may be unavoidable in a community in decline, it can adversely affect the delivery of education. Boyd (1976) noted three results of conflict among school board members:

1. The freedom of school administrators to act is curtailed.
2. School officials are incapacitated because of the emergence of political fighting in a typically apolitical environment.
3. Conflict will lead to new board members, ultimately a new superintendent, and then a shift in policy and practice (p. 6).

Conflict can also erode the trust between the selected administrators and the elected board members (Boyd, 1979b; 1982). In turn, this may reduce the ability of school administrators to make changes and adjust to changing circumstances, thereby reducing the effectiveness of a school.

Conflict can come in the many forms such as between factions on the school board, between the board and the community, or between the teachers and administrators of the district. Therefore, avoiding or limiting conflict can be an important role that a school administrator can play. However, because school administrators and school boards are not typically well versed in how to manage conflict because conflict is not seen as a part of the non-partisan school district and this lack of experience makes it difficult to manage the conflict successfully (Boyd, 1976).

The conflict can result in changes within the governing structure of a school district. Iannaccone and Lutz (1970) predict such a scenario because of the changing nature of the community in relation to the school board. In their words,

When the governing structure fails to respond to a new set of values of an incoming population, groups representing the new set of values are likely to develop a new, competing structure. Conflict between the old

and the new structures will result. (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970, pp. 95-96)

While the old and new guards will come into conflict because of different values, there will be other sources of conflict as well. In a declining community, there are fewer resources so there are fights between groups who seek the limited resources for the benefit of their own partisans (Boyd, 1979b; 1983a). Boyd (1979b) describes this situation where “an expanding budgetary pie, and slack resources with which to buy off conflict and mollify antagonists are gone” (p. 334). Where there used to be enough for all the parties to get something, the situation changes to where one group’s gains come at the expense of another. “Put another way, there is a fundamental shift from distributive to redistributive politics: a shrinking budget creates clear winners and losers” (Boyd, 1983b, p. 12). Once there are fewer resources to go around, different groups are asked to give up something that goes to some other group (Boyd; 1979b; 1982; 1983a, 1983b). Resources are redistributed, and this can develop into a tremendous source of conflict as different sectors mobilize to protect what they have and to take the resources of others.

Furthermore, there will be conflict relative to the various subunits within the school district, like academic departments, athletics, and special education, to name just a few. As Gray and Ariss (1985) argued, “political behavior often develops before or during organizational change when what is in the best interests of one group or subunit is perceived by another group to be counter to its best interest” (p. 717). Not only would the school board have its politics shaped by conflict within the school district organization, but the decline could further exacerbate rifts in the community.

Most notably, Boyd (1983b) points out that young families relying on school services will come into conflict with older community members who do not need the school services anymore and look to direct limited community resources elsewhere.

Conflict, then, can be an inherent part of school board politics during a time of decline. Declining resources create disputes between multiple groups that the school board would have to resolve. Because board members will need to address so much conflict, the situation creates a disincentive for service among board members. Boyd (1982) found that more “capable people,” as determined by the status of their job, were less willing to serve on school boards that were in the midst of conflict because of declining resources. So, board politics tend to be dominated by conflict during a period of decline and that would be exacerbated by the fact that citizens who would potentially be more adept at dealing with the conflict would be less willing to serve on the board.

Aside from a board having to cope with the conflict precipitated by decline, there are a number of other issues that would shape their politics. First, the board would need to cope with greater and more intense participation by all stakeholders when decisions are made. Boyd (1983b) remarks that “retrenchment activates wide and intense participation” since all the subgroups in the organization want to make sure they get their fair share and that the organization’s limited resources do not go to someone else (p. 12). Board members in declining communities would find that their decisions will be made in the glare of public scrutiny whereas before no one paid them much mind.

Boards of education in communities facing decline will also have to deal with the politics of low morale in the organization as resources become scarcer (Boyd, 1983a). The constant threat posed by possible cuts will wear on district personnel, and the board will need to provide reassurance to its employees and community.

As the school board in a declining community struggles with how to operate on fewer resources, another political issue it will need to wrestle with is the decision to reduce instructional staff (teachers) or reduce non-instructional staff (administrators, secretaries, janitors, cooks, etcetera) (Boyd, 1982; Boyd, 1983a; 1983b; Whetton, 1980). Boyd (1983a; 1983b) observes that this will be a political challenge since careful planning is necessary when an organization needs to do more with less, and that places a focus on administrators for the coordination of how the limited resources will be utilized. On the other hand, “the ability to do this is frequently challenged by the view that the administrative component in organizations should be cut to the bone before the service delivery component is weakened” (Boyd, 1983b, p. 13).

In planning for decline, a school board will need to win political support for the idea of “strategic cuts.” The politically expedient way to carry out cuts would be to make small budget reductions across the organization that do not affect anyone to a great degree. However, the politically challenging task is to “dramatize the opportunity costs of not cutting back by making clear the *specific* consequences for the organization and individuals associated with it” (Boyd, 1983a, p. 257--emphasis in the original). In other words, strategic, thoughtful cuts with an eye to the future may not be politically popular when implemented, but it is a political task that the

school district will need to accomplish in a time of scarcity so that the most important aspects of the school district continue to function successfully.

A school district wrestling with the politics of decline will also have to operate more efficiently. This becomes a political issue because efficiency is contingent on greater centralized planning and direction. This greater centralization often undermines the autonomy of teachers, administrators, and other staff members thereby creating a double edged sword of greater cost efficiency at the price of alienating different parts of the school district community (Boyd, 1983a; 1983b). This political task of generating support for this type of initiative would be another challenge in the political realm for boards in these communities.

Labor relations are yet another political issue that the school districts must address when their resources begin to vanish. The challenge will be to retain quality employees and continue to attract others to the district with good compensation packages while at the same time to confront the fiscal reality of smaller budgets. An example of this type of political peril comes from Detroit where the school board repeatedly had problems with the teachers' union during the 1980s (Mirel, 1998). The board could not afford to pay the teachers competitive salaries, yet it needed the support of the teachers in order to improve the schools (Mirel, 1998). This would be an example of "opportunity cost" related to cuts. School communities enduring declining resources will need to decide which parts of the educational program to preserve and to make the strategic cuts in order to make that possible. That necessitates political activity by school leaders and board members to gain support for whatever plan is developed.

A final political issue that school boards in declining districts will need to address is the subject of school closings. A school district wrestling with declining resources often needs to reduce the number of facilities it is operating, and this can create a host of political issues (Narver, Weatherly, & Elmore, 1982; Wood & Boyd, 1981). Even in a suburban community where “neighborhoods” can be difficult to define, a school can have the effect of creating a neighborhood and establishing an identity in a process labeled “neighborhood apperception” (Wood & Boyd, 1981, p. 98). Therefore the decision to close schools and which schools to close is a political decision that the board must undertake with great caution. Narver, Weatherly, and Elmore (1982) believe this process must be done in as rational a manner as possible and point to the success of the Seattle School Board’s process of school closing as a model. In contrast, Wood and Boyd (1981) suggest that often the old, out of date school that is the rational choice to close because of the expense of running and maintaining the older building is offset by the fact that an older building is more enmeshed in the community. Consequently it is more difficult to gather the political support to close such a building. Wood and Boyd (1981) suggest a process to make the political decision to close buildings in a school district that takes into account factors like transiency of the population, community boundaries, and importance of the school to a community.

Through this all, decline can trigger conflict in school districts. It suddenly moves school boards into the realm of making decisions where there will be clear winners and losers. Where board members may have been willing to seek the one best solution for everyone, they find themselves in a world where they must choose

between bad choices. That is not a pleasant position to be in and often generates anger and resentment. This makes it more difficult for organizations to function and for members to cooperate to solve the problems caused by decline (Boyd 1982; 1983b; Gray & Aris, 1985).

Community decline is intricately connected to social class; families with resources who live in a declining community can leave, while the poor cannot always afford to do so. In fact, the non-partisan, rational school board model created by middle class reformers is actually a disadvantage for lower socioeconomic communities (Boyd, 1979b). In blue-collar communities, political parties were more prominent organizations than in white-collar communities, and therefore the exclusion of political parties from school boards was an aberration, not a reform (Boyd, 1976).

Furthermore, working class communities have a greater tolerance for conflict in governmental organizations like school boards. “While in the white-collar districts ‘politics’ was shunned as unseemly, unnecessary, and improper because it was believed a common interest could and should be defined, in the blue-collar districts competing interests and points of view tended to be an acceptable fact of life” (Boyd, 1976, p. 21). As a community goes into decline, political conflict will emerge at the school board level. This is a result, in part, of the changing social class of the community.

On the one hand, there is the argument that working class community members do not have the organizational/management skills needed to avoid and/or address conflict. Minar (1966) argued that the high status districts possessed greater

skills in conflict management and conflict resolution, while the lower status districts did not have that those skills in the community to tap. Boyd (1976) built on this research and added the concept of the political culture of a community and how that culture can be used to predict conflict and conflict resolution. In his research, Boyd (1976) classified communities as to whether they were “private-regarding” or “public-regarding” cultures, and he found with regard to conflict in those communities that it was:

Due both to differences in political culture and in the level of management resources. It appears that in “normal” cases, higher status districts will tend to have public-regarding cultures (which tend to lead to harmony and the avoidance of conflict) as well as plentiful management resources, while lower status districts will tend to have private-regarding cultures (which tend to lead to tension and conflict) coupled with meager management resources. (Boyd, 1976, p. 29)

In short, the social class composition of the community can be a potential harbinger of highly charged school board politics. The political culture of a school district can lean toward conflict and a willingness to see conflict as a regular part of politics, and this includes non-partisan school boards. Furthermore, the expectation among lower status groups that politics serve personal benefits contributes to the possibility of political conflict at the school board level. This “private-regarding” political culture can contribute to clashes on the school board since it encourages a perspective of self-interest at the expense of others (Boyd, 1976).

Willingboro and Decline

Willingboro's decline can be conceptualized using class as well as race. Conceptualizing events in terms of class typically implies a conflict. As Burke (1992) writes when describing history relative to class, "the different functions of these classes give them conflicting interests and make them likely to think and act in different ways. Hence history is a story of class conflict" (p. 59). Willingboro did not witness class conflict in the traditional Marxist sense. The oppressed working class did not storm any palaces or put exploitive capitalists on trial. Rather, the working class came to dominate the town politically, setting in motion a process where upper middle class, typically white citizens left, taking their political skills that downplayed conflict as well as their financial resources with them. As was described above, at its beginning Willingboro was a community that was comprised largely of working class and lower middle class families (Gans, 1967). Initially, there was a challenge by the upper middle class interests in how the schools would be structured and run, but that challenge was defeated and the working class and lower middle class factions came to dominate Willingboro (Gans, 1967).

As Boyd (1976 & 1983b) reported, the political culture of conflict is more likely to be present in poor and working class communities, and this conflict can damage the effectiveness of a school system. Willingboro's reputation as a district dominated by conflict would appear to fit this model. Furthermore, Orfield (2002) notes how the increased number of minorities in a community can lead to its decline, consistent with the demographic changes in Willingboro that paralleled its decline. As

Orfield (2002) described, this growth of the minority population is often among minorities of lower social class.

Based on the literature, there are two factors that seem to be intimately connected in United States public school districts coping with the politics of decline: race and class. Therefore, it would be appropriate to analyze the history of the Willingboro School District's decline in terms of class and race. I would theorize that Willingboro's decline as a school district can be tied to two processes, the first involving class and the second involving race.

With regard to class, according to Gans (1967) when Willingboro was first established as a Levitt community, it was designed to appeal to white, working and lower middle class families. Early in the life of the community, there was a debate about who would dominate the school system. In 1960, the upper middle class faction was defeated, and the school board came under the firm control of the working class segments of the community. Boyd (1976 & 1983b) found that working class communities are more inclined to engage in political conflict. I contend that Willingboro had a political culture that embraced oppositional methods in which factionalism triumphed rather than consensus decision-making. The political culture that developed in the Willingboro Public School District was ill-equipped to handle the challenges that were to come.

The second aspect of the politics of decline in the Willingboro Public School System is tied to race. At its inception, African Americans were actively excluded from Willingboro. Salesmen for Levitt guaranteed that "the community would be as lily-white as the other Levittowns" (Gans, 1967, p. 14). Racism was at work when

Willingboro was established, and this pernicious force would have a hand in its decline as well once African Americans began to move into the community. Orfield (2002) describes a process whereby racism can drive a community into decline. In summary, Orfield (2002) notes that suburbs attract working and middle class minorities, just as would be the case for white families, but the difference is that racist attitudes create white flight once the minority population reaches a certain level and this drives down property values and brings in groups from lower social classes. Just such a process occurred in Willingboro. The African American population went from zero in 1960 to approximately twelve percent in 1970 and was close to two-thirds of the population by the 1990 census (in Rauch, 2008).

Black suburbanization had been occurring since the late 1960s and early 1970s, resulting in higher black population in the previously all white suburbs, and Willingboro fit into this trend (Collins & Downes, 1982; Farley, 1970; Katzman, 1983). Likewise, the increased number of African Americans in suburbia was countered by white flight (Emerson, Chai, & Yancey, 2001; Katzman, 1983; Liska, Logan, & Bellair, 1998; Ornstein, 1984; & Rossell & Hawley, 1982). As Baron (1971), Orfield (2002), Schneider and Ji (1990), as well as Collins and Dawes (1982) note, white flight can leave a community resource poor and unable to support its community services.

Willingboro was also subject to national economic trends. As has been noted, Willingboro was a working class, older suburb that lacked the amenities to compete with newer subdivisions in the region. Furthermore, the specter of racism was displaying itself in the white flight from the community. Both of these trends reduced

the resources available to the community and resulted in the declining school enrollments, both hallmarks of Boyd's (1979b) decline. Added to this was deindustrialization of the United States in the 1970s. The 1970s witnessed "the end of economic growth" in post World War II America (Chafee, 1995, p. 431). This economic malaise disproportionately affected the working class. Not only were there fewer jobs in industry due to economic changes, but automation eliminated many existing jobs as well (Chafee, 1995). Nationally, the working class was declining, and that was also true for the working class in Willingboro. This national economic trend further exacerbated the conditions in Willingboro and contributed to the political decline of the Willingboro Public School District.

The political decline of Willingboro is reflected in these statistics from the Census Bureau that show various trends in Willingboro.

Table 1

	1970	1980	Percent Change
Total Population	43,386	39,912	-8.0%
African American Residents	4,738	15,102	218%
Median Family Income	\$ 26,045	\$ 25,702	-1.3%
Median Value of Houses	\$ 21,414	\$ 40,700	90.1% (lowest percent increase in Burlington County)

All dollars are in 1979 dollars

From: *Burlington County Census Trends: 1970-1980*

The figures show a decline in overall population, the results of white flight, and the family median income and median value of houses grow at a much slower rate than other municipalities in Burlington County, New Jersey. In general, the numbers reflect declining population and declining resources, two characteristics of political decline (Boyd, 1979b).

Therefore, the decline of the Willingboro School District should be examined closely using an historical methodology. The district's decline appears to have a connection with both class and racial conflict. Anyon (1997) noted a similar conceptualization in her study of Newark schools where "the social class and racial status of the overall city and neighborhood population has been closely correlated with the level of the city's investment in education and with the district's success in educating its student population" (p. 155). This study was similarly conceived but

with a focus on a suburban community rather than an urban one. In examining how the Willingboro public school system navigated the politics of decline, the two conceptual themes of race and class conflict may provide insight into other New Jersey and American communities.

Methodology

This story of the decline of the Willingboro School District is a history. It recounts the process by which the district moved from a well-regarded public school district in 1970 through its decline until 1979. This range encompassed Willingboro's heyday as well as its decline.

A history is useful because it tells a factual story. However, it is important to acknowledge that a history tells a story from the point of view of the sources used as well as from the perspective of the historian. As Burke (2001) noted, "historians have come to see many of their sources as stories told by particular people rather than objective reflections of the past" (p. 284). As a result, the sources used to compose this narrative history determined the perspective on the history that will ultimately be written.

The major sources were accounts from the local newspaper, the *Burlington County Times*. This is the paper of record for the area, founded the same year as William Levitt established his new community. The *Burlington County Times* provides an account of the town and its school district.

Outside of the newspaper accounts, there were other primary sources that offer information for the narrative of Willingboro's decline. These include demographic reports on the township, financial statements of the school district,

union newsletters, secondary histories of the township, as well as minutes from school board meetings. These sources provided additional information to construct the history of Willingboro's decline.

These documentary resources were analyzed to tell the story of how Willingboro's school district navigated decline. The sources under discussion were originally written for another purpose. For example, a newspaper account of a board meeting was written to inform readers about what happened at that meeting. However, a series of these articles over time could reveal how the school navigated declining enrollment, declining funds, and the resulting conflicts. Since it is a history, there was no formulaic method that was used to evaluate each document. However, the goal was to find trends that may not have been obvious to contemporary observers, but become clear when seen from an historical perspective.

The drawback of using these sources was that most are the "official" voice and the "official" story. It is important to acknowledge the bias of the methodology and how it shaped the account that was created. It tells the story of the Willingboro Public School District, but it does not adequately tell the story of the average person's experience in the school district. However, this research is intended to be useful to educational researchers and leaders who will be part of the officialdom that will be its focus. Therefore the methodology's drawbacks did not diminish the value for the intended audience.

Furthermore, there was a conscious decision to not use oral histories. In this researcher's opinion, the reflection of participants thirty years after these volatile facts would be warped by time as well as by nostalgia. Consequently, the written

documents from the actual time period under study will provide a more balanced description of the events under review.

Summary

Willingboro was a community designed with great promise. It offered amenities in an effort to combine what was best from the urban environment with what was best from the rural environment. The community also intended to provide a quality public education to students, initially just white students but eventually all. For a time, Willingboro met that expectation. Yet today, its school system is poorly regarded. The community went through a period of economic decline and it still has not recovered. How did the Willingboro public school district navigate the politics of decline? That question can be answered through an historical study of the district.

Chapter II – The Early 1970s: The Cracks Appear

1970 – *Lack of Confidence Breeds Loss of Confidence* (Blanchard,

1970 September 7, p. 6)

The year 1970 found Willingboro at a crossroads. According to the 1970 census, it was the largest community in Burlington County with a total population of 43,000 souls, nearly 16,000 more than any other municipality in Burlington County (*Burlington County Census Trends: 1970 – 1980*, 1985, p. 5). Furthermore, it was not done growing. New houses continued to be built and new schools finished as Levitt wrapped up his model community in Burlington County, New Jersey (Pearsall, 1970, June 2). The taxable value of the community was sixty percent greater than the next wealthiest municipality in Burlington County (West, 1970, February 10).

While the community showed such great promise, there were some clouds on the horizon that become apparent, especially in hindsight. These included an intense amount of conflict within the school board as well as between the school board and the community. As was noted before, Willingboro's working class and lower middle class population lent itself to a political culture based on conflict (Boyd, 1976).

Furthermore, the community as a whole was suffering from racial problems that foreshadowed the white flight that would contribute to Willingboro's decline.

Therefore, 1970 serves as good starting point to examine how the Willingboro school district navigated the challenges of a declining community.

Politically, Willingboro began 1970 with the deadline to file for the school board elections on January 2 (School Races Take Form, 1970, January 3). In this

election, eleven candidates filed petitions for three openings, a very high ratio compared to the other communities in Burlington County (School Races Take Form, 1970, January 3). While the field of candidates was ultimately winnowed down to ten, the previous year's elections had been uncontested (Panella, 1970, February 1). The



Figure 1: Willingboro School Board 1970 - Sitting: Mr. Roy Paige, Robert Reynolds, Dr. Bruno Dattilo, Jr., president, Col. Alfred Denning; Standing: Mr. Allen Denning, Mr. John G. Brenner, Mr. Joseph A. Brancaccio, Mr. Octavius Reid. From: *Gryphon*, (p. 34), 1970.

issues that brought out all of these candidates included community growth, board relations with the public, and racial tensions (Panella, 1970, February 1).

The state of this election reflected some of the deeper points of conflict in the community.

The decline of resources was not an issue yet considering Willingboro's continued growth. Nonetheless, the fact that there was such an interest in running for the open seats illustrated the community's dissatisfaction with the board and foreshadowed future issues. If the community did not trust the board in good times, how would this lack of trust play out when times became more difficult to navigate as a result of financial hardships? One of the most pressing issues for the board was the rising racial tensions in the community. While this would at times break into violent conflict in the community and the schools, it also set up the process for white flight from the community, which would leave the district resource poor in the future.

When the ballots were counted after elections, the board had not changed much at all. The two incumbents who ran were re-elected, but the results reflected the divisions in the community (Voters Reject Twelve School Budgets, 1970, February 11). The top vote getter received only 1,400 votes and six of the candidates received over eight hundred votes (Voters Reject Twelve School Budgets, 1970, February 11). With no clear mandate for any candidate and his platform, the school board was unable to move clearly in any one direction, and conflicts among the school board members were left unresolved.

This conflict among the board, as well as between the board and the community, played itself out in one of the major issues of the year, the question of whether or not the community needed a second high school. As Willingboro grew, the number of students overwhelmed the available classroom space. By September of 1970, the high school would be operating on split sessions to accommodate its students (JFK High Sets Split Sessions, 1970, September 5). The board itself was divided between individuals who favored adding on to the current high school and those who wanted a new high school, but disagreed as to the best location (Willingboro Mulling Various School Sites, 1970, June 16). These disagreements were voiced at a public meeting and one board member accused another of wanting to establish a “factory” by building on to the current high school (Willingboro Mulling Various School Sites, 1970, June 16). There was even public discussion about who should be credited with identifying the building sites first (Willingboro Mulling Various School Sites, 1970, June 16).

When the board finally made its decision to build a new school, the Township Planning Board first rejected the plan and demanded more information from the school board, stating that “it is \$9.5 million of the taxpayers money and we want to be careful in our review” (Pearsall, 1970, September 1, p.1). The comment suggested that the school board was not being careful enough with their review of how to spend taxpayer money. This reflected the conflict between the school district and the township government.

When the local paper, the *Burlington County Times*, ran an editorial on the new school proposal, the editor asked “are you sold on the sellers – the School Board?” clearly implying that most people in Willingboro were not (Papiernik, 1970, October 7, p. 6). He continued several days later by writing,

So now the school board is coming to us and saying, “If you don’t vote for the school bond issue, you will be hurting the children.”

Well, I don’t buy that.

I believe that continuing along the same line we have been following, will hurt the children much more than a year’s delay in the construction program. (Papiernik, 1970, October 8, p. 6)

His argument was seconded by community members who wrote letters to the editor that stated: “EDUCATION, YES! MEMORIALS TO SCHOOL BOARDS, NO!” (Vincent, R. & B, 1970, October 8, p. 6). The community’s level of trust in the school was clearly not sufficient. When the votes were counted from the referendum for the new school over 60% of the votes cast were against the new school (Pearsall, 1970,

October 14). Only three of the 35 voting districts in Willingboro voted in favor of the new school (Pearsall, 1970, October 14).

A few weeks later, concerned about the effect high inflation would have on the costs of a new school, the Willingboro School Board again held an election for another bond referendum to build a new high school, scaling the school down slightly from the previous proposal (Pearsall, 1970, October 20). Like the first referendum to build a new school, it too was defeated, but this time by a two-to-one margin (Pearsall, 1970, December 16). The editors of the *Burlington County Times* argued that the Willingboro School Board needed to do a better job of cultivating the community and developing support for the new school proposal and that the voters “must be rallied to the cause rather than just sold” (Open-Door Policy, 1970, December 18, p. 6).

In this important matter of building a new school, the Willingboro School Board did not have the trust of the community. While the board portrayed the issue as one of taxes, the letters to the editor as well as the editorials in the local newspaper reflected this distrust for the school board. This was further reflected in September of 1970 when the district’s administrators all received a raise, causing the local paper to publish an editorial titled, “Lack of Candor Breeds Loss of Confidence” (Blanchard, 1970, September 7, p. 6). In terms of political capital that the board would have to tap in times of decline, the Willingboro School Board did not have any reserves to call on for the future.

In another storyline from 1970, the culture of conflict was reflected in the relations with the Willingboro Education Association, the union that represented the

teachers. The contracts for the teachers at this time lasted one year and followed the calendar year, as opposed to the academic year. The year 1970 began with an expired contract from the year before and both parties deadlocked and unable to reach a settlement. Once the contract talks reached an impasse and a state mediator was assigned to help break the deadlock, the disagreement between the board and the teachers' association got worse. The school board called a press conference to present its side of the story after they believed the teachers' association broke the agreement not to discuss negotiations in public (Powers, 1970, January 13). The board alleged that the Willingboro Education Association "negotiated like a labor union but want to be treated like professional people" (Powers, 1970, January 13, p. 16).

Relations soured through the winter and spring. The association claimed the board was not making a good faith effort to meet with mediators and blamed, among other things, the superintendent's trip to Puerto Rico for this inability to meet (WEA Hits Reuben Trip, 1970, January 26). By February the talks between the board and the association had moved to fact-finding, and there was some talk about a strike (Strike is Possible if Agreement Fails, 1970, February 27). By the start of April, the board and the association had the fact finder's report, but the board was unwilling to accept the report, the teachers rejected the board's counterproposal, and the paper trumpeted on the front page that "Willingboro Teacher Strike 'A Possibility'" (West, 1970, April 2, p. 1). That possibility was dodged when a few days later, the board and the association reached an agreement on a contract (Panella, 1970, April 6). This process underscored how conflict was central to the functioning of the board of education and its interaction with other groups.

While the conflict in the way the Willingboro Board of Education conducted business appeared inherent, the issue of decline had not yet surfaced. However, by 1970, the decline was already being foreshadowed in the form of racial conflict. In March of 1970, the township established a Human Relations Council to strive toward equal opportunity in the areas of housing, employment, law, and education (Human Relations Group Organized in Willingboro, 1970, March 5). A few days later, this establishment appeared particularly prescient. On March 11, a story in the local newspaper described the situation this way: “Two days of fist fighting between white and black teenagers in Willingboro have resulted in beefed up police patrols and hurriedly scheduled meetings between school, township, and police officials” (Lerner, 1970, March 11, p. 1).

The Willingboro School District continued to be plagued by racial conflicts throughout 1970. The school board formed an Intergroup Relations Council to address racial disputes (Board OKs Relation Unit, 1970, March 11). Moreover, the board moved to develop a new student code of conduct designed to ensure rules were enforced equitably, regardless of the race of the individual students (Willingboro Board of Education, 1970, April 13). They went so far as to acknowledge that students were being treated differently because of race and to mandate a certain number of minority teachers be placed on the committee developing the new code of conduct (Willingboro Board of Education, 1970, April 13).

However, these efforts did not stop a series of fights between black and white students throughout the spring, culminating with the closing of the high school, JFK, as a result of racial tensions (Lerner & Maloney, 1970, April 29). When the school

reopened, plainclothes policemen were in the hallways “after a number of parents voiced concerns for the safety of their daughters” (Police Patrol Kennedy High Halls, 1970, May 5, p. 1). This statement reflected the deep-seated racial concerns and bigoted stereotypes present in the whites of Willingboro.

These racial disputes that plagued Willingboro set a fuse that would burn throughout the decade. Willingboro began the decade with a clear white majority. African Americans made up 11% of the total population at the start of the decade; by the end of the decade they constituted 38%, even though there was an overall decline in the town’s population (*Burlington County Department of Economic Development*, 1985). White flight, as noted in the introduction, can cause numerous problems in a community since the white population that leaves tends to have greater affluence than the African Americans who replace them, causing a subsequent decline in the town’s resources (Baron, 1971; Collins & Dawes, 1982; Orfield, 2002; Schneider & Ji, 1990).

These disputes between racial groups revealed a split between a board member and the superintendent over the way to respond to the racially motivated disturbances. At a public meeting of the Intergroup Relations Council, Alphonse Brancaccio announced his intention to introduce a resolution that would “get rid of the troublemakers” at the high school that he saw as the root of the racial problems (Official Favors Get Tough Step in School Policy, 1970, May 7, p. 1). In contrast, the superintendent, Gabriel Reuben, at a Rotary meeting commented on the need to create an appeal group for students to voice their concerns, and he went on to express overall satisfaction with the disciplinary procedures at the school (Willingboro School

Head Sees Need for Changes, 1970, May 8). Here the administrative leader of the school district was in conflict with at least one member of his board. Reuben was not an iron-fisted disciplinarian, and this board member clearly wanted that type of response to the racial issues.

Reuben was characterized as “an urbane progressive educator” (Suplee, 1995, p. 127). He advocated open classrooms, individualized programs, and was known for working to bring disparate groups such as employees and differing racial and ethnic groups



together (Suplee, 1995). In his own words, Reuben described his leadership as one where, “a climate has been created for change. Where the focus has traditionally been on subject matter in the Willingboro schools, it is fast moving to the learners... and flexibility has become the byword in administrative decision making” (Willingboro Board of Education, 1970, May 25, p. 330).

By May, it was time for the board to determine whether or not to grant the superintendent tenure. In a unique twist, Reuben was granted tenure and then he resigned - at the same meeting (Pearsall, 1970, May 26). He publicly attributed his move to opportunities in another district, but in an interview with the paper “Reuben

Figure 2: Dr. Gabriel H. Reuben, Superintendent of Schools. From *Gryphon*, (p. 34), 1970.

emphasized yesterday that he is not and never had been interested in ‘working for a school board that is not, in the majority, behind me,’” and there was some question as

to whether or not he would receive tenure until the board actually voted (Pearsall, 1970, May 22, p. 14).

By December of 1970, there was still no replacement for the superintendent. During this time the board went through the tumultuous process of proposing the new school and seeing it go down to defeat two times. The board clashed with its superintendent and then did not move to replace him quickly, indicating that they did not view the position as a priority.

In all, 1970 was not a good year for the Willingboro School District. It contained a strong political culture that focused on conflict, as described by Boyd (1976). In case after case, the board was at odds with others. The school board was not trusted by the community, it clashed with its teachers, and it clashed with its superintendent. This was further exacerbated by almost continuous coverage by the local newspaper. In 1970, the *Burlington County Times* published 213 days of the year, the newspaper ran 162 stories relating to the school district, and nearly every single one covered some sort of conflict or problem in the school. The news coverage may have served as a catalyst for the conflicts, or it may have been a reflection of the community's desire for news about conflicts. Either way, the newspaper contributed to the culture of conflict within the community and school board of Willingboro.

What must be kept in mind is this community was not in decline. In 1970, Willingboro had the highest property value of any municipality in Burlington County, New Jersey (West, 1970, February 10). Furthermore, it was growing faster than any other community in the state as measured by new home starts (Scarmozzi, 1970, June

11). Yet in spite of all the resources available to the community in terms of wealth, there was a culture of conflict.

In the midst of this apparent plenty, a cancer of racism and white flight was beginning to grow in the community. As the community gradually lost resources, it remained to be seen how the school board would navigate this decline with its culture of conflict.

1971 - There is something wrong when people laugh at the school board. (Pearsall, 1971, January 28, p. 17)

The year began with the declaration of candidates for the school board. Once again, Willingboro had many more interested candidates than open positions, reflecting dissatisfaction with the current board and a wide interest among the citizens. With three open seats, fourteen candidates filed for the election (Pearsall, 1971, January 2). Their dissatisfaction with the board was evident in candidate nights when they criticized the current board for its lack of communication, planning, fiscal restraint, and programming (Papiernik, 1971, January 11). One candidate remarked, “There is something wrong when people laugh at the school board” (Pearsall, 1971, January 28, p. 17).

Yet following the election, the board’s image in the community did not change. Although the voters rejected the incumbent president and vice president, the

overall tenor of the board remained the same (Pearsall, 1971, February 11). From the start of the new session, the members continued to bicker and

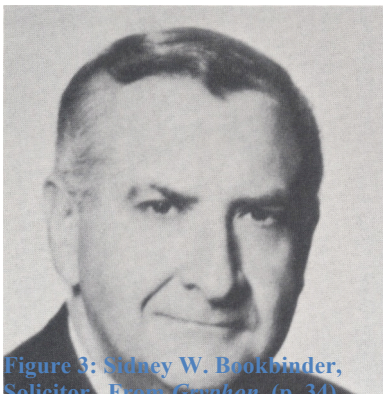


Figure 3: Sidney W. Bookbinder, Solicitor. From *Greenberg* (p. 34).

fight among themselves. The first meeting of the board began with the new members announcing their intention to remove the long-serving board solicitor, Sidney Bookbinder, only to have the board meeting forced to end early when one of the veteran members, Al Brancaccio, asked for a certified list of the absentee ballots and was told the board had not received it yet (Pearsall, 1971, February 16). This technicality ended the board meeting and board member Allan Denning was quoted in the local newspaper saying, “This power play is absurd. It’s not going to accomplish anything, and will only serve to split the board” Pearsall, 1971, February 16, p. 1). A second meeting was held three days later, and while the board successfully reorganized and appointed a new solicitor, there were efforts by Al Brancaccio to hold up the meeting once more on a technicality (Pearsall, 1971, February 19). Not satisfied with his efforts, Brancaccio vowed to continue his appeal all the way to the New Jersey Department of Education’s Division of Controversies and Disputes (Pearsall, 1971, February 19).

A new board was seated and ready to begin the year. Yet it had already shown they were not beyond petty bickering. For the relatively simple process of reorganizing, the board had required two meetings, and one member had vowed to appeal an unfavorable decision to the state.

With the task of reorganizing complete, the board shortly thereafter moved to appoint a new superintendent. This position had been vacant for nearly ten months following the resignation of the previous chief school administrator at the close of the last school year. The board selected Dr. Peter J. Romanoli who came from Ohio and whose resume included stints as a school administrator and, most recently, as a

director of training in an industrial company (Pearsall, 1971, March 9). He viewed his business experience as an asset and made the observation that “there is a move on to get qualified managers in industry into education” (Pearsall, 1971, March 11, p.1). His business background and real world management experience was seen as the antidote to the “permissive and unstructured atmosphere fostered by his predecessor” (Suplee, 1995, p. 129). Reflecting that role, Romanoli sent out a letter to the parents



of all high school and junior high school students that read, “In order that a quality education program be maintained, it is necessary that an orderly educational climate be provided in each of the buildings. The purpose of this letter is to inform you that no disruptive behavior whatsoever will be tolerated in any of the school buildings. Anyone engaging in disruptive behavior will be dealt with very quickly” (Willingboro Board of Education, 1971, August 30, p. 44). In effect, a new

sheriff was in town who would provide the firm hand needed to address the issues in the district.

Romanoli would play a role in Willingboro education for the next three decades. He was hired to be a strong manager and bring order to the school district. Yet these traits that might be seen as assets would play another role. In a fractured board, the strong leader would serve as a polarizing figure around which different factions would alternately rally and attack.

The Willingboro Board of Education fought among itself, and it also continued its conflictual relationship with the teachers of the district. The teachers' contract expired in December of 1970; no replacement was in effect as 1971 began, and an impasse in negotiations was declared (Pearsall, 1971, January 5). The negotiations entered a phase where there was much grandstanding by both sides. Once the impasse was declared, the board declined to meet with the teachers' association without a mediator, and the event was marked by the newspaper headline, "Board Skips Meeting With WEA" (Board Skips Meeting with WEA, 1971, January 6, p. 9). When the mediator finally arrived, his efforts were to no avail, and the board and the WEA still had not resolved the impasse (No Progress Gained By Teachers, Board, 1971, January 25).

The situation continued to deteriorate. Community members expressed outrage at the demands put forth by the teachers. One letter writer directed a comment towards the teachers and said: "What in the name of education are you trying to do to us? You want more benefits, more pay, and less working time" (W.S.B., 1971, January 5, p. 6). The community, while they all may not have shared this person's opinion, would have been right to be concerned about the deteriorating relationship between the board and the WEA. By the end of January, the headlines announced, "Willingboro Faces the Possibility of Strike" (Pearsall, 1971, January 27). The WEA negotiators referred to the board as "one of inaction and acting without good faith in their pretense at negotiations" (WEA Membership United, 1971, February, p. 1). The teachers threatened a lawsuit when it appeared the board would propose a budget that

would make it impossible for the board to meet the salary demands of the teachers (Pearsall, 1971, January 29).

The negotiations lead to a fact finder being appointed who met with the board and the teachers in March over the course of three marathon sessions, but was unable to reach a settlement (Pearsall, 1971, March 8). When the fact finder issued the report, it sided with the teachers' demands for a \$500 across the board pay increase, but the board rejected the report (Pearsall, 1971, April 30). In response to the board, the WEA voted to authorize a strike if there were no further progress toward reaching a settlement (Pearsall, 1971, May 5). To add insult to injury, in the midst of these increasingly tense negotiations, the board agreed to grant salary increases to the district administrators ranging from \$644 to \$2,226 (Administrators Eye Pay Hikes, 1971, May 12).

The board and the WEA eventually reached a settlement in June of 1971 in which there were not \$500 raises across the board but an average salary increase of \$600 (Pearsall, 1971, June 2). While it would seem that the tensions would ease and that there would be a period of good relations between the board and the WEA, that was not to be the case. In July, the board transferred thirteen teachers, including three officers of the association and the wife of the NJEA negotiator who represented the teachers from the high school to the junior high school (Pearsall, 1971, July 13). The WEA president described the transfers as "the moves of a dictatorship" and claimed "Romanoli has the board duped" (Pearsall, 1971, July 13, p. 1). The momentum in improving relationships was squandered as the board and the new superintendent used this opportunity to put the association in its place. Romanoli, who had been

brought in to bring order to the school system, was supported in this move by his board members. One of the board members, Joseph Oliver said, “We asked him [Romanoli] to get our school together. We have to give him the opportunity to do this” (Pearsall, 1971, July 13, p. 10). The superintendent, who was hired in part because of his business management skills, took steps to retaliate against the leading members of the WEA.

The year 1971 seemed to be a rerun of the year before in terms of the relationship between the school board and one of its major partners in the education system, the teacher association. For two years in a row, the teachers had worked nearly half a year without a contract. The constant bickering between the board and the teachers wore on the relationship between the parties, and it reinforced the image of the board with the public as combative and adversarial.

So far, 1971 was highlighted by conflict within the school board and between the school board and the teachers of the Willingboro public school district. Yet its community, or at least the vocal members of the community, did not trust the school board either. That becomes evident in the budget process for the 1971 year and how the budget was presented. In January, the initial presentation of the budget called for a “freeze on new people and programs,” and during a time of high inflation in the United States, the overall increase would be only about two percent (Pearsall, 1971, January 7, p. 1). When the budget was presented publicly, “Willingboro taxpayers breathed a sigh of relief” because of its modest tax increases (Pearsall, 1971, January 12, p. 1).

Then the picture changed dramatically. The properties in Willingboro were reassessed, and although the tax rate went down, most people saw a rise in their taxes with increases as high as \$170 (Pearsall, 1971, January 14). While it was no fault of the board, the original tax projections were incorrect. The cost of the district schools turned out to be greater than people expected. Nevertheless, the voters approved the school budget in spite of the change in tax rates (Pearsall, 1971, February 11).

Financial issues extended beyond the annual budget. The community's need for expanded school space had to be addressed. The high school remained on double sessions. Efforts to pass a referendum to build a new high school had failed twice in the previous year, despite the school board's support of the project. The split between the board and the community over this issue continued. A citizens' committee, formed by the board to examine, disagreed with the board's population projections and argued that there would be 2,000 fewer students than the board anticipated, therefore reducing the overall cost of the school (Pearsall, 1971, March 16). The board's credibility, never very good, crumbled a bit more. The question of a new school was not completely answered and would continue to be an issue, and once again it proved to be a point of distrust between the community and the school board.

However, the board's strategy of asking for a community committee to review the issue and offer recommendations ultimately offered dividends. When the committee reported back in May, they recommended a new high school be built, albeit smaller than that which had been proposed by the board the year before (Pearsall, 1971, May 27). By the winter holidays of 1971, the board was ready to go back to the community with another referendum to build a new high school, and the

At the end of June a plan was finalized and approved by the board, but only after repeated clashes with different parts of the Willingboro citizenry (Board Approves Final School Remap Plan, 1971, p. 1). The Willingboro School District eventually settled on a plan to alleviate overcrowding, but only after alienating many parents. This reflected the school board's almost inherent ability to create conflict.

While the board struggled with its relationship with its teachers and the community, racism continued to erode at the foundations of the community. In the spring of 1971, racial conflicts again erupted at the high school. On April 21, the police were called to disperse two crowds of students, one black and the other white, in a climax of three days of conflicts as the school dismissed its first session and students for the second session arrived (Pearsall, 1971, April 22). An investigation of the cause of the conflict found that the selection of the varsity cheerleaders and junior varsity cheerleaders had, in the words of Superintendent Romanoli, given underlying racial issues "a vehicle for erupting" (Pearsall, 1971, April 23, p. 1).

Tempers eventually cooled off at the high school, but racial tensions were far from over in the school or in the larger community of Willingboro. As the percentage of African American residents continued to grow throughout the decade, white flight would continue to drain resources available to the school district.

White flight had not yet done its damage. Willingboro could still handle the demands of the growing community. It was the second fastest growing community in New Jersey in terms of numerical growth of the population as well as in the percent change in the population (Willingboro Ranks Second in Growth, 1971, January 18). However, the trends would stretch resources in the future. A study found Willingboro

to be ranked 47th in the state in terms of taxes, putting it in the realm of small cities that have high costs to pay in services (Bledsoe, 1971, August 3). As long as Willingboro continued to grow, it would have the resources to meet its needs, but problems would come if growth did not continue and the resources declined.

As 1971 drew to a close, Willingboro appeared to have many trends in its favor, particularly the growth of the community. However, the conflict on the board, with the teachers and with the community, would be exacerbated tremendously if resources ever declined. The forces pushing the community in that direction were already at work. As racial conflict continued, white flight would gradually reduce the resources available to the school district.

1972 – “Was the School Board Less Than Candid?” (Himmelein,
1972, May 17, p. 3)

In January of 1972, there were some positive trends for the Willingboro School District. Once again, the school was going out to have a new high school approved by the voters. This time, the editorial board of the Burlington County Times supported the initiative, where the editors told the voters to support the upcoming bond referendum (Vote ‘Yes’ on Willingboro’s High School, 1972, January 3). Furthermore, the Willingboro Township Council publicly endorsed the plan for a new school in a letter to the local newspaper (Himmelein, 1972, January 3).

In a record turnout on Election Day, the voters approved the new high school by a tally of 4,032 to 1,610, despite its defeat on two previous occasions (Himmelein, 1972, January 5, p. 1). What made the difference? The board members attributed the

victory to their superintendent, Dr. Romanoli, with one board member saying, “The vote tonight is due to the leadership of Dr. Romanoli. Our town has finally come alive and shown they have faith in their school superintendent” (Himmelein, 1972, January 5, p. 34). This support of the school board’s proposal by the editors of the local paper as well as by the local politicians reflected a trust in the school board not seen before. It was as if the board had turned a corner in creating trust among the residents of Willingboro. However, the excitement and political capital generated by the successful vote on the new high school would be swallowed up by the conflict and politics that seemed to be an inherent part of the Willingboro Board of Education.

Politics remained as strong as ever in the election process for the 1972 school board. For the three seats up for election, ten candidates filed candidacy papers (Himmelein, 1971, December 31). While a residency issue would later reduce the field to nine candidates, this large number of candidates reflected unhappiness with the actions of the board (Residency Rule Narrows Willingboro Race, 1972, January 27). At a candidate night, common themes were that the district had too many administrators, did not spend enough on teachers, and, most prominently, the board was not open and factual with the public (Himmelein, 1972, February 5).

When the ballots for the election of board members were counted, the election results reflected this dissatisfaction with the school board. The leading critic of the board, Maucie Miller, received the most votes of all the candidates and was quoted after his victory saying, ‘I think much of the [school] administration may be unnecessary” (Himmelein, 1972, February 9, pp. 1, 19).

The public's dissatisfaction with the board continued even though the finances for the district were fairly good. In fact, as a result of increased property values and the growth of Willingboro, tax rates and actual tax payments were going down for families (Himmelein, 1972, January 11). The community had finally come out in support of the new school and the tax situation appeared to be improving, yet the community remained unhappy with the board of education.

The community held the board in low esteem, and the board's continuing poor relationship with the district's teachers compounded this. The teachers felt compelled to play a role in the elections to protect their interests. They claimed a leading role in passing the referendum for the new high school (Teacher Power, 1972, February). The WEA hosted candidate forums prior to board of education elections because of the large number of teachers who lived in Willingboro (Himmelein, 1972, January 27). The teachers bragged, "Teacher Power is becoming a reality in Willingboro. The Power is being felt in the town" (Teacher Power, 1972, February, p. 1).

The board and the WEA had been negotiating a new contract through the fall, but once again the two groups were unable to come to terms, and by January of 1972 they were at an impasse (Willingboro Negotiations Hit Impasse, 1972, January 20). This was followed shortly by an impasse in contract negotiations with the union representing the custodians, further reflecting a clash between the board of education and its employees (Himmelein, 1972, March 3).

While the year before it had taken until the summer before a contract agreement was reached, this final settlement of the contract with the teachers came in the spring. In negotiations the board and the teachers "made little 'real' progress until

after a Public Employees Relations mediator was called in February” (Himmelein, 1972, April 11, p. 3). The two groups were unable to bargain on their own, and, as a result of their poor relationship, required outside parties for them to make progress. The final agreement was for a two-year contract that, in the words of Board President Octavius Reid, “will give us two years of peace and let us concentrate on educational aspects” (Himmelein, 1972, April 25, p. 1). After three straight years of contract disputes, the board and the WEA were willing to settle on a two-year contract to avoid additional conflict.

While such a strategy seems reasonable and is reflected in the current three-year contracts that boards and teachers negotiate today in New Jersey, it would not bring the “peace” described by Board President Octavius Reid. By June of that year, board and teacher conflicts again came to light. The NJEA leader claimed in Trenton that the administration and board in the Willingboro School District intimidated the teachers (Himmelein, 1972, June 20). The Willingboro School Board had alienated its major partner in education, the teachers, once again.

Further alienation between the school board and the public took the form of disputes over administration. The first issue focused very much on the superintendent, Dr. Peter Romanoli. The school board voted to grant him tenure after just one year in his position “as a reward for the administrator’s performance and as an attempt to add stability to the township’s educational program” (Himmelein, 1972, March 8, p. 3). In a clear division within the board, the newest member, Miller, voiced his disagreement with the plan to give Romanoli tenure, stating, “I hear too many critical comments about the way he (Romanoli) speaks to the public about teachers and the way he

speaks to teachers about teachers” (Himmelein, 1972, March 13, p. 3). When it came time to vote, moreover, the board voted eight to one, with Miller being the lone negative vote, to give Romanoli tenure ahead of schedule, and they voted despite the loud objections of the residents who attended the meeting that night (Himmelein, 1972, March 14). The board moved this measure ahead over community reservations and exacerbated the split between the board and the residents of Willingboro.

The moving of elementary school principals at the end of the 1971-72 school year created another point of contention between the school board and the people of Willingboro. Dr. Romanoli announced in May that six elementary school principals would be transferred and four new administrative positions would be created (Himmelein, 1972, May 17). The move itself was not enough to raise the community’s ire, it blatantly conflicted with a pronouncement made at an earlier meeting that suggested no such move was being made and prompted the reporter to ask “was the school board less than candid?” (Himmelein, 1972, May 17, p.3).

By the day after the announcement, opposition to the move was being formed, and it included two of the principals being considered for the move (Himmelein, 1972, May 18). The community protestors argued that “the move is disruptive and will only serve to injure the educational system by creating instability” (Himmelein, 1972, May 18, p. 3). Within a few days, “a crowd of some 250 jeering, shouting parents seemingly strong-armed a majority of the board to delay action on the transfer of six elementary school principals” (Selvin, 1972, May 23, p. 1)

Following the public reaction to the moves, the board made a final decision at its next board meeting. By an eight to one vote (again Miller was the lone dissenter),

the board voted to make the transfer over the objections of the public (Lerner, 1972, June 13). The board acted, again in opposition to the vocal opinions of the community, to transfer principals, further eroding the relationship between the board of education and the voters.

Following close on the heels of this issue was a decision by the board to grant a six percent raise to the district administrators and principals (Lerner, 1972, June 27). This came after several years of conflict with the teachers and the support staff of the district. This decision to grant raises to administrators by the board and the district administration was not well received by the residents of Willingboro, one of whom wrote in a letter to the editor that he,

Thought it odd that the administrators who make up the budget found money for their increases to be put in the budget, while money for items that would directly affect our children in the school system could not be found. (Voting Against Pay Raises, 1972, July 4, p. 6)

To add insult to injury, the principals received yet another increase in their salaries in July as a result of a corrected interpretation of their contract (Lerner, 1972, July 11).

The school board was misreading the public. In 1972, the board had made multiple changes to the administrative structure in opposition to the desires of the public. The Willingboro community was splitting yet again as a result of the actions by the school board. The residents were left asking, “Why do we need a school district top heavy with high-priced administrators? Why don’t we take some of those salaries and hire more teachers? They are the ones who do the work anyway” (Himmelein, 1972, May 25, p. 3). The residents may have been asking these

questions, but they were not getting any satisfactory answers from their board of education.

The themes of 1972 are similar to what occurred in the earlier years of the decade, and that was the same with racial conflict and racial issues. A symbolic issue in this dispute was the weekly dances sponsored by the NAACP at an elementary school in the district that were cancelled by the board as a result of fights and complaints from residents who lived close to the elementary school (Lerner, 1972, April 10). The dances were viewed with apprehension by the board and by the community, and this distrust certainly had its roots in the growing number of African Americans who lived in the community.

Racial issues continued to plague the community. During the summer the NAACP felt the police were unfairly targeting African American youths (Makler, 1972, July 27). While this matter had nothing to do directly with the schools, it reflected an issue in the larger community as Willingboro struggled to define itself as the formerly overwhelmingly white population coped with an influx of African American families looking for the same benefits of suburban living that attracted white families. The township's Human Relations Council held a public meeting to allow the community to voice its concerns with racial issues in Willingboro (Horowitz, 1972, August 2). While not nearly as dramatic an issue as in the previous years, Willingboro continued to wrestle with its identity as its racial composition changed.

Unfortunately, 1972 continued the trend established in the early 1970s. The Willingboro School District was immersed in multiple conflicts between the board

and its various stakeholders in the township. Furthermore, the racial issues would not go away as the community's composition changed. Yet the district had these problems even though the district was still financially healthy. Tax rates and actual taxes paid went down in 1972. The resources remained for the district to continue to have enough of a pie to give everyone a slice. In spite of the apparent financial health, the Willingboro Board of Education seemed unable to move forward without engendering conflict and distrust.

Chapter III – The Tipping Point

We are projecting a most preposterous image for the Willingboro school district. Dr. Weiss, School Board Member (Lerner, 1973, November 20, p. 3)

The year 1973 is significant in the Willingboro School District because it is a time when the proverbial “wheels came off the cart.” The community openly splits with the school board, and the community turns on itself as racial disputes move from conflicts between individuals to a level involving the entire community. Furthermore, the district stopped growing. From this point forward, the enrollment would steadily decline. The conflict displayed by the board would begin to take on a new intensity as groups fought for survival.

The politics at the board level continued to reflect distrust between the community and the board as well as among the board members. When the application deadline for candidates to run for the school board came, fifteen candidates had filed for the three open seats (Board Elections, 1973, January 5). The large number of candidates reflected a general dissatisfaction with the current board members.

Simultaneous with the run up to the election of board members, the Willingboro Board of Education prepared its annual budget to submit to the voters on the same election day. The newspaper stories the day before the election announced that the proposed budget would cause the tax total to “jump to an all time high of \$4.27” (Lerner, 1973, January 8, p. 3). The same story also announced that board meetings would now be broadcast through cable television (Lerner, 1973, January 8). This new practice would change the dynamics of the board meetings since now both

board members and members of the public who came to speak at the meetings would be performing for an audience far larger than only those in attendance at the meeting.

At the meeting to adopt the budget, “several members admitted not having a chance to thoroughly review the figures” and several of them “expressed the belief following the meeting that even the tentative budget ‘could be more realistic and not so astronomical’” (Lerner, 1973, January 9, p. 3). When the final and scaled down budget was adopted in February, it was passed by a five to two vote, with two board members absent (Lerner, 1973, February 2). The board’s split over the budget was reflected in public statements by various board members criticizing other board members who took the opposing view (Lerner, 1973, February 2).

The board’s bickering over the budget and talk about record tax increases must have made an impression on the voters. When the citizens of Willingboro came out on Election Day, the budget was defeated by a three-to-one margin (Four Districts Reject School Budgets, February 14). Following the election, the public’s lack of confidence in the board’s budget proposal was confirmed by the board’s actions in other areas.

As a board, they had often been accused of lack of openness and truthfulness with the public. When the time came for reorganization, the board exhibited these sorts of practices once again. Prior to the official reorganization, the board held a private conference meeting in which preliminary polls were held to determine the president and vice president of the board (Lerner, 1973, February 19). A certain amount of *quid pro quo* dealings went on relating to the selection of the board solicitor and board officers. Joseph Oliver, a candidate for the presidency, “promised

to vote for a certain lawyer, provided a certain member or two would swing their votes his way” (Lerner, 1973, February 19, p. 3). The talk of backroom deals appeared to be confirmed when Oliver was elected president of the board at the official reorganization (Lerner, 1973, February 21).

The board’s questionable practices included its direct dealings with the public in an apparent practice of retribution. As part of the Title I funds the district was receiving at the time, a parent advisory group had been formed; however, the board dissolved the parent group and moved to appoint new members (Lerner, 1973, March 17). One board member described the reappointment as “an effort to replace certain very active, outspoken members” (Lerner, 1973, March 17, p. 3). The board president said the move was made to replace members of the parent advisory committee who were acting to support particular candidates for the board (Lerner, 1973, March 17). In all, the board was left with another public relations black eye as the group split amongst itself and clashed with certain portions of the community.

The board’s reputation was further marred during the finalization of the school budget. Following the defeat in the election, the Willingboro town council voted to cut the budget by \$481,000 (Lerner, 1973, March 22). Both the superintendent and the board president vowed they would appeal the town council’s decision to the New Jersey Commissioner of Education, and Board President Oliver characterized the town council’s actions as “unsound and not well founded” (Lerner, 1973, March 22, p. 3). While the superintendent and the board president took a clear stand against Willingboro’s town council, another board member, Miller, offered a very different analysis of the budget decision by the town council by saying, “I think

the council's recommendations are sound and it's something we can live with" (Lerner, 1973, March 22, p. 3). In a very public way, the board displayed a troubling lack of unity.

This lack of unity and internal conflict would become more apparent as the board determined whether or not to appeal the township's decision about the budget to the New Jersey Commissioner of Education. This plan to appeal the decision was announced by both the superintendent and the board president. However, when the whole board considered the appeal, the motion to file the appeal was defeated by a four-to-four vote (with only eight members present a minimum of a five-to-three vote was necessary for the board to take action) (Lerner, 1973, March 28). The issue was brought up yet again at the next board meeting, although it was not on the agenda, and this time it was approved after most of the audience had left the meeting (Lerner, 1973, April 4). While the motion was ultimately withdrawn and the previous decision not to appeal the budget cuts to the commissioner was allowed to stand, the board's image as internally split and willing to engage in underhanded dealings was affirmed (Lerner, 1973, April 4).

The board's image as divisive and at odds with the community was driven home again with an issue relating to the new high school approved in 1972. When the bids came in for construction, the board had \$1.8 million dollars "left over" and it proposed alternative ways to spend the money (Willingboro Will Decide Use for \$1.8 Million, 1973, June 12). The various plans to spend the surplus funds, from an indoor pool at the new high school, to a central administration building, to an alternative school, to bleachers at the old high school, were greeted with concern by the public,

and an editorial by the newspaper said there was a “certain element of deviousness about this procedure” (...And in Willingboro, 1973, July 13, p. 6). The editor went on to write “the board would considerably enhance its reputation for economy and good sense if it were to devote these funds to lowering its debt, instead of adding to it” (...And in Willingboro, 1973, July 13, p. 6). A citizens’ group called the Tax Action Council demanded that the board do just that with the surplus funds and even threatened legal action if the board did not use the money to pay down the debt from the school (Ryan, 1973, July 31). Protestors appeared before the offices of the Willingboro Board of Education on September 10 (Silverstein, 1973, September 19). One of the protestors called on Willingboro residents to “pressure our school board members, which you vote for, to remove these spenders of funds for an unnecessary administration building for the board of education and covered swimming pools, etc” (Silverstein, 1973, September 19, p. 6).

Perhaps in response to the protests, the board decided to delay the additional spending plans (Willingboro to Delay Spending Move, 1973, September 11). It was a good decision that they decided to delay their plans. By the end of October, the board discovered that it did not have such a surplus after all and, in fact, would need the “extra funds” to acquire the site for the new high school and outfit the new school (Lerner, 1973, October 29). To the public, not only did the school board make decisions that were not supported by the majority of the voters, but also the board did not have adequate knowledge of the facts when it came time to make those decisions.

That point was further reinforced when it was revealed the Board Secretary Elmer Corda made an error transferring funds from one bank to another causing the



Figure 7: Elmer Corda, Board Secretary and Business Administrator. From: *Gryphon*, (p. 36), 1972.

board of education to lose money in an account that paid a lower interest rate (Lerner, 1973, October 5). This mistake, while it amounted to a relatively small amount of money, brought into question just how the board and its top administrators were doing business and making decisions.

While the Willingboro Board of Education developed a poor relationship with the community, it also failed to promote good labor relations with the teachers. On Ascension Day, a relatively minor Christian holiday, the school district announced it was closing as a result of being unable to secure enough substitutes to cover the teachers who were taking personal days to observe this holiday (Suplee, 1973, May 30). The clear implication made by the administration was that this was some sort of job action by the teachers' union (Suplee, 1973, May 30). The WEA responded that the large number of teachers who were out was not a result of any planned action on their part and challenged that the board did not try very hard to contact substitutes based on the association's survey of substitutes and who had been called to come in to work (Suplee, 1973, May 31). The exchange does not shed any light on whether the WEA planned the action or not, but it does reflect the poor relations on both sides since both the board and the WEA believed the other's actions were based on some ulterior motive.

Even outside agents detected this tension between the board/administration and the teachers. Willingboro underwent a Middle States evaluation in 1973, and one

of the recommendations from Middle States was that the school district needed to improve communications with stakeholders to create a climate that would be more open and less secretive (Willingboro Board of Education, 1973, June 11).

In contrast to its dealings with the teachers, the board approved raises for its top twelve administrators in September of 1973 (Ryan, 1973, September 11). This measure was passed over the objections of the public at the meeting and even over objections from board members with the superintendent taking a leading role in defending the resolution (Ryan, 1973, September 11). Considering the concern about taxes, spending, and disputes with the teachers over salaries just the year before, the board and the superintendent chose to push this resolution through, in spite of the predictable conflict the measure would create.

The public perception of the board suffered as a result of all of these events. This perspective was reflected in the letters to the editor of the local newspaper. In one case, a Willingboro resident who had just attended a board of education meeting wrote, "I never in my life realized how closed-minded some members of this group of people could be" (Singer, 1973, April 23, p. 6). Another letter writer reminded Willingboro citizens that when it came to the school board, they should "demand them to listen and to act. Not what the Superintendent of Schools and the administrators wish to do" (Silverstein, 1973, September 19, p. 6). In both cases the image of the board that emerges is one where the members of the board were unresponsive to the community. As the board had to address issues of student management, labor relations, and racial issues, this lack of confidence in the

Willingboro Board of Education would influence the confidence the public had in the board to make wise decisions regarding any of these issues.

The Willingboro School District faced growing concern over the safety of its schools in 1973. It reached a point where a group calling itself the Concerned Parents and Citizens (the CPC) was established to promote a “law and order” program for the Willingboro schools (Lerner, 1973, April 2). The group presented petitions to the superintendent with over 1,500 names and started “an intensified six-week campaign to bring back safety to the Willingboro School system” (Lerner, 1973, April 3, p. 3). At a meeting with the school board, attended by 500 community members, the CPC demanded changes in the school rules (Lerner, 1973, April 6). The administration, lead by the superintendent, largely agreed to the changes (Lerner, 1973, April 6).

The CPC moved to establish itself as an independent voice in matters of student management. It also set up a hotline for parents to call to report acts of violence in the schools, separate from any data collected by the board of education (Lerner, 1973, April 10). Parents wrote that “they often did not know to whom to turn or whom to call when their children were threatened or intimidated in the schools,” but the CPC would now fill that role (Lerner, 1973, April 11, p. 3). That a parent group should serve this role is patently ridiculous, and it shows to what levels the Willingboro Board of Education and administration had fallen in the minds of the public.

The contentious relationship between the board of education and the CPC continued on its downward spiral. At a meeting with the board of education, the CPC presented fourteen points it wanted implemented to improve school discipline (Gaul,

1973, April 27). The meeting was marked by claims by the CPC that the board was only paying them lip service (Gaul, 1973, April 27). The meeting was adjourned, only to be called back into session twenty minutes later after several board members, solicitor, clerk, and many audience members had left (Gaul, 1973, April 27). The board then considered motions to adopt some or all of the fourteen points presented by the CPC (Gaul, 1973, April 27). Later, the actions taken by the board at the second half of the meeting were declared to be invalid, further exacerbating relations between the board and the CPC (Lerner, 1973, May 14). Even though the board eventually adopted the “quarantine room” for disruptive students demanded by the CPC through proper procedures, the relationship between the CPC and the board did not improve (Willingboro to Quarantine Disruptors, 1973, May 15).

The relationship worsened in September when, after promises to follow the get-tough CPC guidelines, a student was stabbed with a pencil in one of the district’s junior high schools and the school did not follow the procedures demanded by the CPC (Lerner, 1973, September 29). However, the apparent concern with increases in student discipline problems in the schools and the growing number of African Americans in the Willingboro schools come together at this point, reflecting the underlying racial tensions.

By the summer of 1973, it was clear to the citizens of Willingboro that not only was the composition of the community changing, but also that white families were actively leaving the community creating enclaves in the older portions of town, such as Pennypacker, Somerset, and Buckingham Parks, where racial imbalances would require the redistricting of the schools (Ryan, 1973, August 21). Many times,

the increase in minority residents was characterized as a decline of moral character. One woman, Nancy Tyrell, testified before the Willingboro Township Committee about her experience at the Pennypacker Park swimming pool, and it was reported in the local newspaper:

She suggested that the township must promote “safety and preserve middle class values”

Mrs. Tyrell said she has used the Pennypacker pool for the “last time,” charging that she and her children were abused with obscenities from blacks last weekend. At that time the pool was being used by about 80 blacks, she said. (Ryan, 1973, August 21, p. 1).

In this account, the woman portrayed middle class values in competition with the growing number of African American residents.

The practices of real estate agents exacerbated the growing racial imbalance in the community. Letters to the editor offered accounts of real estate agents encouraging residents to put their house up for sale. In their words, there were “Willingboro realtors hard at work each evening and weekend – not looking for buyers, but keeping thoughts of selling and moving fresh in the minds of as many homeowners as possible” (Klingenberg, 1973, September 25, p. 6). The Willingboro Human Relations Commission, a group established by the township council to look into and help prevent racial conflicts, also sensed something amiss with the current real estate practices in Willingboro that created white flight, and the commission

asked any residents with experiences of irregular real estate practices to contact the commission (McHugh, 1973, September 6).

The concerns about real estate practices reached a point where it was charged that blockbusting was occurring in Willingboro (Span, 1973, October 28).

Homeowners in Willingboro reported being visited by real estate agents and warned that they should sell their homes right away since Willingboro was going to be “entirely black” or “will be like Camden” soon (Span, 1973, October 28, p. A-1).

Nationwide, there was a feeling, promoted even at the level of the presidency by Richard Nixon, which connected African Americans with crime (Lugg, 1996). The growth of the minority population in Willingboro brought out similar sentiments in the minds of many white Willingboro residents, as reflected in the account of the African Americans at the swimming pool in Pennypacker Park. Furthermore, African Americans felt they were being unfairly targeted by the police and the community for issues of misconduct (Lerner, 1973, October 1). This feeling focused on the case of twenty-two African-American teens that were arrested by the police for trespassing on private property as part of their walk home from school (Lerner, 1973, October 1). As a result of the arrests, “the black children’s parents have taken it as a deliberate sign of favoritism and discrimination” (The Willingboro 22, 1973, October 4, p. 6). Ultimately, this issue was resolved through a meeting, mediated by the Human Relations Commission, between the children involved, their families, and the residents on whose property they were trespassing (Lerner, 1973, October 8).

Yet the racial issues and white flight are connected to the CPC and its drive to impose a law and order regime on the schools of Willingboro. At first glance, the

response by the CPC to fights and other student management issues in the Willingboro schools appears simply to be an effort to address school safety. However, the CPC also represented a reaction by the white families to the changing demographics of the community. In a larger sense, the CPC was working to promote and impose middle class, white values and white privileges on the schools.

This distinction became apparent with the arrest of the twenty-two, African-American youths. At a public hearing on the matter, the CPC and the Human Relations Commission came into conflict (Suplee, 1973, October 2). Dr. Winkle, the president of the CPC, charged, “‘When the Human Relations Commission gets involved in problems,’ he stated, ‘the net result is racial tension’” (Suplee, 1973, October 2, p. 3). Dr. Winkle went on to argue that the chairwoman of the Human Relations Council had an interest in steering youths away from the court system and toward local counseling (Suplee, 1973, October 2). In this dispute, the leader of the law and order party of Willingboro Township accused the chairwoman of the group responsible for promoting racial harmony, of a soft approach toward youth offenders, especially in this case where they were African American. Dr. Hinkle had the same philosophy as Nancy Tyrell in that the minorities who moved into town needed to be brought under control by strict action from the law enforcement authorities.

For Willingboro, 1973 was a crossroads year. On the one hand, the board of education demonstrated an inherent ability to alienate itself from the community. Its internal bickering, combined with its clashes with different parts of the community, undermined its ability to move the district forward. From budget issues, to alternate projects related to the new high school, to fragile labor relations, the board spent

political capital. Furthermore, it was building a reserve ill will from the community that would impair its ability to get things done in the future.

The enrollment of the district had peaked and was now declining (see Tables A3 & A4). The district had committed itself to building a new high school that was about to open just as the enrollment was declining. This demographic trend meant further conflict for the district. Now fights would be to protect jobs--labor relations--something the board had shown a limited capacity to handle during good times.

Meanwhile, the changing demographics of the township added another ingredient to the mix that made it even more volatile. African American families were coming into Willingboro looking for the same community traits sought by the white residents before them. However, as a result of racial conflict and real estate practices like blockbusting, the white families were leaving the township. Racial tension in Willingboro was nothing new, but it was taking tangible form with long-term effects. The changing culture of the community resulted in a backlash, and it took the form of the CPC. Moving into the coming years, the Willingboro School Board was ill positioned to address the many challenges that it would face.

*1974 - I must say that the School Superintendent and his "followers"
reminds me very strongly of the Nazi Regime when I was a child!*

(Concerned Parent, 1974, June 8, p. 6)

As with events in the previous year, 1974 saw further exacerbation of the various conflicts connected to the school board and the school district. The conflicts took their toll on the school board membership. When it came time to file for school

board elections in January, six candidates filed for three open spots, but two of the three incumbents chose not to run (School Board Hopefuls File, 1974, January 5). Of course, the campaign could be brutal. One candidate, Joseph Oliver, was the subject of multiple letters to the editor because he did not have his phone number listed so his constituents could contact him about an issue (Oliver, 1974, January 9; Lynch, 1974, January 18; Silverstein, 1974, January 22). As Boyd (1982) found, when the conflict increases, the more capable candidates no longer wish to run for office. Considering what had happened in the district and as this example from Oliver's candidacy indicates, it should come as no surprise that incumbents did not want to run for office.

When the elections were finished, the three successful candidates for the board of education were Richardson, Martello, and Harper, all newcomers (Lerner, 1974, February 14). All three candidates were noted for their outspoken criticism of the board and the administration in their campaigns (Lerner, 1974, February 7).

Martello was quoted:

In my opinion, the board has built a maze of bureaucracy consisting of administrative specialists, consulting directors, and coordinators, all being paid high salaries, while duplicating each others work.

They hold fancy titles and continually experiment and change programs to justify their positions.

I will demand, if elected, an immediate survey and breakdown of all this featherbedding. (Lerner, 1974, February 7, p. 32)

The election of these candidates who campaigned on these sentiments reflected the disconnect between the board of education and the voters in Willingboro.

While the elections reflected the public's dissatisfaction with the Board of Education, the budget process and budget election showed another reason the public may have been dissatisfied. The process certainly appeared to begin on a positive note. The board first announced a lowering of the tax rate by approximately 36 cents as a result of increased state aid (Lerner, 1974, January 7). This was followed with further promises of tax cuts by using a portion of the previous year's surplus (Lerner, 1974, January 8). The board adopted the tentative budget, though Board Member Gross cast the one negative vote with the justification that "to vote in favor of the tentative budget would imply an act of faith in the administration which I do not have" (Lerner, 1974, January 9, p. 3). With the exception of this board member, the remainder of the board followed suit to present a budget with substantial cuts to taxes.

Then, when it came to adopt the actual budget, some changes took place. First, the New Jersey Department of Education told the district to cut its budget (Lerner, 1974, February 1). On the contrary, the board added \$95,000 to the budget, which maintained a tax rate decrease but reduced it by about one cent (Lerner, 1974, February 1). In the words of the business administrator, the additional \$95,000 "could be interpreted as adding insult to injury" (Lerner, 1974, February 1, p. 3). Not only did the business administrator publicly break with the board of education, the board of education was adding money to the budget at the same time the state of New Jersey was saying that more money could be cut. The image created in the public's eye was

of a board intent on spending more money than it needed for providing education to the children of the community.

The community acted on this impression when it came time to vote on the budget, defeating it by a vote of 1,261 votes against to 947 in favor (Lerner, 1974, February 14). Keep in mind, this budget would have reduced the tax rate by approximately 40 cents. Nonetheless, the public voted against the budget in part because the state recommended it be cut further and there was “a lack of confidence in the school administration and some board members” (Lerner, 1974, February 14, p. B3). In a letter to the editor, a writer described the situation this way: “The rejection by the voters of the Willingboro school budget should come as no surprise. Two days



before the election I received a copy of the budget summary which, like a bikini, did not reveal the most interesting parts” (Bosakowski, 1974, February 23, p. 4). Sexism aside, clearly the voters did not trust the school board to make decisions for them.

Besides its conflict with the public, the school board also had its own internal clashes. The board began openly feuding with its business

Figure 8: Patricia Harper, Board Member. From: *Gryphon*, (p. 92), 1979.

administrator in 1974. As mentioned earlier, the business administrator, Elmer Corda, had come out publicly against the board when the final budget was approved with added spending and no cuts as recommended by the state. This dispute continued over an issue of drapes in one of the elementary schools. Pennypacker Elementary School had new drapes purchased for its multipurpose room and library, and, until the drapes were replaced, their state

had been a point of contention between the board of education and the community (Lerner, 1974, April 6). However, the matter turned into an issue when board member Patricia Harper claimed that new drapes had not been installed in the library and this was published in the local newspaper (Lerner, 1974, April 6). A board member publicly embarrassed the business administrator using the simple matter of the drapes.

This relationship continued to deteriorate. In 1973 there had been an issue where Corda had moved money from one bank account to another that paid a slightly lower interest rate. The matter had been referred to the county prosecutor for a

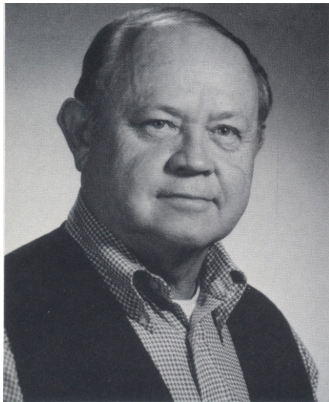


Figure 9: Maucie Miller, Board Member. From: *Willingboro High School*, (p. 22), 1978.

criminal investigation; while no criminal wrongdoing was found, a report cited “inefficiency, carelessness, and lack of supervision” among other issues relating to Corda (Lerner, 1974, September 9, p. 3). This important official was placed on the defensive in a very public way by the board of education.

The conflict extended beyond the business administrator to the superintendent. In 1974, a split erupted between the Superintendent, Dr. Peter Romanoli, and the school board. According to the recently elected board member George Richardson, “If the school board and the superintendent no longer see eye to eye, one has to leave” (Lerner, 1974, May 3, p. 2). Of course, Richardson had no intention of the school board leaving. This dispute further polarized the community. An editorial in the *Burlington County Times* demanded that the school board publicly identify what Romanoli was doing wrong (For Public Debate, 1974, May 6). Nonetheless, the board continued to

try to force Romanoli out of office. The board president, Maucie Miller, and vice president, Dolores Gross, approached Romanoli and told him that a majority of the board wanted him to resign, but Romanoli demurred (Lerner, 1974, May 9).

The general public took sides. One parent commented on the board that “It is heartwarming to know that they are recognizing the incompetence and ill manners of our officials in education” (Insulted Parent, 1974, May 13, p. 6). Another parent complimented the board on “inquiring as to why the quality of education has diminished under the leadership of Dr. Romanoli and his central administration” (Sobel, 1974, May 23, p. 6). Romanoli had his defenders as well. A community member, upon hearing about the board’s actions against the superintendent, sarcastically said that “we need a combination of our Lord, Superman, and Ralph Nader for superintendent” (Sullivan, 1974, May 22, p. 6).

When the board voted on separating itself from Romanoli, the motion failed despite the apparent majority that had asked for his resignation a few weeks earlier (Lerner, 1974, May 29). That being the case, the failure of this formal motion did not end the conflict between the board and the superintendent or the conflict among the board members. Furthermore, Romanoli excited opposing factions within the community, and his detractors were especially vociferous. One, a refugee from World War II Europe, wrote that “the School Superintendent and his ‘followers’ reminds me very strongly of the Nazi Regime when I was a child!” (Concerned Parent, 1974, June 8, p. 4).

Contra Romanoli, as well as assistant superintendent Marcel Gilbert came into conflict with the board over travel expenses (Broderick, 1974, November 5). The



Figure 10: Marcel Gilbert, Assistant Superintendent. From *Gryphon*, (p. 36), 1972.

three had travelled to Washington, D.C. to discuss administrative pay raises in a time when the federal government was trying to limit pay raises as a way to fight inflation (Broderick, 1974, November 5).

The school board filed a lawsuit against the three for the return of the travel expenses, and Romanoli and Gilbert complied with the request, while Corda refused (Broderick, 1974, November 5). The lawsuit

reflected a continuing deterioration between the central administrators and the school board.

A final slight against the administrators by the school board involved an audit of the management of the district. The board awarded a contract to a New York firm to review the management of the district, specifically the business office (Broderick, 1974, November 26). That the board felt it should hire an outside company to review the management of the district further underscored this split. The board itself was not unanimous about the vote to hire the management review, reflecting a division among its membership (Broderick, 1974, November 26).

These major issues hurt the board's public image, but other issues further eroded the public's confidence in the board of education, adding to the conflict. A group that called itself the "board watchers" was actually formed to monitor the behavior of the board (Interested, 1974, February 3). Others characterized the board meetings as pure entertainment:

Where else could one find courtroom-like drama, high comedy, and biting sarcasm, all live on one stage in Willingboro on a Thursday night? The school board comes as close to providing live entertainment as any club or guild in the area. (Broderick, 1974, December 9, p. 6)

The actions of the board cemented that image in the public's mind throughout 1974.

These public image *faux pas* included issues of board members receiving excessive funds for travel expenses. Board member Patricia Gross urged adoption of a policy to restrain this kind of spending, citing a trip to a National School Board Convention in Los Angeles the year before in which each member of the board who attended received \$300 in cash to cover expenses without any accountability (Lerner, 1974, March 15). This added to the image of the board as a group of spendthrifts.

The adoption of a nepotism policy created difficulties for the board of education. The policy was introduced in June of 1974 to forbid the hiring of relatives of those who had the authority to hire and fire employees. At a first reading, this policy was approved by a five-to-four vote of the board membership (Lerner, 1974, June 11). However, when the policy was ready for final approval, it failed for lack of a majority (Lerner, 1974, July 9). In August it came up yet again and was approved by a five-to-three vote as a result of "'priority hiring' for employee relatives was cited by one member" (Lerner, 1974, August 27, p. 3). The back and forth nature of this debate made the board appear indecisive about this issue.

Furthermore, board members split over the possible impeachment of the board president. While ultimately nothing came of it, the board president, Maucie Miller,

was considered for impeachment during July of 1974 because of spending, days off, and use of school property that he authorized without contacting other members of the board (Lerner, 1974, July 23). Even though the impeachment did not come to pass, the internal squabbling among the board members further eroded the image of the board.

The debate over constructing a football stadium continued this trend of infighting among board members. With the new high school, the board reviewed the cost of a new stadium, and as the costs increased, several board members spoke against the high cost of the stadium project since it was seen as a diversion of funding away from educational pursuits (Broderick, 1974, December 6). The topic became so controversial, resulting in large turnouts at board meetings by residents to comment on the issue, that the board considered a move to place the stadium on a referendum for a public to vote on it (Broderick, 1974, December 11). The *Burlington County Times* editorial supported the idea of the referendum, observing that “Opposition to the board’s proposal for a stadium is swelling and the board is on shaky ground at best if it decides to push its own proposal without the acquiescence of the township’s voters” (Willingboro’s Stadium, 1974, December 12, p. 6). The board then decided to move away from the stadium plans (Broderick, 1974, December 20).

The constant bickering and infighting on the board resulted in a sense of disgust from the public and the professionals who worked for the board. One Willingboro resident wrote, “My advice to Mrs. Martello and all board members is to cease your petty personal vendettas and perhaps your televised meetings will no longer be my teenaged son’s favorite comedy” (Jackson, 1974, December 28, p. 6).

The board's solicitor, Sidney Bookbinder, commented, "It's hard to represent a board that's nine boards instead of one" (Broderick, 1974, December 9, p. 6). Both comments reflected the way that the board squabbled.

The board also had a strained relationship with the teachers' union. Once again, the board and the teachers' union, the WEA, were unable to reach a settlement on a labor agreement. An impasse was declared and a mediator was called in to help the parties reach an agreement (Lerner, 1974, May 22). The issues included salary disagreements, class size, and the ratio of students to specialists (Lerner, 1974, May 22). Additionally, every time a labor contract was negotiated in this decade to date, an impasse was reached; a mediator had to be called in to resolve the dispute between the WEA and the board of education. An agreement was eventually reached and ratified by both the WEA and the board of education, but the poor relationship between these two groups continued (Lerner, 1974, June 15; Lerner, 1974, June 25).

Meanwhile, within Willingboro, racial issues continued with open conflict in the schools and community between blacks and whites. White flight became more pronounced. The township council passed an ordinance to ban "For Sale" signs in front of homes to eliminate the image that all the whites were moving out of the township (Lerner, 1974, March 19). County realtors considered suing to end the ban; nonetheless, the measure reflected the desperation that Willingboro's municipal leaders had reached to prevent white flight from the township (Lerner, 1974, March 19).

While Willingboro fought white flight, the CPC or Concerned Parents and Citizens came under attack. Appearing in 1973, the CPC claimed to be working for

safer schools and addressing student management issues that arose. Increasingly, it came to be regarded as an organization that was hostile to the growing number of African American students in the schools. One letter writer expressed herself this way, “I am also of the belief that they [the CPC] are under the influence of a collected leadership of racists who are duping people into their organization under false pretenses” (Fields, 1974, February 11, p. 6).

Both the ban on “For Sale” signs and the CPC’s new image reflected a change in the community in which more and more white families moved out of the community to be replaced by minority families. The CPC and the “For Sale” sign ban were efforts to reverse this trend, but both would ultimately be unsuccessful.

In 1973, local revenue and state revenue, when examined in constant dollars, stopped growing and would begin to decline (see Tables A1 and A2). Revenue from the state aid would climb again briefly following the outcome of the *Robinson v. Cahill* case, but was short lived (see Tables A1 and A2). At the same time, the school district’s enrollment peaked then began its steady decline (See Table A3 and A4). Not coincidentally, the conflict in the community reached a new level of intensity. Not only was the pool of resources shrinking, but it also had to be shared between the white majority and a growing African American minority. This board continued its infighting and its clashes with the community. As the school district began its fiscal and demographic decline, it was ill positioned in terms of a culture that would contribute towards resolving the challenges it would face in the future. Rather, the district had a culture in which it any added pressure would cause the whole teetering structure to collapse.

Chapter IV – Breakdown

1975 - *Does the board need psychotherapy?* (1975, September 23,
p.10)

The established pattern of conflict continued into 1975. The district struggled financially as it grappled with decreased state aid and white flight. In the midst of these struggles, the level of conflict between the board of education and the administration, public, and within the board itself increased.

The year began with board elections. As in the past, the slate reflected a public dissatisfaction with the current the school board. When the time came to file for candidacy, eleven candidates, including three incumbents, put their names up for consideration for the three spots (Board of Education Candidates File Petitions, 1975, February 1). When the votes were counted, two of the three incumbents had been reelected and a former board member had been elected to replace one incumbent (Broderick, 1975, March 12). By the end of the year, following a time of ever-increasing conflict, all three incumbents who were up for reelection would decide not to run for re-election (Broderick, 1975, December 9). This unwillingness to run for office in the face of bitter political feuding (Boyd, 1982) deprived Willingboro of people who were experienced school board members.

The budget followed on a path parallel with school board elections. In terms of aid from the state, the level of support was not increased from the year before (Hammer, 1975, January 30). When the amount of money that the state would provide was announced it was revealed that Willingboro was slated to receive three

million dollars less than they did the year before (Broderick, 1975, February 11). This came at the same time that the board had to create a budget shackled by inflation as well (Broderick, 1975, February 5). As a result of the reduced state aid, the district had to cut its budget *and* increase local taxes to make ends meet (Broderick, 1975, February 11). This meant eliminating over fifty jobs and increasing taxes by eleven cents per one hundred dollars of assessed property valuation (Broderick, 1975, February 11).

The board and the business administrator did not leave the tax rate untouched. The business administrator and the board approved the use of emergency building aid to help offset the tax increases and temporarily reduce the tax rate (Broderick, 1975, February 20). This position was promptly reversed when the school board restored funding to portions of its budget, thereby causing the tax rate to go up by twenty cents (Broderick, 1975, February 22). As a result of reductions in state aid, the district chose to increase taxes rather than to cut programs. The board was dealing with a budgetary pie that was shrinking, yet the board still wanted to provide for all of its constituents. So it tried to respond by keeping the pie from shrinking by tapping local resources.

This strategy promptly backfired when the budget went before the voters for approval. Voters defeated the budget by a two-to-one ratio (Broderick, 1975, March 12). As a community, Willingboro voters did not feel they could support the costs the board was asking them to bear. Following the budget defeat, the budget went to the town council for revised cuts. However, the board felt that they had already presented

a barebones budget, and Board President Miller commented that “he could recommend no areas to be cut” (Broderick, 1975, March 12, p. 1).

When the Willingboro Township Council considered the budget, it called for a \$316,000 cut from the school board’s proposed budget (Broderick, 1975, March 26). At the meeting, “council had suggested that the board examine the decreasing enrollment in the lower grades with an eye toward reductions in staff and administration,” but the school board president considered the suggestions “obnoxious” (Broderick, 1975, March 26, p. 3). The meeting reflected two things. First, as student enrollment continued to decrease, the decline of the district was becoming apparent to outside observers. Second, it showed a fundamental difference of opinion between the board of education and the local government. The split between the board of education and the local government played itself out in an appeal of the budget cuts.

The board voted to appeal the budget cuts to the New Jersey Commissioner of Education believing that the township had taken too much from its budget (Broderick, 1975, April 4). Ultimately, rather than rule on the budget, the New Jersey Commissioner of Education assigned the County Superintendent, George Batezel, to mediate the conflict and the board and the township eventually came to a resolution (Willingboro Votes to Recertify Budget, 1975, April 11). Again, the actions reflected a culture of political conflict that was exacerbated by the tough economic circumstances.

The Willingboro Board of Education’s conflictual nature surfaced again in its challenging dealings with the district’s teachers. This was not new as previous years

had shown, but the stakes were increasing as student enrollment declined. The pie was shrinking and now the teachers had real reasons to be concerned. Once again, the contract talks bogged down and an impasse was declared requiring mediation, with both sides claiming they were very far apart on all of the issues (Broderick, 1975, March 16). The matter remained unresolved and teachers protested before a board meeting in June drawing public attention to the ongoing dispute between the teachers and the board of education (Broderick, 1975, June 10).

The board and the teachers failed to reach an agreement before the end of the school year. During the summer the failure to produce any further progress led to the contract dispute moving into fact finding (Broderick, 1975, July 18). The two sides eventually made progress in the fall and ultimately settled on a two-year contract (Broderick, 1975, September, 29; Reconciliation Myth, 1975, October 4). Nevertheless, in a long line of conflicts, the board struggled to develop a positive rapport with one of its most important stakeholders, its teachers. While these kinds of disputes were not new, it took much longer than before for the board to reach this agreement, in part because of the economic difficulties facing the district. Decline was exacerbating the relationship between the board of education and its teachers.

Furthermore, race never receded as an important factor in the Willingboro School District, and 1975 was no different. The band-aid designed to reduce white flight in the form of a ban on “For Sale” signs posted in front of houses was declared unconstitutional (Broderick, 1975, March 4). Willingboro vowed to appeal the decision; however, the sign ban ordinance was little more than a knee-jerk response to

the fact that whites were leaving the community (Broderick, 1975, March 4). The sign ban was a sideshow to the real issues of white flight.

The primary issue affecting the schools was a growing racial imbalance among the elementary schools in the district where each neighborhood, or park, had its own elementary school. In particular, one of the oldest parks in the district, called Pennypacker and its elementary school that also went by the same name, had an African American student population of 45%, nearly 35% higher than the district as a whole (Broderick, 1975, February 5; Broderick, 1975, October 22). This change from 22% African American to 44% African American took place over four years (Broderick, 1975, November 13). The long rumored white flight in Willingboro was finally making its appearance in the schools. While the board may not have had much control over real estate transactions, it showed little inclination to address the racial imbalance in its schools when it met with state monitors:

The implication was clear, the board members were suggesting that the state really doesn't know what's going on in Willingboro, that Willingboro is different, that Willingboro won't have racial problems because of its present racial imbalance. (Broderick, 1975, February 12, p. 6)

Yet Willingboro did have racial problems, as chronicled across the decade.

Furthermore, the white flight would have a clear impact on the resources available to the community and the school district.

As the deadline approached when the state expected a plan to address this imbalance, the board continued its pattern of refusing to acknowledge that racial

imbalance was a problem (Broderick, 1975, May 8). The Willingboro Board of Education kept insisting the state had not shown how the racial imbalance was negatively shaping the education of the students at Pennypacker while the state insisted it had (Broderick, 1975, May 14). By the fall, the board had several different plans to consider, courtesy of a citizen committee (Broderick, 1975, October 22). These plans included redistricting, bussing, and reorganization of the elementary schools to achieve racial balance (Broderick, 1975, October 22).

That being said, the board still remained reluctant, even intransigent, to addressing the racial imbalance, threatening to do nothing in the face of a state mandate to act (Broderick, 1975, November 13). The board was unable to reach a consensus on a plan for desegregation before the end of the year (Broderick, 1975, November 26; Inman, 1975, December 5). It argued that people from lower socioeconomic levels were purchasing the homes in Pennypacker Park, and, as a result there was a student body that was not achieving at the same level as the other schools (Inman, 1975, December 5). This was precisely what Orfield (2002) warned would happen, and he recognized the negative impact such a change could have on the rest of the community in terms of funding for public services like schools. Now the racial issues had “come home to roost.” No longer were there fights in the schools, but the schools were rapidly changing their racial composition and the district seemed unwilling to take steps to address the segregated schools. However, based on its prior history, the board should have known the significance of race as an issue and of its impact on both the community and schools. The board’s intentions seemed to be reflected by a letter writer who wrote: “Let the state take us to court and

prove racial imbalance – whatever that means in a wholly integrated community where 90% of the homes are the same price range and equally available to all” (Rudolph, 1975, November 27).

Through its actions, the board’s reputation for squabbling was re-affirmed in 1975. This image in the public’s mind came through loud and clear when a petition circulated in the winter of 1975 calling for an appointed, rather than an elected, school board (Bobb, 1975, February 9). The supporters saw it as a way to stop the bickering and conflict (Bobb, 1975, February 9). While nothing eventually came of this proposal, it reflected a deep displeasure among the public with the school board.

While the elected board remained in place, the actions of that group reaffirmed why some members of the community wanted the board abolished. From the opening of its term, the 1975 board of education was uninterested in behaving collegially. When it came time to elect the vice president of the school board, a dispute arose among the various members as to whether or not Robert’s Rules of Order had been followed properly (Broderick, 1975, March 18). At the following meeting, the board president ruled the previous election was invalid, and a new vice president was elected (Broderick, 1975, April 4). A disgruntled member of the board appealed this decision to the commissioner (Broderick, 1975, April 4).

The board’s reputation sank further when a story about board expenses came to light. It was reported that the board members cost the district over \$2,500 dollars to attend a national convention for school board members and it was suggested that the board members spent an inappropriate amount of time on fun social events (Broderick, 1975, April 14). Then the long-time board solicitor, Sidney Bookbinder,

resigned after serving in that capacity with only one break for over 16 years (Lerner, 1975, May 10). The board's incessant bickering seemed to have driven this professional out of his position. In the words of board member Maucie Miller, "I think he is still dismayed over the way school board members relate to one another" (Lerner, 1975, May 10, p. 1).

In general, the board's poor public image haunted all of its dealings and made its conduct of seemingly routine business questionable. Bob Broderick, the *Burlington County Times* writer who provided most of the coverage on the school board for the school year, wrote that he wanted to "thank them [school board] for the best free entertainment I've ever had" (Broderick, 1975, May 16, p. 7). While Broderick found much to laugh at in the dealings of the school board, many of the conflicts moved beyond laughable and substantially disrupted the school district.

The clash between Romanoli and the school board fell into this category. Romanoli, who had been granted early tenure by the Willingboro School Board only a few years earlier, found himself fighting for his career in 1975. This fight spanned the entire year. It began with an exchange after a board meeting in which board member George Richardson accused the superintendent of directing abusive language toward him. In turn, Richardson wrote letters to all the board members and the solicitor demanding that Romanoli be immediately removed from his post (Lerner, 1975, February 1). In stark contrast from when Romanoli had been granted tenure after only ten months



Figure 11: George Richardson, Board Member.
From: *Gryphon*, 1979.

of service just a few years earlier, this same board voted to support Richardson's charges and asked Romanoli to resign (Lerner, 1975, February 2). Board member Patricia Harper commented "it's not only this incident, it is the overall pattern of behavior that concerns me deeply. I do not feel an educational system can be properly run with that sort of attitude" (Lerner, 1975, February 2, p. A-5). When Romanoli refused to resign, the board suspended him at a raucous board meeting at which 500 Romanoli supporters in the audience could not sway the majority of the board (Broderick, 1975, February 4). The case moved on to the New Jersey Commissioner of Education to be reviewed. The high school principal, Dr. Donald Warner, was appointed acting superintendent (Broderick, 1975, February 4).



Figure 12: Dr. Donald Warner, High School Principal and Acting Superintendent. From: *Gryphon*, (p. 23), 1974.

This action fractured an already divided community. Richardson was accused of following through on a campaign promise to have Romanoli fired (Broderick, 1975, February 4). Letter writers argued both sides of the issue. In a letter to the editor, Banner (1975) commented, "The community should raise its head in utter indignation

against this type of petty in-fighting, which in the long run will adversely affect the educational processes that have been developed under able leadership" (p. 6). The other side was equally strident, arguing that, "The resignation of Peter J. Romanoli can have only one effect – that of improving the Willingboro educational system"

(Sobel, 1975, February 8, p. 6). Others saw it as yet another strike against the board and a confirmation of their in fighting that distracted them from real educational issues:

I am thoroughly, thoroughly amazed and positively discouraged and dismayed over the suspension of Superintendent Romanoli. Over the past months and years, our Board of Education has done nothing but argue over petty and unimportant issues and this is truly a culmination.

(Wallace, 1975, February 8, p. 6)

The editorial board of the local newspaper struck a balance between these perspectives and they summarized it as follows:

Two pictures emerge of Dr. Peter Romanoli, Willingboro's superintendent of schools, now suspended without pay.

The first is of a capable administrator, firm, innovative, well liked by both teachers and students.

The second is of an arrogant man with a volatile temper who can't stand to be told what to do.

Mix the two together and you get a man who is efficient and pleased to be the "skipper," but has trouble abiding what he sees as meddling from "outsiders," non-professionals like the press, the public and the board members who serve the public.

Dr. Romanoli, we have observed in the years he has been here, seems to have never really sorted out in his mind his relationship with the public. It is he who serves them, and, through the board they have

elected, carries out their wishes, not vice versa. (Dr. Romanoli's Suspension, 1975, February 5, p. 6)

Regardless of one's opinion of Romanoli, this latest incident did not reduce the conflict but magnified it. Furthermore, it was an added distraction as the board worked to resolve issues like funding and racial balance. This distraction was reflected in newspaper coverage. While the board grappled with reduced state funding as well as orders to better balance the racial composition of the elementary schools, the newspaper published full transcripts of the statements by board members who testified against Dr. Romanoli (Statements of Four Board Members Detail Claims of Romanoli Language, 1975, February 9).

Ultimately, the New Jersey Commissioner of Education ruled in Romanoli's favor (Broderick, 1975, May 16). The commissioner determined that the board did not have sufficient grounds to dismiss Romanoli, and so he was reinstated with full pay and benefits (Broderick, 1975, May 16). Board member George Richardson, who originally brought the charges against Romanoli, was outraged by the reinstatement and said the commissioner was "afraid to make the decision about a superintendent" and further charged that the commissioner had discussed the decision with the New Jersey School Board Association's director a month before it was released (Broderick, 1975, May 17, p. 1). Four board members vowed to appeal Romanoli's reinstatement (Broderick, 1975, May 18). Board member Patricia Harper stated "the only thing that could change her mind on an appeal was Romanoli's resignation" (Broderick, 1975, May 18, p. A-2). While this group of the board wanted to continue the fight, the community seemed to favor ending the spat. As one editorial urged,

“that there will be no further appeals. The educational process can brook no further disruptions at the top” (Together Again, 1975, May 17, p. 6).

This dispute caused the board to stumble in the performance of its main duty: running a school district. It was apparent even to groups outside of Willingboro. The New Jersey School Board Association’s Director, Mark Hurwitz, commented, “They [Willingboro School Board] were leaders in curriculum and other fields. But in the past year it seems that internal squabbles have taken up more of the time of their administrators (Broderick , 1975, May 19, p. 4). Nonetheless, the dispute continued. Romanoli attended board meetings accompanied by his lawyer (Broderick, 1975, May 21). Board members wrote open letters to their colleagues criticizing them for the environment they had created through the ongoing conflict with the superintendent (Broderick , 1975, May 24). The CPC called for all of the board members to resign as a result of their inability to move beyond this dispute and to continue consideration of an appeal (Broderick, 1975, May 29). The New Jersey Commissioner of Education even assigned the county superintendent to try and repair the rift between the board of education and the superintendent (Broderick, 1975, May 29).

Ultimately, the board decided to hire a lawyer to review the case and recommend whether or not it should appeal Romanoli’s reinstatement (Broderick, 1975, June 2). Then, in spite of calls for putting the dispute with the superintendent behind it, the board voted to appeal Romanoli’s reinstatement (Broderick, 1975, June 10). Reflecting the tension that existed between the board and the superintendent, Romanoli commented on the board’s decision to appeal saying at the board meeting,

“I am sorry for the community about the decision the board made this evening. I certainly will continue to work to the utmost of my capacity fulfilling my duties and responsibilities” (Willingboro Board of Education, 1975, June 9, p. 172).

Then, after further arm-twisting behind the scenes, the county superintendent convinced the board to drop its appeal and arranged further negotiations between the two parties, including a meeting with the board, Romanoli, and the New Jersey Commissioner of Education (Broderick, 1975, June 17). Board President Maucie Miller made a statement about the deal that was reached, saying, “I think it’s unfortunate that there has been an allusion to the fact that votes have been bought and sold” (Willingboro Board of Education, 1975, June 23, p. 232).

Despite these efforts to restore more amicable relations, the board and Romanoli remained on tense terms, and yet, as a reporter wrote, there remained “a hard core of board members who are opposed to his continued presence in the district, and will do anything to make him leave” (Broderick, 1975, September 22, p. 7). In September when Romanoli was asked to report on an investigation of the district’s board office, the board subsequently voted to censure him for his findings (Broderick, 1975, September 23). This continuing sniping between the board and its superintendent led the local paper to ask, “Does the Board need psychotherapy?” (Does the Board need psychotherapy?, 1975, September 23, p. 10).

The problems between Romanoli and the school board were never totally resolved. In November, rumors of a possible buyout for Romanoli surfaced, but they never amounted to anything (Suplee, 1975, November 2). In December, the board considered another censure of Romanoli, but it did not have the votes to move it

forward (Broderick, 1975, November 11). This battle between the board and its chief executive sapped further strength from the board's reputation and provided an unnecessary distraction when the district faced other pressing issues.

Romanoli was not alone in the clash between the board and the top administrators of the Willingboro School District. The school business administrator/board secretary, Elmer Corda, was subjected to attacks from the school board as well. This further reinforced the conflictual nature of the board. In the annual audit report, the financial practices of Corda's office were cited for imprecise record keeping which he attributed to the switch to a computerized bookkeeping system, as well as the long-term absence and eventual death of the board's accountant (Broderick, 1975, February 18). Board members were concerned about the financial health of the district and suspected there had been administrative mismanagement (Broderick, 1975, February 18).

In a continuation of the questions about Corda from the year before, the board received a report about Corda's actions as well as recommended actions to improve the school district's accounting practices in the spring of 1975 (Broderick, 1975, April 15). The board's solicitor, Sidney Bookbinder, completed this "Corda Report," before he resigned (Broderick, 1975, April 15). With its release, the board was further polarized with some members asking to be disassociated from the report (Broderick, 1975, April 15). That did not prevent the board from denying Corda a raise when raises for all the other central administrators were approved (Broderick, 1975, May 13). Then, in an apparent about-face, the board voted in July to grant Corda his raise and decided to not forward the Corda Report to the board's new solicitor for the

allegations to be further investigated, although several of Corda's harshest critics were absent from that meeting (Broderick, 1975, July 15).

The report was not released to the public; however, the local paper did acquire a copy (Broderick, 1975, July 22). In a story on the origins of the report, the county prosecutor, who originally investigated Corda and then recommended the board do its own investigation, characterized many of the allegations as "a personality or quasi-political thing against Corda" (Broderick, 1975, July 22, p. 7). To an outsider, the board seemed to be scapegoating an administrator for allegations that did not appear to be particularly serious.

The board then directed Romanoli to review the report and offer recommendations about how to address it (Romanoli to Review "Corda Report," 1975, July 22). When Romanoli recommended no further action be taken, the board censured him for his recommendations and for the tone of his report (Broderick, 1975, September 23). Furthermore, over Corda's objections, the board voted to split the position of board secretary and business administrator and advertise for a new board secretary (Broderick, 1975, September 24).

As 1975 drew to a close, the Willingboro School District's top administrators were in open conflict with the school board. In the midst of this rancorous conflict, the board opened its brand new high school in the fall of 1975 (Sacharow, 1975, October 7). Coincidentally, the district was experiencing declining enrollment. The district's enrollment, which had been over 15,000 at the start of the decade, had dropped below 14,000 for the start of school in 1975 (see Table A3). The district that

had been predicated on growth for so many years faced growing financial problems combined with and exacerbated by a shrinking student population.

1976 - The educational program here looks good. But this board is one of the worst in the state. (Mickle, 1976, December 2, p.1)

The year 1976 marked the Bicentennial of the United States of America. In the midst of that celebration of the independence of the United States from and freedom taxation without representation, New Jersey struggled with how to pay for its public schools. Ultimately, the final outcome of the *Robinson v. Cahill* New Jersey State Supreme Court case was the enactment of an income tax. However, that was still seven months off and the funding of schools was uncertain as school boards prepared their annual budgets.

Willingboro would see a slight increase in state aid for the upcoming year; however, in the words of the county superintendent “with low ratables and high enrollment, \$2.3 million’s not much of an increase” (Bledsoe, 1976, January 28, p.1). This was followed by more bad news when the district learned, as a result of further state cuts, that it would receive approximately only one million dollars more for the coming year than the last year (Talmadge, 1976, February 5). In a time of high inflation as well as collective bargaining agreements that guaranteed certain salary increases, this amounted to a miniscule increase in state funds that would not cover the increased costs (Talmadge, 1976, February 5). These costs would have to be covered by increased local taxes (Talmadge, 1976, February 5).

In developing this budget, another split appeared between the superintendent and the board of education. Romanoli claimed that the loss of state aid “will not lead to the elimination of any school programs,” while board member Patricia Gross said, “We are going to have program cuts and there are no two ways about it” continuing, “it would be deceitful to say any different” (Talmadge, 1976, January 14, p. 5).

Yet much was at stake in this budget. The school district was losing state aid, and cuts along with tax increases, were necessary to keep the district from running a deficit. The board of education considered multiple cuts, all very drastic, to make ends meet (Bobb, 1976, February 8). These included elementary school assistant principals, locker and playground aides, limiting all but central office staff to ten-month contracts, and the like (Bobb, 1976, February 8). Board member Patricia Harper warned that “There is no way that local property taxes could fund the needed money. It would necessitate almost \$1 per hundred in the local property tax. That’s beyond the community’s economic ability to pay” (Bobb, 1976, February 8, pp. A-1, A-4). When it came time for the board to approve the budget, it moved forward on the heroic assumption that the state would provide full funding and the district would not have to make the cuts (Talmadge, 1976, February 10). Against the advice of both their solicitor and the business administrator, the board approved a budget without the drastic cuts (Talmadge, 1976, February 10).

However, as the plan became public, it became apparent that the district was considering closing an elementary school (Talmadge, 1976, February 11). This talk of closing a school came only a few months after the new high school had opened to handle the large growth in the student population. Now it appeared that the district

would need to reduce its capacity. The community's did not receive the possibility of a school closing well, at least not by those who would lose their community school. One person wrote "I, personally, will do everything possible to keep Stuart School [one considered for closing], it's [sic] administration and faculty, open for the education of the children of our area" (Hood, 1976, February 20, p. 6). Besides schools, the board considered reducing class offerings (Gross, 1976, February 22). This, however, was were strongly opposed by the community and ultimately defeated by the board (Gross, 1976, February 22). One board member wrote a letter to the editor in which she publicly denounced the recommendations of the superintendent, which she described as an "educational fiasco" (Gross, 1976, March 22, p. C-2). Ultimately, in the face of increasing public pressure, the board adopted a budget that anticipated the district receiving the total amount of state funding, even though they were warned by state officials not to expect that much (Shrom, 1976, February 27).

When the community voted on the budget, the uncertainty seemed to have influenced their vote. On Election Day, 63% of the votes were against the budget (Unpredictable Voters Split On School Budget Approvals, 1976, p. 3). Following New Jersey law, the budget was sent to the town council. The council voted to cut the budget by \$300,000 dollars, and this was accepted by a majority of the board (Shrom, 1976, March 23). While the budget was defeated for the third year in a row, the majority of the board did not argue in favor of appealing the cuts – which was an improvement of a sort (Shrom, 1976, March 23). Yet in another display of division, two board members were quoted by the newspaper arguing that the board should appeal the budget cuts to the commissioner (Shrom, 1976, March 23).

The budget process did not burnish the board's image. Similarly, the election of the board itself reinforced the board's poor image in the community. In an election for three seats on the board, all three incumbents chose not to run, a reflection no doubt of the headaches and public acrimony that members earned (Shrom, 1976, March 6). When it came time to elect officers, the headaches of being a member of the board of education were revealed to the new members. For the second year in a row, the board failed to decide who should serve as the vice president since they were deadlocked over two candidates (Broderick, 1976, March 16). The matter was referred to the county superintendent of schools for a decision (Broderick, 1976, March 16). Ultimately, the county superintendent chose a "none of the above" candidate, selecting a third person who had not been in the running for the vice presidency. This compromise decision was acceptable to most, but not to all of the board members (Talmadge, 1976, March 20). The inability to support one candidate and then public expressions of displeasure with the county superintendent's choice again showed the divisions within the board.

The board's image in the community continued to plummet. As Margaret Reynolds described in her letter to the editor, "There is no muscle in the Willingboro school district – no muscle in the administration, no muscle within the school buildings, on any level, and no muscle on the board of education" (Reynolds, 1976, March 24, p. 6).

That image of the board was cemented by the ongoing conflict between the board and various administrators, and the superintendent in particular. In January of 1976, a board member introduced a motion to censure Romanoli for preventing a

board member from attending an interview of principal candidates, but the motion was defeated (Talmadge, 1976, January 14; Willingboro OKs School Plan, 1976, January 27). A further consideration of censure followed over the issue of nepotism. In August of that year, a man who turned out to be the son of the district's personnel director was recommended to the board for a custodial position (Mickle, 1976, August 17). This violated the board's policy on nepotism, and Romanoli made this recommendation knowing that the candidate being recommended was a blood relative of the district's personnel director (Mickle, 1976, August 17). In October, there was a move to censure both Romanoli and the personnel director for this near breach of board policy (Mickle, 1976, October 25). Romanoli survived this scandal as well, but his relationship with the board eroded further (Mickle, 1976, October 25).

In November, the New Jersey Office of Fiscal Affairs issued a report on the management of the district (Mickle, 1976, November 2). While the superintendent was criticized by the report, the main thrust of the criticism was directed at several board members who interfered in typically administrative matters, intruded in school meetings, and spoke directly with staff (Mickle, 1976, November 2). Furthermore, the district was engaging in across-the-board cuts when managing declining resources instead of making targeted cuts and identifying specific programs (New Jersey State Legislature Office of Fiscal Affairs, 1976). In a time of decline, these kinds of across-the-board cuts will ultimately cripple the entire organization whereas targeted cuts that focus on retaining the priorities of the organization (Behn, 1980). The board's infighting made this kind of careful, strategic planning nearly impossible. Several board members dismissed the report and planned to make corrections and

clarifications to the report before releasing it to the public (Mickle, 1976, November 2). In the end, an unidentified member of the evaluation team commented, “The educational programs here looks good. But this board is one of the worst in the state” (Mickle, 1976, December 2, p. 5).

Administrative raises were another area of conflict between Superintendent Romanoli, certain members of the board, as well as the public. In May of 1976, Romanoli recommended 23.5% raises for the administrators, intended to parallel increases granted to teachers (Talmadge, 1976, May 4). These raises would be retroactive as well (Talmadge, 1976, May 4). This put him at odds with certain members of the board, one of whom “strongly criticized Romanoli for recommending the retroactive raise, ‘when the district is in such dire financial straits’” (Talmadge, 1976, May 4, p. 4).

The public reaction was extremely negative. The proposal to grant raises to administrators generated one letter to the editor in which the writer complained that the board perspective on raises was “Let’s pay those administrators what they demand, rather than what they deserve, and more importantly, what we can afford” (Silverstein, 1976, May 19, p. 6). With reactions like that and 150 people attending the board meeting where this proposal was to be voted on, not surprisingly, the board blinked (Willingboro School Board Rejects Salary Increases, 1976, May 11). The board voted to table the motion for the pay increases after a tumultuous meeting with many speakers attacking the board for considering such a move (Willingboro School Board Rejects Salary Increases, 1976, May 11). The motion was reconsidered in September of that year as part of a special meeting to address two issues, one of

which was the administrative raises (Mickle, 1976, September 2). At a “stormy” meeting described by a reporter, the raises were denounced by the public, and when a board member said the raises “were too high and the administrators hung their heads dejectedly” (Mickle, 1976, September 2, p. 11).

The board ultimately awarded the raises for the administrators in December after parliamentary maneuvering (Mickle, 1976, December 14). The motion, which had been tabled throughout the year, was brought up in the board meeting under “old business” so that it was not on the agenda and after public comment for the evening had been completed. Then it passed only by a five-to-four vote (Mickle, 1976, December 14). In an ironic twist, board member George Richardson, who had played the leading role in having Romanoli suspended the year before, voted for the raise and defended it by saying “If the board had been doing its job for the past three years, he would have gotten what he deserves without the outcry,” referring to the board’s failure to grant Romanoli a raise over the last three years (Mickle, 1976, December 14, p. 3).

In response to actions like these, a new group called the *Taxed to Death Committee* appeared in Willingboro (Reynolds, 1976, September 24). The group’s leader, Margaret Reynolds, announced the group’s objectives in a letter stating, “Our purpose is to stop the spiraling tax increases which emanate from fat pay increases to central administrators, principals, and teachers, and to educate the taxpayers to some of the horrendous expenditures that are taking place in this district” (Reynolds, 1976, September 24, p. 6). When the pay raises for the administrators were announced in



Figure 13: Margaret Reynolds, Community Organizer and later Board Member. From: *Willingboro High School*, (p. 92), 1979.

December, one member of the *Taxed to Death Committee* announced she would consider running for the school board (Mickle, 1976, December 14).

In this environment, George Richardson and Roy Paige, both incumbent members of the board, announced they would not seek reelection

(Richardson to Leave Board, Eyes Council, 1976, December 21). Richardson said he chose to leave the

board because the meetings were a “farce,” personality conflicts rather than discussion about education dominated any discussion, and that he had other political ambitions (Richardson to Leave Board, Eyes Council, 1976, December 21, p. 5). The departure of these two board members reflected the board’s toxic environment that discouraged people from wanting to participate.

Racial problems also continued to bedevil the divided school board as the group worked to address concerns from the state that some of the district’s elementary schools were racially imbalanced. Two elementary schools, Pennypacker and Buckingham, had disproportionate minority enrollment and the students at these schools scored lower on the state elementary assessment tests than at other elementary schools in the district (Talmadge, 1976, January 6). The proposal that the board considered at the start of the year called for the voluntary transfer of minority students from the Pennypacker and Buckingham elementary schools to elementary schools with lower minority percentages (Talmadge, 1976, January 6). The proposal brought out parents who objected to any change, and the board failed to act on the

proposal at its first opportunity (Talmadge, 1976, January 13). However, the voluntary transfer plan was approved by the end of the month (Willingboro OKs School Plan, 1976, January 27).

The state, however, was unwilling to approve the plan. While Romanoli and other supporters thought the voluntary transfer of minority students out of the schools in question and a corresponding transfer of majority students to the Buckingham and Pennypacker schools would resolve the issue, the state monitors did not anticipate a sufficient number of students volunteering to transfer, thereby the schools would remain racially imbalanced (Talmadge, 1976, April 7). In other words, the state wanted to know how the district would implement mandatory desegregation if it were not done voluntarily. The proposed solution, developed by a citizen committee, called for an attrition plan where new students eligible to enroll in Buckingham or Pennypacker schools would be involuntarily enrolled in a different school to promote greater racial balance (Mickle, 1976, August 13).

Nonetheless, the state rejected Willingboro's plan as unacceptable and required it to submit a new plan (Mickle, 1976, August 13). Willingboro residents feared that the state would force them into a plan that would require bussing of students to achieve racial balance. Bussing for public school desegregation had been demagogued by national politicians for years (Lugg, 1996). Consequently, this was opposed by both the community and the board members, one of whom remarked that bussing would only take place "over my dead body" (Mickel, 1976, August 13, p. 16). Other parents threatened to lie down in front of busses to prevent bussing while another community member said, "This town is a firecracker" referring to the racial

tensions (Mickle, 1976, August 13, p. 16). The board appealed the decision of the commissioner. Romanoli threatened that the district might have to close the schools to achieve the racial integration the state was mandating and predicted community outrage if that came to pass (Mickle, 1976, August 17).

Following this bluster, Fred Burke, the New Jersey Commissioner of Education, approved the Willingboro plan, but with the requirement that the attrition plan be implemented immediately (Mickle, 1976, September 11). The board appealed the second decision again to Burke in hopes of delaying the implementation of the attrition plan so that prospective buyers in the district would understand the school situation before they made their purchase (Mickle, 1976, September 21). The board also agreed to implement the plan as ordered by the commissioner while the appeal moved forward (Willingboro Adopts “Attrition Plan” for Schools, 1976, October 12). In the end, Burke asked the board to drop their formal appeal, which the board “in their characteristically noisy fashion” rejected (Mickle, 1976, November 23).

The battle over desegregation had ended for 1976, but the board again demonstrated its inherent ability to create conflict. In their dealings with the New Jersey Department of Education they managed to give offense. In the words of the county superintendent, “Why get into litigation if you’re going to accept the attrition plan?” (Mickle, 1976, November 23, p. 3). In other words, why would Willingboro need to continue the formal appeal if it had already voted to implement the Commissioner’s decision? Again, a culture of conflict seemed to be at the heart of everything the board did.

Then racial clashes returned to the school classrooms as well. In the early seventies, the schools faced many violent confrontations between white and black students. This situation had seemed to quiet down or at least disappear from the newspapers. By 1976, these issues returned. Controversy erupted in the community when the student council at Willingboro High School was accused of racism because it gave a necklace, rather than a crown to the first black homecoming queen at the school (Willingboro Group Denies Racism Charge, 1976, November 25). The student council claimed the decision to stop awarding a crown had been made well before the queen had been chosen and that the decision was driven by budget concerns (Willingboro Group Denies Racism Charge, 1976, November 25). Nonetheless, the district's history of the racial tensions made the charges seem plausible. Later, complaints surfaced at a board meeting that students at the junior high school were intimidated into sitting only with members of the same race (Mickle, 1976, December 21). Racial conflicts and racial segregation continued to be issues for the dysfunctional board to deal with as the community changed into one with a higher percentage of minority members.

The school board maintained its oppositional relationship with the teachers as well during 1976. The contract was up for renegotiation, and there was serious consideration given to make the negotiations open to the public as a way to speed up settlements and limit raises (Mickle, 1976, October 19). Leading up to negotiations, the board alienated the teachers by failing to properly implement a promise from the previous negotiations (School Board Vote Causes Dissent, Dispute, Threat, 1976, October 19). The board had promised the union a benefit in the second year of the

contract worth \$30,000 dollars for which the union proposed adopting a dental plan for the teachers (School Board Vote Causes Dissent, Dispute, Threat, 1976, October 19). The dental plan was rejected and then adopted by the board through questionable parliamentary procedures that the board solicitor ruled to be improper (School Board Vote Causes Dissent, Dispute, Threat, 1976, October 19). Ultimately, the board voted to repeal the plan, and the union took the matter to the Public Employees Relations Commission as an unfair labor practice (Willingboro Schools Nix Dental Plan, 1976, December 14). The stage was set for contentious negotiations leading into 1977 as the board and the teachers began to work out a new collective bargaining agreement.

The collective bargaining with the teachers was not the only issue that would extend into 1977. Budget issues also continued to beleaguer the board. Although the board had developed a budget and the legislative arrangements to settle *Robinson v. Cahill* appeared to mean more state funding for public schools, it was not all roses for Willingboro. In the fall of 1976, the business administrator, Elmer Corda, warned that the district was in danger of exceeding its budget and running out of money before the end of the year (Perkins, 1976, October 12). Just as interesting, the school district still had not identified how it would address the \$300,000 budget cut imposed by the town council following the budget defeat the previous spring (Perkins, 1976, October 12).

The district nearly depleted its surplus to transfer money to cover costs for the current year (Mickle, 1976, October 26). The board planned to carefully watch their spending for the balance of the year and also counted on some unanticipated revenue to make the budget work for the rest of the year (Mickle, 1976, October 26). This

tight financial situation would create further conflict as the board had to continue to reduce expenditures and thereby determine financial winners and losers.

In the same vein, school closings were increasingly seen as an appealing option to reduce costs. By the fall of 1976, Romanoli was reporting to the board the need to close a school, possibly an elementary school (Mickle, 1976, September 28). Elementary enrollment had declined from 8,700 in 1971 to 5,900 in 1976, hence the reason for the proposal (Mickle, 1976, September 28). The community recognized the irony in the situation since the new high school had just opened, and at least one letter writer questioned why the community had just built a brand new high school for growing student needs only to begin considering closing other schools due to lack of enrollment (Havrilla, 1976, October 14). As the year 1976 closed, departing board member George Richardson publically identified one elementary school for closing, stating the Country Club Elementary School could be closed and used for administrative offices to save the district money (Mickle, 1976, December 28).

The nation's bicentennial had seen the Willingboro Public School District further founder as a result of a culture of conflict, fiscal difficulties, and racial tensions. The board's ongoing disputes among its own members, with the administration, and with the public reduced its effectiveness and lessened the public trust placed in it. At the same time, white flight reduced the population and the resources available to the district. As a result, the conflicts only intensified. The fiscal shortfall at the end of 1976, as well as talks of school closings, and disputes with the teachers over their contract would become more significant in the year to come, further impairing the district's ability to function.

Chapter V – Collapse

1977 - Preliminaries

*I keep saying it and nobody seems to believe me. But there is no money
in this budget to pay for any new expenses. --*

Joseph Oliver, Board President (Mickle, 1977, September 26, p.5)

By 1977, the Willingboro Public School District was on the brink of a traumatic event, the teachers' strike in the fall of that year. It was the first strike in that district, and the first teachers' strike in Burlington County. The strike was inherently connected to the decline of the Willingboro School Public School District. Since the district had fewer resources, groups began to fight to protect their "slice of the pie," albeit a shrinking pie. As the pie became smaller, the tensions increased in a district already known for conflict. The strike exacerbated the feelings of ill will and conflict.

The year began with a continuation of the trends that had become apparent in the previous years. When it came time to see who had registered to be a candidate for the school board, the ballot was yet again full. Ten candidates filed for the three open seats, and George Richardson and Patricia Harper, two former board members, were running for one unexpired term (Candidates Ready for School Elections, 1977, February 18). George Richardson had earlier indicated he was leaving the board, but he apparently had a change of heart and decided to run once again (Candidates Ready for School Elections, 1977, February 18). That meant a total of twelve candidates were vying for three full terms and one unexpired term.

Besides the sheer number of candidates, there were other indicators that the board election was critically important. The teachers' union organized a candidates' night for teachers who were also residents of the town to ask questions of the candidates (Mickle, 1977, March 1). There were 400 teachers who lived in the district, so with candidates being selected to the board in the past with as few as 950 votes, the teachers could prove a powerful force in the election (Mickle, 1977, March 1).

The teachers did not rely solely on a "meet and greet night" to influence the election. The WEA also had a political action committee called Willingboro Educators Political Action Committee, or WEPAC, that endorsed four candidates and supported them financially with mailings and organizing coffee klatches (Mickle, 1977, March 12).

The teachers were not alone in their efforts to shape the outcome of the election. Willingboro's growing African American community had its own instrument to influence elections. It was called the Political Action Council, and it also endorsed a candidate for the election (Willingboro's PAC Backs Payne in Race, 1977, March 26).

The *Taxed to Death Committee*, led by Margaret Reynolds, while it did not endorse any candidate, but also tried to influence the election. The committee held a meeting open to the public that she advertised in a letter to the editor (Reynolds, 1977, March 22). She wanted to "elect candidates who will represent all taxpayers – stand up to the hierarchy of the administration, the teachers' union and respond to the outrageous waste and abuse of money, abhorrent business management and rampant

mediocrity that permeates the system” (Reynolds, 1977, March 22). In a fiery meeting where she spoke for 70 minutes, she railed against the teachers’ union and board members who were too close to the teachers (Mickle, 1977, March 24).

Less formal was a group calling itself the *Committee of 77* (Goldy, 1977, March 27). The group did not have official status as a PAC, but it was a loose group of citizens that sought to influence the elections (Goldy, 1977, March 27). However, there were some who believed this group sought to elect candidates who would be supportive of the superintendent, Peter Romanoli (Reynolds, 1977, March 22).

Each group seemed to have its own agenda. Nonetheless, the increased political activism reflected the growing concern brought on by decline in Willingboro. As the town suffered the effects of white flight, declining population, and limits on state aid, each group sought to protect the interests of its members. The decline injected even more politics into the already heated environment the school board elections in Willingboro.

The budget was part of the election since citizens voted on the budget at the same time they chose board members. Across the state of New Jersey, the newly established income tax now provided a stream of revenue for the state to tap for school finance, but the state also imposed caps on districts to limit their budget growth and equalize school spending by giving different caps to different schools based on their wealth (Bledsoe, 1977, January 25). The cap on Willingboro limited its budget growth to 6.7% for the year (Bledsoe, 1977, January 25). This cap sharply curtailed the growth of the district’s budget considering that the annual inflation rate

for 1977 was 6.5%, effectively limiting the real budget growth to 0.2% (Table of Historical Inflation Rates by Month and Year, 2010).

The state aid increase would offset any increase in property taxes, or at least it seemed that way. The local tax levy for schools was projected to drop by 23 cents as a result of the increase in income tax-funded state aid (Mickle, 1977, February 8). Then the tax situation changed again with an announcement that the local property taxes would only decrease eight cents, and School Business Administrator Elmer Corda attributed the change to state directives and a mix up over the tax rate from the year before (Mickle, 1977, February 10). This amount changed once again when Corda received news about an increase in federal aid as well as plans to limit spending in the current year to free up money for the following year resulting in a tax cut of 25 cents (Willingboro Taxpayers Will Get 25 Cent Break, 1977, February 11). The almost daily fluctuation of the income projections, whether they were the result of state mandates or district actions, only served to reduce confidence in the school board's actions among the community members.

The Willingboro School District had to make cuts to address the reduction in resources. The school board considered saving money by relocating the central administrative offices and the district alternative school into elementary schools (Mickle, 1977, January 25). The board ultimately rejected this plan, fearing a large outcry from parents who would object to the alternate school being housed in their neighborhood school (Mickle, 1977, January 25). This is a classic symptom of decline. People may recognize the need for economy, but they do not want to be the

ones affected by the reduction of resources. One letter writer summarized this issue very succinctly in her effort to urge people to speak out on the budget cuts:

That budget for the next year is being juggled every which way at present in an attempt to enact cuts of personnel to insure that the expected tax decreases can be delivered as promised to you.

Cuts seem inevitable; the questions concerning what or whom is to be cut are of great importance to the residents of Willingboro with children of school age. Many helpful services of benefit to your children may be cut simply because such services are the easiest to cut as the groups in questions [sic] have no power against the board....

I urge the people of Willingboro to come out in support of your schools, in support of personnel worth fighting for. In support of awareness for that awareness alone will prevent incompetent action from being taken against the better interest of your kids. (Darby, 1977, March 1, p. 6)

In her call to action, this Willingboro resident recognized that the budget cuts in question would come at the expense of whoever was the least politically active. Parents needed to come out and defend their slice of the shrinking budgetary pie. The decline of the school district increased the political action taken by the groups that would be impacted; at the same time this increased the chance for conflict as these groups battled each other for shares of the district's resources.

Of course, one of these groups was the teachers. As the board worked to finalize the budget, personnel cuts became one of the items under consideration. In

particular, ten physical education teachers were marked for release (Willingboro School Board Adopts Tentative Budget, 1977, March 8). When the board approved this tentative budget, the business administrator, Elmer Corda, warned that “the caps have prevented officials from putting any money in the budget to use in negotiations with the Willingboro Education Association (WEA)” (Willingboro School Board Adopts Tentative Budget, 1977, March 8, p. 4). Corda’s warning hinted at the challenge that the board would face when negotiating with the teachers.

As the budget process progressed, the personnel cuts became more dramatic and included a reduction of \$750,000, achieved in part by cutting 30 teachers, 14 hall aides, and 20 lunchroom aides (Mickle, 1977, March 11). Besides eliminating these positions, the board president warned there would be no money to grant wages to employees up for contract renewals and he said that, “The employees are going to have to have some feeling for our position. They’re going to have to realize we have to pull in our belt and so are they” (Mickle, 1977, March 11, p. 1). At the public hearing for the budget, employees, particularly the lunch room aides, were the largest

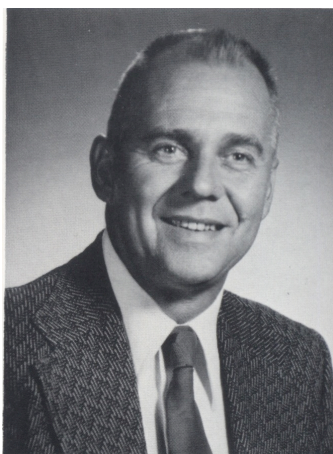


Figure 14: Joseph Oliver, Board Member and president during the strike. From: *Willingboro High School*, (p. 22), 1978.

group present to ask questions of the board about who would lose their jobs as a result of the budget cuts (Few Attend Session on Willingboro Finances, 1977, March 17). Foreshadowing the labor issues to come, Board President Oliver told the public that, “any salary increases won by the employees will have to be taken out of programs for students” (Willingboro Adopts \$25 Million Budget, 1977, March 18, p. 3). Here again, groups were

placed in opposition to each other. With a shrinking budgetary pie, any group's gain would come at the expense of another.

When Election Day came and the votes were counted, the teachers had reason to be pleased, or at least the WEPAC group did. They had endorsed four candidates for the Willingboro School Board and all four had been elected (Mickle, 1977, March 12; Voters OK '77 Budgets in 30 Towns, 1977, March 30). Two longtime critics of Romanoli, Alice Martello and Patricia Harper, were voted out of office (Voters OK '77 Budgets in 30 Towns, 1977, March 30). Furthermore, the budget had passed for the first time since 1972, no doubt in part because of the generous property tax cuts that were the result of the new state income tax and the spending caps placed on school budgets (Voters OK '77 Budgets in 30 Towns, 1977, March 30).

After the election, the board moved to improve its public image. All of the candidates had promised a new image for the board. The steps taken to achieve this goal included dropping verbatim minutes, reducing the length and number of meetings, and creating a process for working with the school administration as opposed to interfering with the day-to-day running of the schools (Mickle, 1977, March 31). George Richardson, an incumbent who was reelected said, "I want to make meetings as boring as possible," in reference to the circus-like atmosphere that characterized board meetings up until then (Mickle, 1977, March 31, p. 3). Richardson also reflected a new spirit of comity between the board and the superintendent. Richardson had led the charge in Romanoli's suspension several years earlier, but now Richardson was quoted as saying, "I think Pete (Romanoli) will prove he's quite capable of doing the job" (Mickle, 1977, March 31, p. 3).

In an atmosphere of decline combined with a political culture of conflict, this new image of the school board did not last long. At the very first public meeting, there was a tie vote for the vice-presidency of the school board (Mickle, 1977, April 8). After a short recess, the board voted again and this time Richardson was elected vice-president, but the board member, John Jordan, who had switched sides had his unsuccessful nominee for board solicitor named to the post of labor negotiator (Mickle, 1977, April 8). While the board members denied that any deal was made, the way the events shook out certainly left that impression in the public's mind. Furthermore, stories emerged that Richardson had threatened to resign if he was not given the vice-presidency. Former board members attended the meeting and publically criticized the professional appointments made by the board, including the appointment of the new solicitor (Mickle, 1977, April 8; Richardson Confirms Ultimatum, 1977, April 19). As one letter to the editor questioned, "What happened to all the campaign promises about maturity, stability, and dignity?" in reference to the promises of a new image for the Willingboro Board of Education (Cole, 1977, April 22).

Further efforts were made to improve the image of the board. The board voted to stop broadcasting its meetings on the local cable television network (Willingboro Kills TV Meetings, 1977, May 10). George Richardson led this move at the board level because he believed that the board members "played for the cameras," thereby creating a more volatile environment for the meetings (Willingboro Kills TV Meetings, 1977, May 10, p. 11). His critics argued that he was trying to make the board's actions more secretive (Willingboro Kills TV Meetings, 1977, May 10).

However, ending the television broadcasts appeared to make good sense to improve the board's image when, at that same meeting, the superintendent got into a screaming match with long-time critic Margaret Reynolds over her charge that two Willingboro High School teachers were having sexual relations with students (Willingboro Kills TV Meetings, 1977, May 10). Keeping potentially slanderous commentary off the television would be good for the district's image, whether the claims were true or not.

The decision to pull the board's meetings from the television did not last for long. By August, the board voted to return its meetings to the cable television network. The result this decision had on the board's public image is reflected in the way the decision was announced in the local paper: "Willingboro school board meetings are coming back to television this fall – to rival 'Fernwood Tonight' for linguistic lunacy and insane situations" (Mickel, 1977, August 2, p. 3). Once again the board appeared to be unable to make a decision and stick to it, even though ending the television broadcasts of the meetings appeared to be in the best interest of the district.

Clashes with the watchdog group *Taxed to Death* and its leader, Margaret Reynolds, further tarnished the board's public image. The issue arose when Reynolds requested the salaries of teachers and administrators and then claimed the request was not processed until she threatened legal action (Sacharow, 1977, June 12). While the Board Secretary did provide the material and did so in what he considered a timely manner, the story ran in the Sunday edition of the local paper under the title, "Willingboro Board Held Data; 'Watchdog' Barks," leaving the public with the clear

impression that the board and administration had something to hide (Sacharow, 1977, June 12, p. B-1). Adding to the image problem, the data released showed that teachers and administrators in Willingboro were paid higher than average salaries when compared to the state as well as other Burlington County Schools (Sacharow, 1977, June 12).

The transfer of elementary school principals caused a public stir in a repeat of the actions of 1972. In June of 1977, the board announced its plans to rotate the principals of the elementary schools; it had done this in past years, albeit in the face of public outcries (Mickle, 1977, June 16). When over 100 parents turned out to a meeting to protest the planned moves, they predicted “mass chaos” if the board followed through on this plan (Mickle, 1977, June 16, p. 1). Unfortunately, 1977 proved to be no different than prior years.

In response to the public pressure, board members reconsidered the move (Mickle, 1977, June 23). As the board meeting where the decision to rotate the principals could be reconsidered approached, it appeared that there were not enough votes to rescind the decision to rotate the principals (Mickle, 1977, July 8). At the board meeting, there was further maneuvering, but the motion to leave the principals in place was defeated (Mickle, 1977, July 12). The final decision was not well received by the community. In a letter to the editor, one resident wrote:

The most startling realization is the fact that we people in Willingboro have no voice in the education of our children. The superintendent repeatedly reminded us that many times more people came out opposing the transfer of principals five years ago and it is still to no

avail. The 1,100 plus signatures on the petitions seems to have no impact on many board members. (Epps, 1977, July 26, p. 6)

This resident, as well as many others, felt that the board was not listening to the voters.

Proposed school closings further estranged the board from the voters. This was a frequent topic at the board level as a way to address budget shortfalls and declining enrollment. The board formally considered closing its two junior high schools in the latest version of the plan to close schools (Budd, 1977, September 11). “Dwindling enrollment” was cited as the reason for proposing the school closings (Budd, 1977, September 11). Earlier, the board had floated proposals to close elementary schools, but these had met tremendous resistance from the public who did not want their neighborhood schools closed--a reaction that would have been predicted by scholars who researched the closing of schools (Wood & Boyd, 1981). This time the board chose the junior high schools because “the junior high schools, on the other hand, do not belong to one particular park, official reason and this mayimina [sic] some emotional outcries” (Budd, 1977, September 11, p. 1).

If the board thought its plan would avoid public objections, it misjudged the community. Identifying themselves as members of the Board Watchers Association, Andrea Wertzell-Anni and former board member Alice Martello questioned whether school closures would save the board any appreciable amount of money (1977, September 14). At the board meeting to formally consider this proposal, over 800 people, about half of whom were teachers in the Willingboro School District, turned out to voice their objections (Mickle, 1977, September 15). The meeting was raucous.

School officials were forced to shout at times to be heard over the heckling from the crowd as the district defended its plan to save the district money by closing the schools and releasing teachers (Mickle, 1977, September 15).

Consistent with the politics associated with decline, the teachers mobilized to fight this school closing and its attendant loss of jobs for teachers. Following the board meeting at which the plans to close the district's junior highs were tabled, a commentator remarked "it's clear that much of the Wednesday night protest developed because the WEA organized it" (Mickle, 1977, September 17, p. 1). The WEA was working to protect its interests and the interests of its members as the community struggled with how to deal with the declining school enrollment. Parents realized the WEA's pivotal role, and some parents even resented the WEA's power, claiming, "the WEA has no right to manipulate the public concern for a quality education, thus fueling the continuing battle for their own special interests" (Darby, 1977, September 27, p. 6). The WEA did not simply organize a large turnout at a board meeting; they also set up hotlines for parents to contact to find out the "truth" about how the school closings would impact their children (Mickle, 1977, September 17). The closing further strained relations between the WEA and the board as the two groups were working to negotiate a contract (Mickle, 1977, September 17).

The teachers were not the only group that stood against the proposed school closings. Echoing sentiments of other parents, one letter writer expressed concern about bringing junior high school aged students into the elementary schools:

The problems of a junior high school would soon appear in our now outstanding elementary schools. Menstruation, masturbation, smoking

and graffiti alone would require two assistant principals per elementary school just to police the lavatories, to say nothing of the effect such would have on the little primary children. (Reeves, 1977, September 22, p. 6)

Other parents called for all the facts to be gathered before the decision that could affect the quality of the schools was made. One argued “I like to save money, but show me they are real savings with no hidden costs in terms of our children’s education and the quality of life in our community” (Molina, 1977, September 24, p. 6). In other words, save money, but make sure it does not affect me. While the opposition to the closing of the junior high schools was not as personal as the closing of the neighborhood elementary schools, the parents feared the impact this cut would have on them and their “slice of the pie.”

The board was functioning in a tense environment as a result of the conflict. Serving as a board member, while it may have had its perks, had its downfalls too. Being the center of this conflict took its toll. In June of 1977, veteran board member Joseph Baptista resigned after five years of service (Baptista Quits Willingboro Board, 1977, June 14). He had been president and vice president at various times during his tenure, but even those prestigious positions, or perhaps because of those prestigious positions, he had enough before completing his second term (Baptista Quits Willingboro Board, 1977, June 14).

Baptista’s resignation created further conflict. At the meeting, when Baptista resigned, board member George Richardson made a motion at the end of Baptista’s resignation speech to nominate a replacement that was quickly squashed by the public

in attendance and the other board members (Baptista Quits Willingboro Board, 1977, June 14). As a letter writer pointed out after the fact, interested applicants had to first be solicited from the public and then interviewed by the board before a successor could be selected (Shuster, 1977, July 12). While Richardson's move to quickly nominate Baptista's successor failed, his legally questionable motion further reinforced the board's image as a group that needed to be closely watched by the public.

The board continued its infighting. Former and current board members filed a formal complaint with the New Jersey Department of Education against board president Joseph Oliver (Mickle, 1977, June 29). Oliver was accused of casting votes that were a conflict of interest and for violating the state's "sunshine" law that required discussions and votes to be done in an open, public meeting (Mickle, 1977, June 29). While Oliver retained his position, the fact that current and former board members would go to such lengths to attack each other reflected the growing polarization and politicization of the school board.

Board members were not only subject to formal attacks; the culture of the community had reached the level where board members were attacked anonymously in their homes as well. Most notably, George Richardson, after voting to sustain the transfer of elementary school principals, reported that his wife received a phone call from an anonymous caller who warned her, "Be careful of your husband because he cannot be trusted" (Richardson, 1977, July 20, p. 6). Decisions by the board resulted in personal reprisals, and this environment could only attract potential board members

who embraced this culture of conflict rather than someone who would seek consensus.

As the board continued to bicker with itself and with the public, Willingboro's white flight continued unabated. Officials in the township argued that the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veterans Administration (VA) set the appraised the values of homes in the community at artificially low levels (Evans, 1977, January 18). Since so many homes in Willingboro were sold to buyers with FHA or VA mortgages, the home prices were not allowed to climb as they were in other towns (Evans, 1977, January 18). Willingboro town leaders argued "the practice prevents minorities from moving into other towns, leaving Willingboro as their only option" (Evans, 1977, January 18, p. 1). The township council and the leaders of minority groups wanted the VA and FHA to offer mortgages in neighboring communities and to allow property values to rise in Willingboro rather than to continue the current practice which "steered" black families to Willingboro (Evans, 1977, January 18). These VA and FHA practices had furthered white flight. Poorer minority families were pushed into the community while more affluent whites and blacks left and property values suffered. The result was that the community was left with fewer resources with which to provide services like education.

The measure taken by the community to reduce white flight through the practice of "blockbusting" had been to ban "For Sale" signs in front of homes and that measure had been challenged in the courts. In 1977, the case had eventually reached the United States Supreme Court, and, at that level, the ordinance was ruled unconstitutional (Court Rejects Sale Sign Law, 1977, May 2). The Willingboro mayor

expressed outrage at the decision since she claimed the law had helped to stabilize house sales since 1974 when the law went into effect (Court Rejects Sale Sign Law, 1977, May 2). Nonetheless, the law reflected Willingboro's realization that the community was experiencing white flight and that various steps had to be taken to prevent it from continuing.

That the community's racial composition was changing was reflected in the school district's changing discipline code. In the early seventies, in the midst of racial tensions, a discipline code was established that gave the administration no discretion in imposing disciplinary consequences to avoid inconsistency in discipline (Mickle, 1977, August 2). By 1977, this concern had faded since the minority population of Willingboro had grown so significantly. The board considered and ultimately approved a new policy that allowed administrators discretion in imposing disciplinary consequences (Mickle, 1977, August 2; Mickle, 1977, September 24).

Willingboro was in the midst of many challenging trends that added to its culture of conflict. School finance was difficult as the district faced declining revenue and the need to reduce spending. White flight continued in the community and more affluent families left Willingboro -- taking their resources with them. In the meantime, enrollment in the school system declined, further reducing the resources available to the school district. All of these drains added to the conflicts within the school district. However, it would be the conflict between the school board and its teachers that would define the year 1977.

Labor Relations - 1977

The time of reckoning is here this year. (Reynolds, 1977, October 20,

p. 6)

The year 1977 would come to be dominated by the Willingboro teachers' strike. This major event in the history of the school district was a logical step in the chain of events marking the decline of the school district. When the district lost its resources, groups moved to protect their interests, and the teachers were no different. As the district and the teachers went eyeball-to-eyeball, neither could afford to give in and the strike would be the result -- a strike that would irreparably damage relationships in the district.

The strike did not come without its preliminary skirmishes. Throughout the decade, every teacher contract in Willingboro had required outside mediation before a settlement could be reached. The year 1977 was no different. In April, the board moved to consider layoffs of up to 80 teachers to "give the board about \$1.25 million to use for negotiations with teachers for next year's contract" (Willingboro Board May Cut Jobs, 1977, April 25, p. 9). This move could only hurt relations with the teachers since it alienated the teachers either way: the teachers would lose jobs or there would not be any money to provide raises for the teachers. When the measure came up for a vote, the board did not approve it, and the Board President Oliver "worried aloud about money during the evening, arguing that the district's \$25 million budget for next year simply contains no money for employee salary hikes" (Mickle, 1977, April 26, p. 1). A few nights later, the board reversed itself and voted to non-renew 52 non-tenured teachers (Willingboro Mulls Elementary Staff Cuts,

1977, April 29). As the school year moved toward its end, the relationship between the board of education and its teachers became even more contentious. The board, as a result of finances, had placed the teachers in a lose-lose situation: either they lost membership or they lost their raises.

The 1977 school year began with the district in the same position it was in the spring -- no contract for the teachers (Mickle, 1977, August 29). The board maintained its position that there was no money to pay for raises (Mickle, 1977, August 29). For its part, the WEA assured the community that schools would open and that there were no plans for job actions (Mickle, 1977, August 29). When the question of a teachers' strike came up, the WEA spokesperson, Jeff Jeffords, said, "people who keep bringing up a strike are the ones that would like to push us (the WEA) out" (Mickle, 1977, August 29). The Willingboro Public School District was the second-largest employer in Burlington County in 1977 so the possibility of a strike had major economic implications, not only in Willingboro, but across the region as well (Mickle, 1977, August 29).

The image at the start of the school year was one of détente between the teachers and the school board: schools would open, there were no plans for job actions, and talks would continue. This situation changed rapidly. By September, the school board unilaterally moved to reduce the length of lunch periods granted to elementary school teachers (Mickle, 1977, September 10). The board had eliminated 20 lunchroom aides; it no longer had the personnel to supervise recess, so recess had been eliminated (Mickle, 1977, September 10). The solution had been for the students to return to their classes earlier and then end the school day earlier (Mickle, 1977,

September 10). The WEA lodged a complaint with the Public Employees Relations Commission (PERC) that this was a violation of the contract along with a demand that the practice be discontinued (Mickle, September 10, 2010).

The board's response further exacerbated the situation. The board threatened that if the PERC ruled against the board of education, then five or six teachers would be let go in order to find the money to bring back the lunchroom aides so that recess could be reinstituted (Mickle, 1977, September 14). Joe Oliver, the board president, said, "I keep saying it and nobody seems to believe me. But there is no money in this budget to pay for any new expenses" (Mickle, 1977, September 14, p. 5). As a result of the financial situation, the WEA found itself in another lose-lose situation. The union could stand by its guns and defend the contract at the expense of its membership's jobs, or it could allow the union contract to be unilaterally changed by the school board.

The WEA found itself fighting to save additional teacher jobs when the proposal to close the junior high schools in Willingboro was presented to the board (Mickle, 1977, September 15). When the board considered this measure, the WEA helped to orchestrate a turnout of over 800 teachers and residents at the board meeting to voice their objections (Mickle, 1977, September 15). As one of the teachers commented upon seeing the crowd at the meeting, "I think I've been duped into another in-service day" when he saw how many teachers were at the board meeting (Mickle, 1977, September 17, p. 1). The WEA was increasingly concerned about the impact Willingboro's decline would have on its portion of the school budget, and it was becoming more politically active.

The WEA next moved to hire an expert to review the school budget to see if, in fact, there was no money in it to settle the contracts (Mickle, 1977, September 20). The move marked a distinct lack of trust by the WEA in the school board. The WEA president announced he was “not convinced” that the board lacked the funds to settle the contract (Mickle, 1977, September 20, p. 3). He further charged that the current teacher contract had been “trampled upon” by the board this year and in previous years (Mickle, 1977, September 20, p. 3). The WEA had gone from assuring residents that the schools were open and no job actions were planned when schools opened to this statement directed at the board calling for “a change in board attitude – a change to positive action on your part. We, the teachers, do not want to be forced to take critical action. We do not want to see our schools and community further affected this year” (Mickle, 1977, September 20, p. 3).

In this environment, negotiation continued with the support of a mediator from the PERC, but no further progress was made (Mickle, 1977, October 8). These negotiations proved to be fruitless as the two sides failed to reach a settlement as teachers protested outside of the building (Mickle, 1977, October 8). The situation continued to deteriorate.

Before the mediation session was held, the district sent a letter to the substitute teachers who worked for Willingboro asking them if they would be willing to work in the event of a teacher strike (Budd, 1977, October 9). The letter made it plain that the school board believed a strike was a possibility, even if its public pronouncements seemed to indicate otherwise (Budd, 1977, October 9).

For their part, the teachers began to engage in job actions. By the end of October, teachers were “working the clock” (Mickle, 1977, October 25). The teachers arrived in school exactly when they were supposed to arrive and left at the end of the day without taking any work home (Mickle, 1977, October 25).

With each passing day, the possibility of a strike grew. Perennial school district critic, Margaret Reynolds, reported that the teachers were mobilizing for a strike, and she applauded the board for the measures it was taking to line up substitutes (Reynolds, 1977, October 20). She welcomed a show down with the union to put it in its place and, like a prophet from the Old Testament, she wrote, “The time of reckoning is here, this year” (Reynolds, 1977, October 20, p. 6).

She was not the only one who sensed the growing possibility of a strike. While talks continued, the superintendent took steps at the end of October in anticipation of a strike. He issued an order requiring all elementary school teachers to leave their keys, teacher manuals, and planning books in the schools and not take them home (Hefler, 1977, October 30). The WEA accused him of “anticipating actions we have not even considered yet” (Hefler, 1977a, October 30, p. A-1). However, the WEA also acknowledged that if the current round of talks failed, there would be a general membership meeting at which a strike could be called (Hefler, 1977a, October 30).

The parents also felt the momentum moving the community toward a strike. The parents were as divided as the teachers and the school board. Some parents blamed the teachers and one said, “They only care about their paychecks and are setting a bad example for our kids” (Hefler, 1977b, October 30, p. A-2). Others took

the side of the teachers and asked, “If there is no money to pay the teachers, how come there is money for the board’s travel expenses?” (Hefler, 1977b, October 30, p. A-2). Regardless, both sides worried about the impact this growing conflict would have on their children, fearing that the job actions would be replaced by an even more hurtful strike (Hefler, 1977b, October 30).

The board made what the newspaper called a “final” offer that the teachers rejected (Mickle, 1977, October 31). The teachers met in a general meeting to review the rejected contract proposal and to vote on whether or not to authorize a strike (Mickle, 1977, October 31). The teachers voted to authorize a strike, and the board went public with its “final” offer made to the teachers as both sides tried to force a settlement in their favor (Mickle, 1977, November 1). The vote for a strike was not unanimous, and those who voted against the strike claimed they were forced to publically vote against the strike by standing up to be counted in front of their colleagues (Mickle, November 1, 1977). The strike vote, designed to give the union additional bargaining leverage, had the opposite affect on the board. The vote to authorize the strike “unified the board in its opposition to further concessions” (Mickle, 1977, November 1, p. 4).

The school district tottered on the edge of a precipice as the community wondered what the final outcome would be. Leading up to another negotiating session, both the township council and the local clergy urged both sides to continue negotiating, around the clock if necessary, to reach a settlement and avoid a strike (Willingboro Groups Press Board, Teachers, 1977, November 2). The talks proved to be unsuccessful, and the WEA President warned that a strike was “imminent”

(Mickle, 1977, November 3, p. 1). Furthermore, maintenance workers and secretaries, both groups also without contracts, agreed to join the teachers in a strike if one was called (Mickle, 1977, November 3).

On November 4, 1977, a Friday, the teachers of the Willingboro Public School District went on strike and did not report for work. The maintenance workers joined them (Mickle, 1977, November 4). The secretaries would reach an agreement later that night and did not join in the strike (Budd, 1977, November 6). Initially, the schools were not closed, and efforts were made to keep them open using administrative personnel (Mickle, 1977, November 4). After about an hour, the students were dismissed or left on their own, but not until after students at the two junior high schools caused a significant amount of vandalism, including torn out ceiling insulation, broken windows, torn bulletin boards, and smashed trashcans (Mickle, 1977, November 4). By noon the administration had decided that all extracurricular activities and sports would be cancelled for the duration of the strike and sporting contests forfeited; this decision included homecoming festivities at the Kennedy High School, state soccer playoff games for both high schools, a game for the Willingboro field hockey team to determine the league championship, and the interruption of an undefeated freshman football season at Levitt Junior High (Goldstein, 1977, November 4). At 3:30 p.m., district officials appeared before Superior Court Judge Alexander Woods and won an injunction ordering the teachers back to work on Monday (Shrom & Conlow, 1977, November 5).

As the lights went out that Friday night in Willingboro, the community was left wondering what would happen that Monday. Regardless, a line had been crossed.

Like the first shot fired in a war, the calling of a strike brought the conflict into the open. It was no longer possible to pretend that everything was fine; the schools were closed and all of the sports and activities were interrupted. Whether community members supported the teachers or not, everyone's children were directly affected. The sun did come up the next morning in Willingboro, but it rose on a community that was hopelessly divided.

The Strike - 1977

The educational process must begin again. The longer the strike continues, the more damage is done to relationships in the district, to continuity and to the perception of how they learn and who is responsible for that learning. Editorial (Strike Can Be Settled; Here's

How We See It, 1977, November 13, p. 6)

I would like to say that if we ever go back to school, I will never have the same feelings I once had for the teachers. Pam Bookman (1977,

November 25, p. 6)

The strike would last 32 days and leave the schools closed until December 6, 1977 (Mickle, 1977, December 6). During the intervening weeks, there would be protests, pickets, confrontations, board meetings, marathon negotiating sessions and court hearings. All pushed the community further apart and damaged the school district.

In terms of its timeline, the strike was marked by repeated negotiating sessions and marked by court appearances before both sides were finally able to reach

an agreement. As soon as the strike was called, the district sought and received a temporary injunction to force the employees back to work. While the district did not reach an agreement with the teachers or the union representing the custodians, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers, it did reach an agreement with the secretaries the same day the strike was called (Budd, 1977, November 6).

On Monday morning, the teachers failed to honor the temporary injunction and did not return to work (Mickle, 1977, November 7). At the same time, talks continued Sunday night into Monday, but the talks were through the NJEA since the WEA members “hid out” to avoid the sheriffs who would deliver the return to work orders (Mickle, 1977, November 7). These talks broke down with the two sides no closer to a settlement (Mickle, 1977, November 8). The two unions representing the teachers and the various support workers out on strike voted formally to defy the court order and to remain out of work until a contract was reached (Mickle, 1977, November 9).

Reflecting the distance between the two sides, the WEA leadership left town for an extended weekend in Atlantic City to attend the NJEA convention (Mickle, 1977, November 10). The decision by the WEA leadership to make themselves unavailable for talks demonstrated just how entrenched the two sides were at that point and that no progress seemed possible. At that convention, Governor Byrne inserted himself into the strike by pronouncing that he would probably commute any jail time given to Willingboro teachers as a result of their strike in violation of the court injunction (Mickle, 1977, November 11). The governor’s action may or may not

have influenced the course of the strike by removing the likelihood that teachers would be sentenced to jail if they continued their strike.

Talks resumed after the NJEA convention, but these proved to be no more successful than the preceding talks (Mickle, 1977, November 14). Even though the talks continued to go poorly, the board was hesitant to officially fire the support workers, despite threats to do so, and the board was slow to move on bringing contempt charges against the teachers for their refusal to abide by the court order to return to work (Mickle, 1977, November 14).

As talks progressed, the concept of interest arbitration became more central to the bargaining process. Interest arbitration meant that both sides would propose a settlement to the arbiter, and the arbiter would then craft a final settlement that could include items from both sides of the dispute rather than choosing one or the other (Mickle, 1977, November 15). The idea was first proposed by the WEA (Mickle, 1977, November 15). The board rejected the concept; however, there were members who voted for it when it was proposed (Mickle, 1977, November 15).

Before the possibility of interest arbitration could be explored further, the issue of the strike returned to court. The school board moved to have the WEA found in contempt for its failure to honor a return-to-work order (Mickle, 1977, November 16). The teachers managed to delay this for several days on the grounds that they needed additional time to prepare for the hearing (Mickle, 1977, November 19). The leaders of the two striking unions were eventually given jail time and the unions were fined; the decision was appealed (Mickle, 1977, November 29). The final decision about the jail time and the fines was not made until after the strike was settled.

While the legal maneuverings were taking place in court, the board moved to open some of the schools in the district using substitute teachers and administrators (Willingboro Will Open Schools, 1977, November 17). The district would open one high school and one elementary school and offer basic education classes for seniors and the students who normally attended the elementary school being reopened (Willingboro Will Open Schools, 1977, November 17). The plan saw many students come to register, but it also sparked a protest march by seniors who objected to what they considered babysitting service and parents who drove their children to the elementary school that was open and had to cross picket lines and risk flat tires as a result of nails being placed in the street (Mickle, 1977, November 18).

As the mediation between the board and the WEA continued, the state brought more pressure by including three and four mediators in the talks (Budd, 1977, November 20). Furthermore, the talks took place at PERC headquarters in Trenton (Budd, 1977, November 20). In spite of these efforts, after a 17-hour marathon session, the contract remained unresolved (Mickle, 1977, November 21). Following the session, interest arbitration was brought up once again, and while the board did not vote to adopt this process to reach a settlement, several board members came out publically and advocated it as a way to reach a compromise solution on the teachers' contract (Mickle, 1977, November 23).

The talks between the striking unions and the board continued as all parties sought an end to the strike. This round of talks initially failed to move forward because the teachers and the support workers wanted to negotiate jointly while the board refused to participate in the joint negotiations (Mickle, 1977, November 30).

However, a compromise was reached over the next several days, allowing an observer from one union to sit in on negotiations of the other so that talks could move forward (Willingboro Talks Hit Promising Note, 1977, December 3). By December 5, the talks had reached a settlement using interest arbitration in which the arbitrator determined the final terms of the contract after considering the proposals from both sides (Mickle, 1977, December 5). Having the PERC negotiator determine the final terms of the contract allowed the dispute to be settled since “neither party to the dispute could make the last move toward peace without being accused of capitulation” (Mickle, 1977, December 6, p. 1).

This is a general timeline of events between the strike and the ultimate settlement of the contract. That settlement involved compromises over pay increases and fringe benefits, but that was not what made this strike remarkable. It was the effect this strike had on the community and the school district that made it significant.

The strike was a decision made by a majority vote of the teachers and ultimately called by the leadership of the WEA, yet the strike destroyed relationships among the teachers. Decline not only created conflict between groups, but also within groups as they wrestled with how to protect their portion of the fiscal pie.

Specifically, there were a number of teachers who chose not to participate in the strike. The strike began at the start of November, but by mid-November, the school board reported that “fewer than ten percent of the teachers had crossed the lines” out of a total teaching force of 850 (Mickle, 1977, November 16, p. 1). The number was significant enough that the board used these teachers, along with administrators and substitutes, to open two schools during the strike (Mickle, 1977, November 16). So

while the total number may have been less than ten percent, it was likely that 50 to 60 teachers crossed the picket lines and went to work in defiance of their union.

Why some teachers chose teachers not participate in the strike can be gleaned from this letter written by a teacher who chose not to join in the strike:

Even though I supported and still support our teachers' cause, and even though I feel the Board of Education has been extremely unfair to its employees, I could not bring myself to vote for a strike that would hurt the children whom I have been hired to teach. Putting oneself out on a limb for one's own benefits may be admirable in some instances but never, to my estimation, when it is hurting young people who are innocent bystanders. (A Matter of Conscience, 1977, November 18, p. 6)

These teachers may have been acting on a matter of conscience, but their colleagues who participated in the strike did not make it easy for those who crossed the picket line. A resident of Willingboro denounced "the inexcusable harassment being handed out to the few district employees crossing the picket lines and going to work in the schools" (Darby, 1977, November 22, p. 6). After the strike ended, the division among the teachers continued. Teachers who chose not to participate in the strike were ostracized by their colleagues, even after the strike was over (Bollenbach & Bollenbach, 1977, December 28). In short, "because a few teachers chose to stay in their classrooms, long-held friendships were torn apart" (Suplee, 1995, p. 130). The strike, designed to be an act of solidarity among the teachers, also created divisions and conflict among the very group the action was intended to benefit.

The strike estranged the teachers from the community as well. There were supporters of the teachers in the community, as reflected in their letters to the editor. A former Willingboro resident and teacher argued that “If the average Willingboro resident would put emotion aside and compare his own salary, benefits and working conditions with those of the teacher’s [sic], the conclusion would be obvious. The WEA’s actions are long overdue” (Morrison, 1977, November 10, p. 6). Another supporter of the strike wrote, “If you really want a quality education for your children then you must be willing to pay for that too” (Turner, 1977, November 11, p. 6). Both of these writers were either teachers themselves or related to the teachers in the Willingboro district. Occasionally a parent would write in support of their cause, as one who claimed the strike “is not a disgrace to the teachers, but to the board of education in Willingboro” (Wolf, 1977, November 14, p. 6). In terms of quantity, these expressions of support were few and far between.

In contrast, the community’s overall opinion of the strike was negative. There were those who had stood against the teachers from the beginning, others who supported the teachers until it came to a strike, those who grew increasingly frustrated with the behavior of the striking teachers, and finally the parents who became more exasperated as the strike took its toll on their children.

The fact that the teachers were striking in defiance of state law turned community members against the teachers. The teachers were supposed to teach the students how to become productive member of society, but these very people were now blatantly disregarding the law and a court order. One letter writer asked, “Can our youth be expected to become responsible adults, when those who have the most

influence upon their minds are acting irresponsibly?” (Haines, 1977, November 10, p. 6). Another found “that strike has taught my children how adults can lie and defy the law for the almighty dollar” (Curtis, 1977, November 16, p. 6).

The daily picketing around the schools created ample opportunity for the teachers to come into conflict with the public, and it was not always to the teachers’ benefit. One parent who had a run in with the picketers said, “I have always believed that teachers were professionals and deserved a lot better than they got, but you showed me that you are nothing but a bunch of lawless hoodlums!” (Essenfeld, 1977, November 11, p. 6).

As the strike continued, the parents of the community became increasingly frustrated by their inability to influence the strike and get the schools reopened. The parents organized themselves to pressure both sides to reach a settlement (Guaralnick, 1977, November 12). A PTA group wrote letters to the parties involved in the strike as well as to the Governor of New Jersey demanding that binding arbitration be implemented to resolve the contract and that the schools be reopened immediately while the arbitration was carried out (Simpson, 1977, November 25). Neither group was successful in getting the schools reopened or moving the talks forward at a faster pace. Overall the various community groups that attempted to end strike were unsuccessful (Mickle, 1977, November 26). Willingboro residents became disillusioned with its teachers because of the strike, causing a rift between the two groups.

Even after the strike was over, parents continued to speak out against the teachers. One group of parents presented a petition demanding that the striking

tenured teachers be brought up on tenure charges for engaging in the strike (Mickle, 1977, December 22). The board had agreed to a “no reprisals clause” in the contract so the petition came to nothing, but it showed some of the deep-seated resentment of the parents toward the teachers.

The strike also destroyed some relationships between the teachers and their students. As with the parents, there were students who supported the teachers. A supporter expressed herself this way:

I feel the teachers aren't being selfish. The only way to get through to the board is by hurting us. The teachers are no different from our parents, the board of education, or any one else for that matter. They have to pay bills and eat too. (Wilkins, 1977, November 17, p. 6)

While this student continued to have faith in her teachers, the overall trend was that students wanted the teachers to come back to work or resented the teachers for going out on strike. High school seniors worried the strike would affect their ability to go to college because of deadlines for college applications and letters of recommendations, while elementary school students responded more simplistically with a third grader telling her picketing teacher, “You shouldn't be out here” (Mickle, 1977, November 12, p. 1).

In general, the students felt the teachers had betrayed them. This sentiment came out in a student's letter in which he wrote: “The profession that was at one time the most respected profession around has turned its back on us. The teachers are striking and we the students are losing out” (Dinetz, 1977, November 16, p. 6). Pam Bookman (1977, November 25) claimed, “if we ever go back to school, I will never

have the same feelings I once had for my teachers” (p. 6). An eighth grader was even more blunt saying, “I have lost all respect for the teachers who are striking but greatly respect the judgment and courage of those who didn’t strike” (Mullen, 1977, November 26, p. 6). The strike, in the minds of the students, left them feeling disillusioned and disappointed (Mickle, 1977, November 26). Here was yet another tear in the fabric of the Willingboro School District as the students became estranged from their teachers as a result of the strike.

Another obvious rift was between the teachers and the school board. The teachers were significant stakeholders in the district, and they were clearly alienated from the board and vice versa. That the labor dispute evolved into a strike simply confirms this sentiment. As the strike continued, this rift grew more pronounced. The board eventually brought contempt charges that would include jail time against the WEA leaders for failing to end the strike when ordered to do so by a court order (Mickle, 1977, November 29).

There were events in the strike that demonstrated the depth of the conflict between the board and the WEA. A few days into the strike, both the WEA and the school board distributed fliers to all the residents of Willingboro in an effort to take the negotiating process to the public and win over the community. First blood was drawn on November 8 by the board of education when it mailed out a flier to all the homes in Willingboro that offered a summary of the labor situation from the board’s perspective, just four days into the strike (Oliver, 1977, November 8). The WEA responded with its own publication that began with the question, “Does the board lie?” and then identified what they considered multiple falsehoods in the board’s

claims (The Inside Story, 1977, November 8). It closed by remarking, “The board is well known for erratic behavior,” and urged residents to call the various board members and listed their home phone numbers (The Inside Story, 1977, November 8). Both publications lobbed personal attacks at their opponents and suggested that the other side either did not care about the students or was lying about the ongoing negotiations.

The board purchased a large ad in the local paper outlining the demands of the teachers and how acquiescing to these demands would result in cuts to student programs (Strike Update, 1977, November 26). Here, the board was making the negotiations public rather than keeping them behind closed doors in an effort to draw the public into the debate. The WEA responded in kind with its own ad that accused the board of fiscally irresponsible actions that placed the district in a position where a contract could not be settled and of being unwilling to bargain (On November 4, 1977, 1977, December 1). Both sides were unwilling to negotiate with each other, but each sought to bring the talks into the public sphere.

The WEA took the unusual step of picketing and distributing critical literature about Board President Joseph Oliver at his the place of employment (Mickle, 1977, November 21). Ironically, Joseph Oliver was a teacher in another district, and his colleagues received this literature from the striking teachers of Willingboro (Mickle, 1977, November 21). This was an attempt to embarrass the board president at his job. These sorts of tactics were not business, but personal. While the WEA claimed its leadership did not authorize the protest, it further eroded relations between the WEA and the board of education.

The strike gradually undermined the norms of what would be considered acceptable behavior. When an elementary school was opened during the strike, using substitutes, administrators, and non-striking teachers to staff it, police cars that entered the driveway of the school suffered flat tires from nails that were left in the parking lots of the school (Mickle, 1977, November 18). The superintendent, Dr. Romanoli, was charged with assault because a teacher claimed he “brushed” her with his car when he tried to drive into the high school driveway, and charges were brought against a teacher who used abusive language toward Romanoli (Romanoli Faces Assault Charges, 1977, November 23). Both incidents reflected a worsening of relations between the superintendent and his teachers, as well as a willingness by one or both parties to engage in increasingly outrageous behavior.

The strike did not last forever, but its effects were long-lasting. It dramatically highlighted the decline of Willingboro. Throughout the strike, the board of education claimed that it did not have money to settle the contracts without making dramatic cuts elsewhere. In the midst of the strike, the audit of the previous year was completed, and it confirmed the position of the school board showing the board only finished the previous year with a \$1,400 surplus, far less than what was needed to settle the contract with the teachers (Mickle, 1977, November 16). Based on these financial reports, the district was truly struggling with how to make ends meet. The fiscal pie was shrinking, and the teachers struck in an effort to protect what they considered their fair share; it would clearly come at the expense of others somewhere else in the budget.

A few days after the strike ended, the school board was again wrestling with the budget (Mickle, 1977, December 13). In front of an audience of 700 people, the board looked for ways to prevent the district from running a deficit since actual expenses exceeded the district's revenue (Mickle, 1977, December 13). The board finally agreed to cut supplies and books, as well as 15 art, music, and physical education teachers – all in an effort to bring the district expenses down (Mickle, 1977, December 20). Even with these cuts, the superintendent and several board members feared the district would run out of money before the end of the school year (Mickle, 1977, December 20). Ironically, the WEA had won a contract it considered acceptable, but in the process it lost several teaching positions to help pay for the terms it found favorable.

The board also returned to where it was before the strike in examining the possibility of closing schools to save money in the face of declining enrollment. The board approved the plan presented by the superintendent that called for the closing of the Levitt Junior High School (Mickle, 1977, December 22). In terms of teachers, the plan would eliminate 60 additional teaching positions for the coming year, and, as part of a three year restructuring, it would ultimately mean the elimination of 117 teaching positions (Mickle, 1977, December 22). While the plan was far from finished and a final decision would need to be reached in the next calendar year--the writing was on the wall. A school would, in all likelihood, be closed and teaching positions, as well as support positions, would be lost as a result.

In the wake of the strike, both the board and the leadership of the WEA called for “peace and an end to bitterness” (Mickle, 1977, December 6, p. 1). The question

was just how much this feeling was reflected among the rank and file teachers as well as in the day-to-day administration of the schools. For after all, “Tires were flattened. Personal attacks on character were made. Salaries were published. Board members were picketed. Administrators were called scabs. Employees were issued jail terms” (Mickle, 1977, December 6, p. 1).

After the strike ended, the editors of the *Burlington County Times* observed, “We know that there will be no return to the ‘good old days.’ Willingboro will certainly never be the same again” (There’s Relief, but Little Joy, 1977, December 7, p. 6). What the editorial did not acknowledge or perhaps even realize was that Willingboro had not remained “the same” throughout the mid-1970s. In just a few short years, the district had gone from educating students using split sessions in schools filled beyond capacity while it worked to convince the community of the need to build a new high school to accommodate the students, to a district where various school-closing plans were floated before the community as declining enrollment and revenue forced the district to choose among unpopular choices. Unfortunately, Willingboro did not have a culture of trust where the community believed the school board and central administrators were acting in the best interests of their children. Instead, the board’s image was one of poor managers among whom conflict was a frequent event. As a result, when very difficult choices were placed before the board and the community, there was incessant questioning of the school board’s actions and motives. This process reached a crescendo when the teachers struck in 1977. The action reflected desperation on the part of the teachers who sought to protect their standing and who did not trust the board to treat them fairly.

However, the strike merely added to the divisions within the community and increased the likelihood of dissension as the district moved forward.

Chapter VI -The End of the Decade, 1978 and 1979

1978 – Abraham Levitt Junior High School – opened in 1960 to accommodate the children of then-booming Willingboro – closed forever yesterday due to a drop in local school enrollment.

(Mickle, 1978, July 1, p. 1)

Following the turmoil of 1977, it was almost impossible for Willingboro to have a year with even more strife. Nonetheless, the community had its share of conflicts in 1978 as continuing financial difficulties, reflecting Willingboro's decline, exacerbated tensions in a community in which groups, particularly the school board, had difficulty in getting along.

The school board elections for 1978 reflected this concern for the budget challenges. There were three open seats on the school board and ten candidates filed for these positions (School Board Candidates File for Election, 1978, January 9). Besides new candidates like Margaret Reynolds, the slate included incumbents like Board President Joe Oliver (School Board Candidates File for Election, 1978, January 9). Not on the list of candidates was Maucie Miller who decided not to run for reelection based on the frustration he experienced being a member of the board, especially during the teachers' strike (Mickle, 1978, January 12). The large number of candidates for the school board reflected Willingboro's politicization of the school board, especially since the town was continuing to struggle with the financial problems related to decline. The number of candidates in Willingboro was in stark contrast to the trends in other districts where fewer candidates who wanted to run

could be found (Hefler, 1978, January 13). Consistent with a declining community, dissatisfaction brought out people who believed they could change the system. Those who served on the board, like Miller, grew increasingly frustrated with their inability to address the problems of the community as forces beyond their control reduced the community's resources.

As the candidates met to promote their views to the community, they spoke out against the budget cuts, in particular the closing of the Levitt Junior High School (Mickle, 1978, February 4). While they objected to the school closing, they did not offer alternatives (Mickle, 1978, February 4).

With decline, came increased stakes in the political process since the results for the winners and losers would be much more significant. One group, always intent on protecting its interests, was the teachers' association in Willingboro. The WEA, in conjunction with the NJEA, mailed a letter to all members of the NJEA who lived in Willingboro endorsing certain candidates for the school board (Mickle, 1978, February 11). The letter argued that the board was becoming a rubber stamp for the superintendent and that the endorsed candidates would question recommendations like the proposal to close the Levitt Junior High School (Mickle, 1978, February 11). While the WEA was able to call on potentially 900 votes in the community, they also had to contend with a backlash against the teachers as a result of the strike that had ended just a few months before (Mickel, 1978, February 11). In fact, one candidate noted that "an endorsement from the teachers might be the kiss of death this year" (Mickle, 1978, February 4, p. 1).

Other, less prominent groups also took an interest in the election promoting their positions in the election. These included the Committee of '78, which had ties to business leaders and to Superintendent Romanoli, and also sought to promote their interests (Mickle, 1978, February 11). Their leading candidate, Board President Joseph Oliver, hoped to capitalize on the resentment towards the teachers after the strike and win enough votes against the more numerous, teacher-union candidates (Mickle, 1978, February 11).

When the votes were counted after the election, the resentment against the teachers did appear to have shaped the election. Of the three candidates endorsed by the teachers, only one was successful; Margaret Reynolds, who had been very critical of the teachers and their union over the past several years, was also one of the successful candidates (Mickle, 1978, February 21). Furthermore, the budget passed and it included provisions to close the Levitt Junior High School and the elimination of the several additional teaching positions (Mickle, 1978, February 21). The political power of the teachers was reduced. Their move to protect their pay and positions through a strike had, in some ways, created such resentment that they were unable to muster the political power to prevent their members from losing positions.

The budget passed on Election Day (Mickle, 1978, February 21). This budget included a slightly reduced tax rate, but the tax payments remained stable as a result of property being reassessed (Mickle, 1978, January 27). However, in order for the budget to remain within the budget caps mandated by the state of New Jersey, cuts had to be made which included many teaching positions as well as the closing of the Levitt Junior High School (Mickle, 1978, January 27). Romanoli publically attributed

the cuts to the settlement with the teachers to end the strike in the previous year (Mickle, 1978, January 27).

The continuous cutting of the budget as a result of declining resources left the community disillusioned with the direction in which the public schools appeared to be heading. One letter writer summarized the sentiment in this way:

One of the reasons for my family moving to this community was the community's reputation for concern and pride in its educational system. After this recent cut, I am very disillusioned. I was looking forward to sending my three sons to the elementary school in our park. The reductions in programs has to result in a reduction in quality.

(Kearns, 1978, January 23, p. 6)

The decline of Willingboro left its residents reeling. They saw their public schools losing resources and, as a result, losing programs as well. Furthermore, years of distrust between the board and community did not leave the community feeling as if the board were acting in their best interest. Instead, they believed the board was not using its resources wisely. One member of the community recounted her experience at a board meeting where raises of 3.2% were approved for individuals who were not part of a bargaining unit and she asked, "Does this mean more cuts?" (Hummell, 1978, January 28). The people of Willingboro thought their schools were deteriorating and that the board was doing nothing to stop this deterioration.

Regrettably, the board was also forced to navigate challenges beyond its control, namely the ongoing white flight and loss of resources related to declining property values. Willingboro homes remained less expensive than comparable homes

in neighboring communities, \$30,000 for a home in Willingboro as compared to \$50,000 in other Burlington county townships (Mickle, 1978, January 29).

The issue of low property values in Willingboro was apparent to the residents and leaders of Willingboro at the time. In an article investigating the sale of homes in Willingboro, it was revealed that 70% of the homes sold in Willingboro had mortgages guaranteed by the FHA or VA, meaning that the homebuyers might have been too risky for a traditional mortgage and that the federal government backed the mortgages (Mickle, 1978, May 7). In addition, when the federal government appraised a house in Willingboro, it was often for far less than the selling price agreed to between the buyer and the seller causing the price of the home to be reduced and further depressing the property values of homes that would be sold in the future (Mickle, 1978, May 7). The result, according to Willingboro's mayor, was that the town attracted thousands of African American families (Mickle, 1978, May 7). Willingboro was moving away from being an integrated community to a re-segregated, all-black community (Mickle, 1978, May 7). This was very ironic considering that its builder, Levitt, intended Willingboro to be an all-white community. Furthermore, reports indicated that real estate agents steered white families away from Willingboro (Mickle, 1978, May 8). All of these factors depressed the values of homes in Willingboro and further reduced the resources available to the community to support institutions like the schools.

Willingboro was facing a series of issues that strangled the public schools. There were budget caps that limited the growth of school budgets; declining enrollment rates; white flight; and slower growing property values that further

reduced the financial backing for the schools. By 1978, decline had hit the Willingboro school district hard.

This decline had to be confronted by the board and the dilemma came in the form of what to do with the Levitt Junior High School. The board reexamined the issue during the month of January and was split on whether or not to close the school, and one board member even publically demanded that an outside consultant be brought in to recommend alternatives (Hefler, 1978, January 15). The board was closely divided, and the board member who cast the deciding vote said he supported the plan to close because “right now there doesn’t seem to be any other alternative” (Mickle, 1978, January 19, p. 3).

In a last gasp effort to find an alternative, the school board ordered the principals of the two junior high schools to seek an alternative plan to avoid having to close Levitt Junior High School (Mickle, 1978, January 22). When it came time for the principals to submit their plan, they admitted to being unable to find an alternative to losing the junior high (Mickle, 1978, January 24). Subsequently, when the board approved the budget that would be sent to the voters, they included closing Levitt Junior High as part of the budget despite the public opposition at the board meeting (Caputo, 1978, January 31). Voters approved that budget as part of the 1978 school elections (Mickle, 1978, February 21). Nonetheless, all the candidates elected to the board in 1978 had vowed to reexamine the decision to close Levitt (Mickle, 1978, February 21).

When the newly-elected board met, the decision was reexamined at a two-hour long, public meeting (Busby, 1978, March 3). While most of the public opposed

the closing of the Levitt Junior High School, no new proposals were offered (Busby, 1978, March 3). The board was left twisting on the horns of a dilemma. Neither alternative was appealing since it had to choose between going against the wishes of the public or spending money it did not have.

The board was very reluctant to decide what to do with the junior high school. The board cancelled two meetings at which there would not have been enough members present to constitute a quorum (Willingboro Postpones Two Meetings, 1978, March 22). The growing frustration could be detected in the Business Administrator Elmer Corda's warning that the board had to act since, contractually, employees needed to be notified within 60 days of the opening of school whether or not they would have their jobs for the coming school year (Willingboro Postpones Two Meetings, 1978, March 22). Even the editorial board of the local newspaper detected this unwillingness by the board to make the decision and criticized the board for its "vacillation" and told them "it's time to fish or cut bait" (School Board on a Pendulum, 1978, March 23, p. 6). The board was in a no-win position, so typical of communities in decline, in which it did not matter which choice it made. It was a question of selecting the lesser of two evils, not the better of two options.

When the board finally met and voted on the issue, the board decided to close the Levitt School by a five-to-three vote (Busby, 1978, March 29). The board members who were undecided finally supported the closing because "the district's fiscal situation gives them little choice but to support the closing" (Mickle, 1978, March 28, p. 1). An exhausted community seemed to agree with the board meeting, with public attendance being relatively light and the attendees quiet (Busby, March

29, 1978). Even the editorial in the paper applauded the decision by the board in light of the declining enrollment in the school system (Levitt Closing Won't Spell the Doom of Willingboro, April 5, 1978).

The board moved cautiously once the final decision had been made to close the school. Fearing a future baby boom, the board chose not to sell the building but instead moved to use it for administrative offices and continued to use its central kitchen to prepare meals for the schools in the district (Mickle, 1978, June 6).

Nonetheless, the end came for the school on June 30 of 1978 (Mickle, 1978, July 1). The school had been originally opened as the town's junior-senior high school to handle Willingboro's growing student population as the community got its start and had seen growth rates of a 1,000 students a year when Levitt first started building houses in the township (Mickle, 1978, July 1). Now it was closing. The newspaper story on the event opened with what sounded like an epitaph for the school: "Abraham Levitt Junior High School – opened in 1960 to accommodate the children of then-booming Willingboro – closed forever yesterday due to a drop in local school enrollment" (Mickle, 1978, July 1, p. 1).

The decision to close the school could not have been avoided thanks to fiscal issues facing the school district. While it was unavoidable, that did not make the decision to close any easier on some of the people directly affected by that choice, namely the teachers who lost their jobs. On the day Levitt closed, 81 teachers in Willingboro were laid-off as a result (Teacher Bitter Over Job Loss, 1978, July 1). One teacher interviewed about losing his job was quoted saying, "In all I've seen in Willingboro I've become disillusioned and disappointed with education. It's been a

big letdown. The way the entire school system is run here is suspect” (Teacher Bitter Over Job Loss, 1978, July 1). In all likelihood, his colleagues who also lost their jobs had similar feelings. For those teachers who were not let go, seeing friends and colleagues lose their jobs certainly increased their apprehension about the district and whether or not they would keep their own jobs in the future. All in all, Levitt’s closing further cemented the distrust and uneasiness the district employees had for the school board. Not surprisingly, in one of his studies on decline, Boyd (1982) found that teachers who were concerned about their jobs often decline in their effectiveness. Willingboro certainly fit this description as a school closed and positions disappeared.

Underlying all of this, of course, was the financial health of the district. Throughout the spring of 1978, while the district weighed its options about whether or not to close a school, there were concerns about the district’s financial health in the current year. The New Jersey Department of Education expressed concerns that the school district may not have enough money to operate until the end of the school year (Mickle, 1978, March 2). The school administration responded by presenting a plan to both the state and the school board that would reduce spending and allow the district to finish the year with a surplus (Busby, 1978, March 3). Business administrator Elmer Corda’s plan called for a purchasing freeze to eliminate as many expenses as possible and he projected a surplus at the end of the year of \$82,798 (Mickle, 1978, March 11).

Not surprisingly, the budget crisis and subsequent plan to resolve it led to finger pointing and recriminations. Board members, union leaders, administrators, and community watchdog groups all had different theories on how the crisis

developed (Mickle, 1978, March 7). These included teachers' and maintenance workers' overly generous contracts, rising administrative salaries, rising utility costs, and/or an unwillingness of the board to cut costs (Mickle, 1978, March 7). Regardless of the cause or causes, the district's financial woes added to the atmosphere of distrust and conflict. This was further exacerbated when the board decided to make personnel cuts at the close of the school year that resulted in 81 teachers losing their jobs (Mickle, 1978, April 22).

One Willingboro resident challenged the accuracy of all the financial record-keeping that led the board and the state to conclude that there was a financial shortfall in the district (Mickle, 1978, May 16). A board watchdog named Martin Greenhouse presented his own calculations that the district would finish the year with a surplus of \$500,000 (Mickle, 1978, May 16). He further charged that the board had been making decisions about contract negotiations in the midst of a strike and laying off teachers based on inaccurate information provided by Elmer Corda (Mickle, 1978, May 16). While Willingboro did finish the school year with enough money to operate, the issue of who was more accurate, Greenhouse or Corda, would not be resolved by an audit until the end of the year, but this question reflected how distrustful the community was of the board.

The financial difficulties of the district showed no signs of abating. The board imposed an hourly fee for the use of its gymnasiums by local recreation programs (DeMark, 1978, November 20). This triggered an outcry from the community who feared these fees would crush the various recreation programs in the town (DeMark,

1978, November 20). Necessary or not, the fees did nothing to burnish the district or school board's image with the community.

In a school district with a history of conflict, these budget crises did not help to reduce tensions. The strike from the previous year also remained a prominent point of contention, despite pledges from both sides that they would move forward without enmity or recriminations. From the start of the discussions about closing Levitt, the board and the superintendent blamed the settlement with the teachers union as one of the reasons this cost-saving measure had to be implemented (Mickle, 1978, January 27). Other episodes, like the budget crisis, were also blamed on the teachers' new settlement with the board (Mickle, 1978, March 7). For the teachers to find themselves blamed for unpopular measures and events could not have improved relations within the district.

However, the tensions from the strike were not limited to intemperate remarks. The head football coach at Willingboro High School, who participated in the strike and testified in court at one of the contempt hearings, was fired from his coaching position (Richardson, 1978, January 31). According to the coach's account, Superintendent Romanoli told him, "I don't want you back. I backed you for four years and what you did to me in the courtroom (during the strike) was enough. If I rehired you, it would make me look bad" (Richardson, 1978, January 31, p. 14).

The tensions among the teachers continued as well in the aftermath of the strike. A teacher who did not strike brought a lawsuit against some of his colleagues who did strike (Mickle, 1978, March 8). The striking teachers had called the non-striking teacher a "scab" when he crossed the picket line, and the court was asked to

rule whether the term was offensive (Mickle, 1978, March 8). In the end, the court ruled that “scab” was not an offensive term, but this case reflected ongoing antipathy among the ranks of the teachers.

The WEA leaders also had to deal with fines and jail sentences when they were found in contempt of court for failing to end the strike when ordered to do so by the court. The WEA was fined \$25,000 for the strike (Mickle, 1978, August 3). After originally being sentenced to jail time and then appealing the sentences, the teachers were assigned community service for their roles in leading the strike (Shrom, 1978, September 22). These sentences kept the strike alive in the minds of the Willingboro residents.

Perhaps most glaring of all was the fact that a contract between the board and the WEA had never been officially ratified after the end of the strike in December of 1977 (Shrom, 1978, May 17). As the two sides worked on settling the final details of the contract, the NJEA representatives working with the WEA became involved in an altercation with the board’s negotiator (Shrom, 1978, May 17). As a result, the Willingboro Board of Education refused to negotiate with the WEA if the same NJEA personnel continued to represent them (Shrom, 1978, May 17). The WEA responded by filing a contempt of court charge against the board for failing to bargain in good faith (Shrom, 1978, May 17).

Aside from disputes over with whom the board would bargain, the WEA and the board were also unable to agree on the financial records the board would disclose to the WEA (Mickle, 1978, May 20). Reflecting continuing enmity and distrust, the

WEA wanted the right to inspect the financial records of the school district due to questions about the accuracy of the financial status of the district.

The union and the board finally worked out a settlement and agreed to a statement of non-violence so they could continue their negotiations (Mickle, 1978, July 11). The dispute over negotiating conditions, especially when some board members privately commented that they did *not* feel intimidated by the WEA negotiators, shows that the petty disagreements continued to divide the teachers from the school board. By the time the schools were preparing to open in September, the contract still had not been settled since the parties were fighting over whether or not a no reprisal clause between the union and the board of education should be incorporated into the contract (Mickle, 1978, September 6).

The WEA won the right to inspect the school's financial records by taking the matter to court (DeMark, 1978, November 29). The union could not look at records of a personal nature, but it could look at the district's overall financial picture (DeMark, 1978, November 29). The union continued to be skeptical of the school board's claims of poverty that were used during the negotiating process and the board continued to use to justify teacher layoffs (DeMark, 1978, November 29).

Overall, the strike continued to haunt many in the district. When the WEA leaders were sentenced to community service, the story was posted in a teachers' lounge with the statement, "Lest we forget" (DeMark, 1978, November 4, p.1). Another teacher offered this assessment of the strike: "We thought we would benefit more from the strike and we did not. We haven't gotten a raise for last year (no raise was given for the first year of the contract), and they're still bickering about the

contract” (DeMark, 1978, November 4, p. 2). The strike, undertaken by the teachers to protect their interests, had not been overly successful and hard feelings still impeded progress in the district. Yet the culture of conflict had created a sense that the teachers would only be able to protect their interests with such a dramatic step. Like the school board working to deal with the fiscal difficulties in which it had to choose between the lesser of two evils, the WEA was in a similar no-win situation.

In the midst of these challenges, the school board reinforced its poor image in the community. The conduct of the board members, broadcast again on the local access channel for all to see, hurt the board’s image in the community. A board observer wrote, “I have just finished watching the telecast of the January public board meeting and I must say that I was appalled at the rudeness exhibited by the current president,” and this writer went on to urge the board president’s ouster at the polls (C.C., 1978, January 23, p. 6).

As a group, the board maintained its pattern of bickering and dissent. In the contest for the presidency of the board in 1978, the board members displayed these inclinations. The presidency went to George Richardson, but not until new board member Margaret Reynolds denounced the behind-the-scenes political maneuvering that went into the selection (Busby, 1978, February 22). She said of the process where the presidency was largely determined before the meeting that, “You have to vote for the candidate least offensive to your sensibilities” (Busby, 1978, February 22, p. 1).

The board later stirred up more controversy when it was revealed that the televised broadcast of a meeting was censored (Mickle, 1978, June 17). When a resident demanded that the board president resign, that portion of the meeting was

edited out of the televised broadcast (Mickle, 1978, June 17). In the controversy surrounding this matter, it came to light that the board had censored a student news broadcast that was critical of the plan to close Levitt Junior High School (Mickle, 1978b, June 17). Both episodes reinforced the image of the board as a backroom-dealing body that worked to hide information from the public.

The salaries awarded to the central administrators were another point of contention for the school board. In a strange procedure, the board of education met for a private dinner at a local restaurant with Superintendent Romanoli and the other central administrators to discuss salary negotiations (Mickle, 1978, January 14). The fact that the meeting was about negotiations was used to justify the meeting being closed to the public (Mickle, 1978, January 14). This arrangement certainly looked bad. While the board ultimately decided that there would be no raises for Romanoli and the other central administrators, the damage was already done (Mickle, 1978, January 18). A letter writer commented, "This morning in the BCT I read about a private dinner between the School Board and School Administration to discuss pay raises for top staffers. What in the world is going on?" (Boockoff, 1978, January 21, p. 6).

The topic did not go away. In the spring, the topic of raises for the superintendent and other central administrators reappeared. The board, in contrast to their earlier position, voted to grant Romanoli and other central administrators raises at the same time that they voted to cut 81 teachers (Mickle, 1978, April 22). On its face, this created the image of rank inequity. The school district eliminated teaching positions because of hard financial times at the same time that it was granting raises

to its top administrators. The local paper pointed this out in an editorial in which, referring to the administrative raises, the editorial board wrote, “we believe the board has gone to excess and has seriously damaged its credibility with the public. That the public is likely to become more aggressively vocal in demanding better results for its money” (Widening Credibility Gap, 1978, May 3, p. 6).

And then the topic came up again. In late 1978, the board approved another raise for Romanoli that amounted to a 6.8% increase for the coming year (DeMark, 1978, December 12). The community reaction was predictable: “Let your school board know in no uncertain terms that at this time such an increase is setting an undesirable precedent. It is uncalled for, it is not justified and is a flagrant abuse of the taxpayers’ money” (Robertson-Danko, 1978, December 26, p. 6). The board’s lack of political acumen in providing raises to the superintendent at the same time that it was dismissing teachers and closing schools demonstrated why it was so distrusted by the public.

While the board’s public image suffered, the image of the school district also declined. The district’s summer school was nearly cancelled as a result of student misbehavior, including rampant bicycle thefts, drug dealing, and breaking of windows (Mickle, 1978, July 20). The board eventually allowed the summer school to continue but authorized Romanoli to terminate it without awarding students credit if the problems continued (Mickle, 1978, July 21). While the summer school did finish out the term, the board voted to discontinue summer school in the future (Mickle, 1978, August 22).

Misbehavior by the students in the Willingboro schools was not limited to the summer school program. In a prominent article in the local paper, the question was asked, “Willingboro schools: How safe are they?” (Master, 1978, December 10, p. B-1). The article argued with statistics that people were more likely to be assaulted in the Willingboro schools than out on the streets (Master, 1978, December 10). It was later revealed that a freelance writer who was a teacher in the Willingboro School District wrote the article and some of the statistics cited were erroneous (Aide: Willingboro Schools Safer Than Most, 1978, December 17). Nevertheless, the damage again was done. The district had been identified in the Sunday edition of the paper as unsafe for students or anyone else. The board president, George Richardson, responded at a board meeting to the story by wishing that he had “enough money and power to destroy the *Burlington County Times*. ‘Burn it down’ was the way he put it” (Board’s Performance Isn’t Education, 1978, December 21).

By the end of 1978, Willingboro had not moved beyond the damage caused by the strike of the previous year. The conflicts continued and the decline continued. The dynamics of the district prevented it from effectively addressing the problems associated with the decline and actually made the situation worse.

1979 - “*Willingboro once was...*” is being heard all over town. New combers [sic] are shocked. Those who have been around for years reminisce. (Ernest J. Gilbert, 1979, April 30, p. 6)

As Willingboro approached the end of the decade, the pattern of decline was well ingrained. The community was shrinking, white flight was well underway,

school enrollment was falling, and the fiscal resources of the community were dwindling. Added to this mix was a culture of conflict and distrust that hampered and even prevented the community from taking steps to address these issues.

The year 1979 saw the reputation of the school board still in tatters. One of the dominant themes of the year before had been the budget crisis in which there had been questions as to whether or not the school district would have the money to continue to operate the public schools. Under the direction of the business administrator, the district imposed austerity measures designed to create a surplus by the end of the year. These had included freezes on purchases as well as elimination of teaching positions.

When the audit of the 1977-78 school-year was finally released, the district had a surplus of \$982,000, nearly \$900,000 more than Business Administrator Elmer Corda had projected the previous spring (DeMark, 1979, January 10). The release of that information immediately raised questions about why the district had cut jobs and claimed poverty in its negotiations with the WEA during the strike of 1977 (DeMark, 1979, January 10). Superintendent Romanoli expressed “serious concerns” about the accounting practices as a result of findings from the report, but he also said the district had been only purchasing items on an emergency basis since October of 1977 so that could account for the large surplus (DeMark, 1979, January 10, p. 4).

The president of the WEA, James McAndrew, was not nearly as cavalier about the financial report (DeMark, 1979b, January 10). He charged that the surplus “suggests that the strike was most unnecessary. Negotiations would have proceeded in an orderly process if the true financial picture had been evident,” and he continued,

“Some very creative programs were devastated due to the lack of funds” (DeMark, 1979b, January 10, p. 4). The teachers charged the district with a cover-up and hired their own accounting firm to investigate the finances of the school district (DeMark, 1979, January 26). Even though there would be no changes to the financial settlement of the contract that resulted from the strike, this would bode poorly for any sense of trust in subsequent negotiations between the WEA and the Willingboro Board of Education.

The community’s trust in the board of education was shaken further. A group calling itself the Community Coalition, lead by an African American minister, demanded the immediate suspension of the business administrator and a full audit of the district’s finances (DeMark, 1979, January 12). Members of this group had relied on the board’s financial projections when they called for the teachers to return to work during the strike and now felt deceived by the board of education. In their own words, “We had trusted the voracity [sic] of the board and now we find that there is some duplicity” (DeMark, 1979, January 12, p. 4). General members of the community were just as outraged, like this letter writer who commented on the budget surplus, “I cannot see paying the administrative staff the money we do when they can make a mistake totaling almost one million dollars. Who is to know what other mistakes they’ve made with our money?” (Wilkins, 1979, February 1, p. 6).

For his part, Corda defended his projections from the year before and said, “I think we overreacted in terms of saving money” (Demark, 1979, January 11, p. 1). He also claimed that his projections, like that for absenteeism, were based on trends that did not play out for the rest of the year (DeMark, 1979, January 11). The Board

considered conducting a full audit, but the motion failed to garner enough votes to move forward (DeMark, 1979, January 19). Later, at a public meeting where the auditor presented the report, he indicated that a \$982,000 surplus was not too high considering the size of the overall budget and that the board's dramatic reduction in spending created the surplus (Hagenmayer, 1979, February 2). The board decided to pay the auditor to implement the improvements recommended in the audit report so that the movement of money in and out of the district's accounts could be better monitored (DeMark, 1979, February 14). However, the damage was done again to the board's image. The whole episode left people asking questions like, "Was the financial crisis real or contrived? If contrived why?" (Truehart, 1979, February 10, p. 6).

This entire debate over the surplus and the credibility of the school board preceded the annual school elections. For the three open spots, nine candidates had filed their papers in Willingboro, including two incumbents and two former board members (Candidates File for School Board Elections April 3, 1979, February 23). The current president, George Richardson, chose not to run so he could pursue candidacy for the state assembly (Candidates File for School Board Elections April 3, 1979, February 23). One incumbent would drop out of the race, citing health, family, and professional reasons (DeMark, 1979, March 20). The large number of candidates, especially when compared to other communities where there were many uncontested elections, reflected the interest of people to run for the school board and their dissatisfaction with the current members, (A Dearth of Candidates, 1979, March 1).

Leading up to the election, one of the themes at a candidate forum that kept coming up was the image of the board (DeMark, 1979, April 2). The candidates all resolved to reduce the public bickering and to keep disputes behind closed doors, a clear reaction to the current manner in which the board conducted its business (DeMark, 1979, April 2).

When the votes were counted, one incumbent and two former board members were elected to the board (DeMark, 1979, April 4). Incumbent Carol Levine was reelected, and Alice Martello and Maucie Miller, both endorsed by the WEA, were elected to fill the other two openings on the school board ((DeMark, 1979, April 4). A low turnout allowed the WEA and its membership to influence the election results by mobilizing their members who were residents of Willingboro (DeMark, 1979, April 4). The WEA, frequently battered in the recent financial challenges facing the district, knew how important the elections were and took an active part in working to influence their outcome.

It was not only board members who were selected in the elections. Willingboro also voted on its local school budget. The school board initially decided to propose a budget that grew as much as the state-imposed spending caps would allow (Czarniecki & DeMark, 1979, February 27). The board believed it would do well this year, but felt it had to include the maximum allowed so that the budget would be able to grow in the coming years to handle costs anticipated in the future (Czarniecki & DeMark, 1979, February 27). After further debate it settled on a figure that was approximately \$800,000 below the caps and would allow for a cut in the tax rate; higher assessments still meant actual taxes paid would rise for most residents

(DeMark, 1979b, March 20). Furthermore, it also called for a reduction of teaching positions as a result of declining enrollment (DeMark, 1979b, March 20). In addition, while there was support to restore the special area teachers cut last year due to the budget crisis, the board did not include them as a result of disputes over procedure (DeMark, 1979, March 22).

On Election Day, the budget passed, but the capital outlay budget did not (DeMark, 1979, April 4). The community appeared to support the lower tax rate for the general budget, but not the expenses related to roofing, paving, and air conditioning installation (DeMark, 1979, April 4). Shortly after the election, the school board voted to restore the special area teachers that had been cut the previous year, a move that was supported by the WEA, the community in general, and by the restored teachers (Hauder, 1979, April 10).

The good will that came from the restoration of the teaching positions did not go far in ameliorating the animosity that still lingered from the 1977 strike. Part of that animosity was between the board and the maintenance workers who struck in conjunction with the teachers. The board refused to give the maintenance workers the same prescription benefits that were awarded to the teachers, even though this was apparently the deal that was negotiated (DeMark, 1979, January 24). A superior court ruling sided with the maintenance workers and ordered the board to supply the benefit (DeMark, 1979, January 24). The board vowed to appeal the decision (DeMark, 1979, January 24).

This was followed by the more dramatic action by the WEA to pass a vote of “no confidence” in Dr. Romanoli (DeMark, 1979, May 29). The resolution, passed by

87% of the teachers who voted, was partly in reaction to how Romanoli handled a student walkout at Memorial Junior High School; it also cited Romanoli's unprofessional manner and his repeated violations of the teachers' contract (DeMark, 1979, May 29). Romanoli dismissed the move as "childish" (DeMark, 1979, May 29, p. 3). The relations between the teachers and the superintendent and, by extension the board of education, continued to be poor.

Perhaps the best indication of the continuing divide between the teachers and the board of education was the fact that their contract from the 1977 strike still had not been finalized as a result of a dispute over a no-reprisals clause (Demark, 1979, November 4). The employees and the board were about to begin talks on the next contract, and no one wanted a repeat of the last round of talks, but the tensions still remained (DeMark, 1979, November 4).

Tensions between the teachers and the board were just one aspect of the board of education's difficulties. The board's relationship with the community continued to be strained as it was forced to make unpopular decisions or simply made poor decisions in line with their ongoing culture of conflict. The debate over fees charged to the township for recreation sports to use the school district's gymnasiums remained a topic that created tension (DeMark, 1979, April 18). The issue was left where the district and the township would look into the possibility of bartering services, but it was far from resolved (DeMark, 1979, April 18). This left a bitter taste in the mouths of the community. One resident reflected on the change when he wrote, "Years ago, members of the Board of Education knew that it was political death to even think of putting the financial squeeze on recreational groups" (Gilbert, 1979, April 30, p. 6).

Scandal continued to plague the Business Administrator Elmer Corda throughout 1979. It came to light that the district's insurance broker had paid for Corda's car insurance over the previous two years (DeMark, 1979, August 22). The issue divided the board, with members like Reynolds claiming the report was "biased" and that Corda "is the glue holding this district together," while board member Alice Martello predicted "the school board will probably act to protect Corda rather than examine his actions" (DeMark, 1979, August 23, p. 4). The board ultimately left it to the New Jersey Insurance Department to investigate Corda if it so chose to, but the board did not mount its own investigation and the board determined he had not acted improperly (DeMark, 1979, August 24). The New Jersey Department of Insurance did investigate the fact that Corda had not paid for his car insurance in an apparent benefit he received for the district using the insurance broker (DeMark, 1979, August 30). While the board received an opinion from its solicitor that it should investigate the matter of Corda's insurance deal, nothing further came of it that year (DeMark, 1979, October 10). Scandals like these, or at least the appearance of impropriety, continued to undermine the board's credibility with the public as it worked to solve larger problems dealing with declining enrollment and finances.

Outside of the schools, the community itself continued to decline. This primarily took the form of white flight. The newspaper reported a case where an African-American woman purchased a house in Willingboro and then saw three other houses on the same street sold to other African Americans (DeMark, 1979, July 25). Two other houses on the street were also on the market, and this was out of a total of

12 houses on her street (DeMark, 1979, July 25). Yet it was not simply white flight that was occurring, but rather the flight of upper class residents, those with resources to help support the community. In the words of an observer, “If you keep talking of white flight and of people moving, it’s really an upper middle class flight. It has nothing to do with color, and some of the first ones to leave are blacks” (DeMark, 1979, July 25, p. 1). Concerns remained that real estate agents were channeling African Americans to Willingboro (Lindenmuth, 1979, October 7). Willingboro began to investigate these claims as its minority population continued to grow out of proportion to the surrounding communities (Lindenmuth, 1979, October 7).

With the close of the 1970s, Willingboro had been transformed as a community. It had gone from a burgeoning town where the schools were filled to bursting with students to a town where enrollment was steadily declining. It had gone from a primarily white community to one where minorities made up a segment of the population out of proportion to the rest of the county and state. The growth in minorities was a not “problem” per se; rather the exodus of resources from the community that went with the generally wealthier white families as they moved out created a problem. Over the course of the decade, Willingboro had declined economically and its schools along with it.

There is a certain sadness to the story of the Willingboro Public School District over the course of the 1970s. It is reflected by one resident who observed, “‘Willingboro once was...’ is being heard all over town. New combers [sic] are shocked. Those who have been around for years reminisce” (Gilbert, 1979, April 30, p. 6). The years 1978 and 1979 saw a continuation of a pattern that was evident in

1970. The board fought among itself and with others. Racial tensions tore at the fabric of the community and robbed it of financial resources. The teachers did not trust the board nor did large segments of the community. As the decade ended, these groups all fought with each other for the limited financial resources of the community. The losers in all of these fights were the community as a whole and the school children specifically.

The account of the Willingboro Public School District during the 1970s is like the proverbial car accident that is awful to watch, but a sight from which observers cannot turn away. Just as the police will reconstruct a car accident to learn how to prevent a future crash, Willingboro can offer guidance to future school district leaders who are grappling with similar challenges.

Chapter VII – Conclusions

Yes, Willingboro schools have problems. They will be solved by positive not nihilistic activity. An idiot is all that is needed to destroy but only the wise can build that which is worth building.

(Jackson, 1979, June 18, p. 6)

Over the course of the 1970s, the Willingboro Public School District experienced a significant period of decline, driven largely by factors that were out of the control of the school district. Willingboro was not alone in this experience. Across the United States, numerous communities experienced economic challenges marked by stagflation and lower economic productivity throughout the 1970s (Chafe, 1995).

There was also the New Jersey funding system for local schools. During the decade of the 1970s, this came to the forefront of state educational issues. The state grappled with the question of how to fund schools in a series of laws and court cases. School funding in New Jersey was shaped by the Bateman Bill, *Robinson v. Cahill*, and ultimately Chapter 212 (Salmore & Salmore, 1998). The final form of school funding in New Jersey during the decade of the 1970s allowed school districts to “choose their own local taxing levels and thus maintain or even exacerbate expenditure disparities” (Salmore & Salmore, 1998, p. 265). For Willingboro, where property values were growing much slower and as the demographics shifted to include far fewer affluent residents, it was unable to fund its schools at previous levels.

The effect of these trends on Willingboro can be seen in examining the funding the district received over the course of the decade. In real dollars, the school saw a consistent rise in funding, but when these same monies are looked at in constant dollars, the funding actually declines over the course of the decade (See Tables A1 and A2). Furthermore, Willingboro also saw a decline in population and school enrollment over these same periods, combined with white flight, which further shrank available resources of the district.

These factors all lay outside of the control of the Willingboro School Board. The question then is, How did the Willingboro Public School District navigate decline? After considering the record from the decade of the 1970s, it is clear that the district navigated this decline poorly. The challenges facing the district called for good leadership from the school board and its top administrators. What the people of Willingboro received was something else entirely. As Ronald Jackson, board member observed, “Yes, Willingboro schools have problems. They will be solved by positive not nihilistic activity. An idiot is all that is needed to destroy but only the wise can build that which is worth building” (Jackson, 1979, June 18, p. 6). The people of Willingboro did not receive wise leadership. Instead, the leadership seemed intent on turning on itself as it grappled with financial and demographic crises.

The most prominent demographic issue was the decline of Willingboro’s population coupled with the twin trends of white flight and minority population growth. This took place for a variety of reasons, included reputed practices of real estate agents such as blockbusting as well as steering minorities to Willingboro, not to mention the VA and FHA property assessment policies in Willingboro. These were

part of national trends where politicians, including Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan played to the fears of white Americans about the growing minority population for political advantage (Lugg, 1996).

The board took a more pro-active stance toward race issues at the start of the decade, particularly when Gabriel Reuben was the superintendent. It revised the student discipline code to ensure consistency across races, and it established a committee called the Intergroup Relations Council in an effort to address issues of race. However, as the decade went on, there was less willingness on the board's part to acknowledge racial conflict. Most notably, during the years 1975 and 1976, the board actively resisted demands by the New Jersey Department of Education that they implement measures to reduce the racial imbalances that had developed in certain parks of Willingboro. The board insisted Willingboro was an integrated community and that the matter did not need to be addressed. Ultimately, the board only implemented the policy to reduce the racial imbalance when the state forced their hand.

In all, racial conflict and white flight played a role in the decline of the Willingboro School District. There were forces that the board did not have control over. Nonetheless, when it came to items that the board could have taken steps to address, it proved unwilling to do so. As a result, it contributed to the racial tensions and trends that were negatively affecting the district.

Class was also an important theme in the decline of Willingboro's school district. Over the decade of the 1970s, Willingboro became more solidly working class and lower middle class. The declining affluence of the district, as reflected in

the census and financial data, meant that residents who may have been more affluent were leaving the district. The ongoing white flight also reflected an exodus of white residents who had the resources to move. The economic trends of the 1970s, like deindustrialization, would have hit Willingboro particularly hard. Furthermore, the property values that grew at a much slower rate than neighboring communities would have attracted new residents who would be more likely to be working or lower middle class.

While the data certainly reflect the fact that Willingboro remained a working class and lower middle class enclave, the local partisan politics also support this conclusion. Gans (1967) noted that Willingboro came to be controlled by the Democratic/Catholic faction, which represented the lower middle class and working class. By 1973, the Democrats controlled every seat in the township council and maintained this one party stranglehold on power for the remainder of the decade (Mickle, 1977, August 12; DeMark, 1979, November 3). The continuity of the class composition in Willingboro meant that the political conflict would be more readily embraced (Boyd, 1976). Therefore, this added to the board of education's tendency toward disagreement and bickering.

Central to the decline of the Willingboro School District was the conflict that occurred at the level of the board of education. This conflictual nature of the board made it impossible -- or at least very improbable -- that the group could navigate the crises brought on by Willingboro's decline. Conflict can be brought on by decline (Boyd, 1976). Yet Willingboro had a working class and lower middle class culture that embraced political conflict before the decline began (Boyd, 1976; Gans, 1967).

An examination of the board meeting minutes, some verbatim some not, just further illustrates how the board was mired in conflict. In this instance, the school board was about to reorganize, and there was a dispute over the reappointment of the board solicitor. It reflects the incessant bickering of the board:

I have been arbitrarily ruled out of order, yet no action has been taken.
 We have the procedure for rescission of motions in previous meetings.
 None of this has been done. I can't believe this. We are actually being told, "We are going to reorganize and that is it." I owe allegiance to the employees of this Board of Education as well as to the Solicitor.
 This, to me, is ludicrous. (Willingboro Board of Education, 1971, February 18, n.p.)

This exchange took place when Willingboro was a growing community, its enrollment was on the way up, and a new high school was in the near future. Furthermore, this was prior to the arrival of Superintendent Dr. Romanoli.

In this second exchange, the board was debating what to do with a report that the board solicitor had completed on the district's business administrator and board secretary, Elmer Corda:

Mr. Richardson: You know, this is getting more and more pathetic every time this is brought up. There is a very simple solution to this whole problem, and that is: that we take the Booz, Allen & Hamilton Report and we take the report done on the Business Administrator and we tell the Superintendent and the Board Secretary and Business Administrator to sit down and come up with conclusions and

recommendations on this, and we sit down and discuss it at great length in a private conference. If we are going to continually bring this up in public, we are gonna get nothing accomplished – nothing!

Mrs. Gross: Mr. Chairman...

Mr. Richardson: I'm having nothing more to do with it when the discussion happens like this.

Mrs. Gross: Mr. Chairman...

Mr. Baptista: Mrs. Gross?

Mrs. Gross: I find George's attitude kind of mind-boggling because I touched base with him on this a few minutes ago in the other room. I wanted to get an idea whether or not he would support this sort of thing, and how you can divorce yourself from these issues which are so important and not resign your position on the Board, is a bit of a puzzlement to me. I do have a motion in regards to the Booz, Allen & Hamilton Report after we vote on this one. Thank you.

Mr. Richardson: Mr. Chairman...

Mr. Baptista: Mr. Richardson?

Mr. Richardson: Since I've been quiet the past couple months, I'm gonna say something now. I have no intentions, number one, of resigning from the Board because I think I do perform some valuable function – whatever that is. Number two, Yes, Mrs. Gross and I did have a discussion, and the discussion was that we would turn this whole matter – I did not know that it was gonna be a separated

question when it came out here, and had it been all one, I probably sit here very quietly and just vote for it, but now it's turning into a political issue again, and I'm having no parts of it – NONE, and I'm sick and tired of the innuendos now, that I should resign because I'm afraid to do something. That's the innuendo here, and I don't understand what this is about anymore.

(Willingboro Board of Education, 1975, July 21, p. 21)

Finally, consider this last example of the kind personal attacks that board members engaged in when conducting board meetings:

Mrs. Gross (interrupts): Point of Personal Privilege...

Mr. Richardson: Yes, Mrs. Gross?

Mrs. Gross: I haven't been over to say good evening to Mr. Oliver, so I can't be sure this evening whether he reeks of liquor as much tonight as he did the other night...

Mr. Richardson: That was quite out of order.

Mrs. Gross: This is a public meeting, George, and I think if a Board member chooses to come to a meeting stewed, the public ought to be made aware of it! Now if he's going to go on a tangent tonight and make long winded speeches that happen to be completely filled with lies, I think the public ought to know this, 'cause the fact of the matter is he continually distorts and lies.....

Mr. Richardson: Mrs. Gross, believe me – I try and be a gentleman at all times and I don't like to be rude, but I'm going to allow...

Mr. Miller (interrupts): Joe, let me smell your breath!

(Willingboro Board of Education, 1975, August 28, p. 4)

These are a small sample of the exchanges that happened throughout the years among members of the Willingboro Board of Education. They reflect a continuous pattern of bickering over the years. This sort of behavior hurt relationships among the board, made it difficult for them to work together, and damaged the reputation of the board in the eyes of the public. As the board confronted the economic decline of the community, it lacked the necessary credibility for its decisions to be accepted by that same community. The conflictual nature of the board damaged its ability to navigate the challenges of decline.

The board's infighting also certainly created a distraction from the educational issues they should have been focused on during the 1970s. Take for example, the board's suspension of its superintendent in 1975. At precisely the time the board should have been focused on the budget, not to mention the state's demand that the district address racial imbalances, the board members were consumed by conflicts and squabbles. Likewise, the district moved to build a new high school and ultimately won voter approval for it in 1972. However, the district's enrollment was declining before the high school opened, leaving one to conclude that the board did not plan or project accurately. Perhaps the infighting took their attention away from this topic as well. In general, the constant bickering and friction distracted the board from the business of running a school district. The egos of many of the participants left them embroiled in petty disputes and blinded them to what should have been their duty.

The board's love/hate relationship with Superintendent Peter Romanoli reflected the board's tendency towards conflict. At the start of the decade, Willingboro had a different superintendent, Dr. Gabriel Rueben, who "worked with teachers and administrators to eliminate tension and dispel racism" (Suplee, 1995, p. 128). A longtime assistant superintendent said of him, "If Reuben will be remembered for anything it should be that he was able to turn an entire school system around, to create an atmosphere for better relations among students and among staff members" (Suplee, 1995, p. 128). This same superintendent resigned a few moments after he was granted tenure and attributed his leaving to a lack of support among the board (Pearsall, 1970, May 22).

Enter Romanoli, who had a very specific charge from the board when he was hired. In his own words, "One of the things that I was charged with when I came to this school district was to straighten it out, in quotes, straighten it out, meaning to straighten out the staff, straighten out the students, straighten out the discipline in the schools" (Willingboro Board of Education, 1973, April 3, p. 484). This attitude was what the board wanted as "the permissive, unstructured atmosphere fostered by his predecessor gave way to a more traditional emphasis on essential skills, a philosophy the community eagerly embraced" (Suplee, 1995, p. 129).

The board wanted a take-charge administrator, one who did not shy away from knocking heads when he disagreed. That was exactly what they got. Take, for example, this report from the board meeting addressing the contract with the WEA when the board moved unilaterally to change the length of teacher lunch times:

He said that he felt it was time for the Board to find out just how much authority they have, whether or not they can change this schedule, and that this is something that should be tested, and if there are any complaints to be negotiated further, they do so after they make their decision. (Willingboro Board of Education, 1977, August 29, p. 131)

Romanoli even made this recommendation over the advice offered by board members who suggested reconciliation and compromise (Willingboro Board of Education, 1977, August 29). Here, in a “damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead” attitude, Romanoli demonstrated his willingness to move forward measures he felt were right or necessary, regardless of what others thought. The steps taken by Romanoli at this juncture had a direct impact in bringing on the strike in 1977. Conflict was not something he avoided; instead, he embraced it.

Yet this same style also resulted in Romanoli clashing with the board. The conflict was a result of “Romanoli’s insistence on managing the district free from interference by the board, while the board often saw him as a usurper of their authority” (Suplee, 1995, p. 130). Over the course of the decade this took its toll in the form of clashes over his salary, moves to force him to resign, and, most notably, his suspension in 1975.

As has been noted earlier, districts in decline see an increase of conflict as different interests clash in an effort to protect their share of the fiscal pie (Boyd, 1979b; 1983a; 1983b). Romanoli was like a bull in a china shop rather than a soothing force. As the board struggled to make hard decisions that would need to be sold to the various stakeholders, Romanoli never hesitated to jump into the fray, not

as a mediator, but as a combatant. Districts in decline need a skillful politician at the helm, not someone who provokes conflict (Boyd, 1979b). Behn (1980), in a similar vein, advocates a leader that can marshal political support to promote a new direction for an organization facing decline. The district did not have the right leadership for the times. Romanoli did not have the skills or temperament to redirect the school district in a new direction once decline commenced.

In fairness to Romanoli, the role of politician in chief was not what a superintendent was expected to fill in any classical sense of school leadership where a professional leading the district makes the right decisions for the right reasons (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1974). As a result, administrators in declining districts are not ready for the conflict or trained in the political skills needed to navigate those challenges (Boyd, 1976). Romanoli, upon coming to Willingboro, touted his private-industry management experience as an asset in running the Willingboro School District (Pearsall, 1971, March 11). In hindsight, the district should have sought out someone with experience in Washington, DC, with skills navigating the backrooms of Congress.

Willingboro was also subject to factors inherent to being a municipality and school district in New Jersey. New Jersey has a cultural commitment to the concept of “home rule,” where local government has control (Salmore & Salmore, 1998). This feeling is so strong that former Governor Brendan Byrne once described it as a religious belief among New Jersey residents (Salmore & Salmore, 1998).

Willingboro and its board of education functioned in this statewide philosophical attitude. Furthermore, there was no training or direction from the state

to counteract this attitude for board members at this time. It would be some time before board members would be required to attend training in ethics by the New Jersey School Board Association (School Ethics Commission, 2010). This can explain, in part, some of the actions by the board members. As officials of a local government entity, the school board members believed they were entitled to make the decisions for their own school district. This was reflected in the board's resistance to state mandates, in particular the state order for the district to develop a desegregation plan in 1975 and 1976. Furthermore, this home rule culture would have empowered the members to involve themselves in every aspect of the school district's governance, including the day to day operations.

The board engaged in micromanagement, even to the point where a state report on management recommended that the board allow its administrators to run the district on a day-to-day basis and focus instead on acting as a policy-making group (New Jersey State Legislature Office of Fiscal Affairs, 1976). A powerful illustration of this micromanagement took place when a board member went out to lunch and had a beer with several of the district principals who were being considered for transfer to get their take on the whole process, and then the board member described this meeting at a public board meeting (Willingboro Board of Education, 1972, June 12). The board's interference in the daily running of the district added to ill feelings between the board and its superintendent.

This conflict extended to administrators besides Romanoli. The business administrator/board secretary came into his own share of disputes with the school board. Elmer Corda's practices as well as his own personal finances were questioned

as he was subject to various reports and investigations over budgeting processes. In a community where the school board was held in low regard because of its constant conflict both internally and with its leading administrators, it should come as no surprise that the decisions arrived at were questioned, especially as the district was faced with how to cope with declining funds and enrollment. Managing decline requires trust in the administrative decisions being reached (Boyd, 1982). The all too frequent crises and scandals involving the top administrators in the district made that trust impossible to build.

This conflict extended to the relations with the teachers and their union. Every instance during the decade when there was a contract to be negotiated, the original contract expired before the board and the teachers were able to reach an agreement. These agreements always required the intercession of state labor relations officials before a final contract was settled. Furthermore, teachers, especially those who lead the WEA, frequently complained of reprisals and intimidation by the administration. It reached a level where the WEA established its own political action committee to endorse and support candidates for the school board who it thought would be supportive of the teachers and their priorities. Relations between the board of education and the WEA reached a nadir when, in 1977, the teachers felt so trapped that they went on strike. The recriminations from the strike and the subsequent staff cuts only added more bile to an already poisonous brew. Hence when it came time for the school district to make the necessary cuts to address the declining enrollment and worsening financial situation, the relations with the teachers were so poor that there was no trust. Instead of demonstrating even a modicum of trust, the teachers felt

forced to battle the board each step of the way in order to protect their portion of the fiscal pie. These battles split the board, the teachers, and the community further, making it difficult for collaboration. As Mirel (1998) has noted, in communities coping with decline, teachers are a necessary part of the effort to address the fiscal problems; otherwise the chances for success are low. Willingboro's teachers did not have a positive relationship with the board of education at precisely the time when a collaborative relationship was necessary.

By 1979, the Willingboro School District was a world away from where it had been in 1970. It had gone from being a growing, dynamic district to a district struggling to cope with its shrinking population and finances. Many of the factors that caused this decline were beyond the control of district leaders. Nonetheless, when faced with these challenges, the district navigated them poorly. The ongoing conflict within the board that extended to other portions of the district and community made the board unable to cope with the challenges associated with decline. Instead of a skillful navigation of the shoals, the district found itself battered by the rocks. As Table 2 illustrated, it has not recovered, even into the twenty-first century.

Willingboro School District's Decline		
	1970s	21 st Century
Enrollment	15, 857 (1972-1973)	4,490 (2008-2009)
Number of Schools	14 (1977-1978)	8 (2008-2009)
Population	43,386 (1970)	31,629 (2010)
African American Residents – Indicator of White Flight	4,738 (1970)	22,325 (2010)

From: *Burlington County Census Trends: 1970-1980*; Levinsky, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009; Suplee, 1995

The history of the Willingboro School District is its own, and history does not repeat itself. Nonetheless, the cancer of conflict within the governing body of this

school district provides a morality tale applicable to other school districts. The factors causing decline may be out of the control of the district. However, to continue with the nautical analogy, only if all the people on the ship are working together can the district hope to navigate the challenges of decline. Willingboro did not have everyone rowing in the same direction, or even rowing at all. The captain, or superintendent, of the ship was ill suited for his role. The community did not trust the captain's officers. In general, the people on the ship seemed more interested in attacking each other as the boat was struck by rocks and was buffeted by storms. As a result, when faced with the challenges presented during the 1970s, Willingboro was damaged beyond repair.

Willingboro's story is unique and has many characters and plot twists exclusive to this community; yet the challenges the community faced are not unique. In the year 2010, school districts across the state of New Jersey are being forced to address the very same issues that were taking place in Willingboro in the 1970s. As a result, there are several lessons that seem to be transferable from that time to the present and have relevance in the contemporary practice of school administration.

First and foremost is the role of conflict. Conflict is not necessarily a bad event. People in public life disagree about different issues and debate these topics passionately. Yet conflict should be transient not permanent and fixed in any organization in order for it to thrive. Organizations who continually battle with each other risk creating a desert of ill will in which the stakeholders do not trust each other, every move is questioned, and progress is not possible.

Instead, there should be open and transparent discussions about the priorities of the district in which all the stakeholders have a voice. Community discussions do

not remove the need for tough decisions, but the when stakeholders agree about certain priorities as well as the fiscal reality, it becomes possible to move forward. Willingboro never did this. The superintendent was there to straighten out the district, and the board members were so consumed by internal bickering and clashes with teachers and parents that it was impossible for any rapport to develop. As a result, every decision was questioned, and the motives of decision makers were always suspect. In tough times, everyone needed to work together, but they did not.

The other concept that can be taken from the story of Willingboro is one of leadership. Dr. Romanoli, the superintendent for almost the entire decade, was brought in to get everyone to toe the line, in sharp contrast to his predecessor. Yet his skills as a manager were not those the district ultimately needed. Instead, as the district entered its period of decline almost as soon as Romanoli arrived, it needed a reconciler who could pull everyone together during difficult times. His style added to the conflict. Times of decline require a political manager – not a business manager -- who can bring together disparate groups and create some semblance of a coalition to confront the hard economic times.

Other leaders in the district, Business Administrator/Board Secretary Elmer Corda most notably, by their conduct or misconduct constantly brought the decisions made into question. Because of their actions, these administrators squandered trust that residents may have had for the professionalism of their leaders. The “aura” of school administration is important capital. Instead of being husbanded carefully, it was expended in numerous controversies over pay hikes, budgeting processes, and

even scandals. As a result, when it came time to make difficult decisions, there was no credible decision maker whom the public trusted.

This ongoing conflict was absolutely poisonous. Throughout this decade, the account of the Willingboro School District demonstrates how the constant conflict disgusted the members of the community. News stories, editorials, and letters to the editor reflected the outrage, as the district leadership seemed unable to put differences aside to address the problems of the community. The conflict led to yet further decline in a vicious circle that was increasingly damaging to the district.

Willingboro has the distinction of demonstrating how important the public credibility of a school district is for navigating decline. As the conflict was allowed to run unchecked and unmanaged, the board fought among themselves, fought with its administration, fought with its teachers, and fought with the public. It expended capital it needed during these conflicts it needed to properly navigate the challenges of decline in the school district. When school administrators sought raises, when positions were being eliminated, when school board members accused each other of impropriety on the local cable television station, very few residents were willing to accept the district leadership's decision about anything, especially volatile measures like school closings and staff reductions.

In fact, it would seem apparent from this case study that managing conflict is as important a role for school leaders as is providing direction for a district coping with decline. Conflict may be unavoidable in a district moving through the redistributive decisions demanded by decline, but moving ahead without considering it can convert a situation where a controlled burn turns into a conflagration that

threatens to destroy everything. Willingboro's conflictual politics did just that and transformed the vibrant district of 1970 to a burned-out hulk by 1979.

As this account of the Willingboro Public School District draws to a close, it stands out from previous research in several distinct areas. First, the district and community provided a significant amount of documentation about the school system, particularly that offered by the local newspapers. As a result, it was possible to trace its decline of the school district and the community reaction to it. Boyd (1976; 1982a; 1983b) examined school districts in decline but focused on the superintendents for an analysis of the decline rather than on the community reaction. While many of Boyd's (1976; 1982a; 1983b) observations about declining school districts apply to Willingboro, what Boyd fails to take into account is the role of conflict and its impact on the credibility of the school district and its leadership.

Prior to this dissertation, the field of research on decline was dominated by short case studies. Boyd (1976; 1982a; 1983b) looked at how decline impacted school districts through relatively small windows of time, such as a school year. The uniqueness of this study lies in its methodology. Using the historical methodology, it is able to look at the process of decline in one school district over a period of many years. The longitudinal nature of the research allows the reader to discern the long term impact of decline and the conflict it generated, as well as the decline produced by the on going conflict.

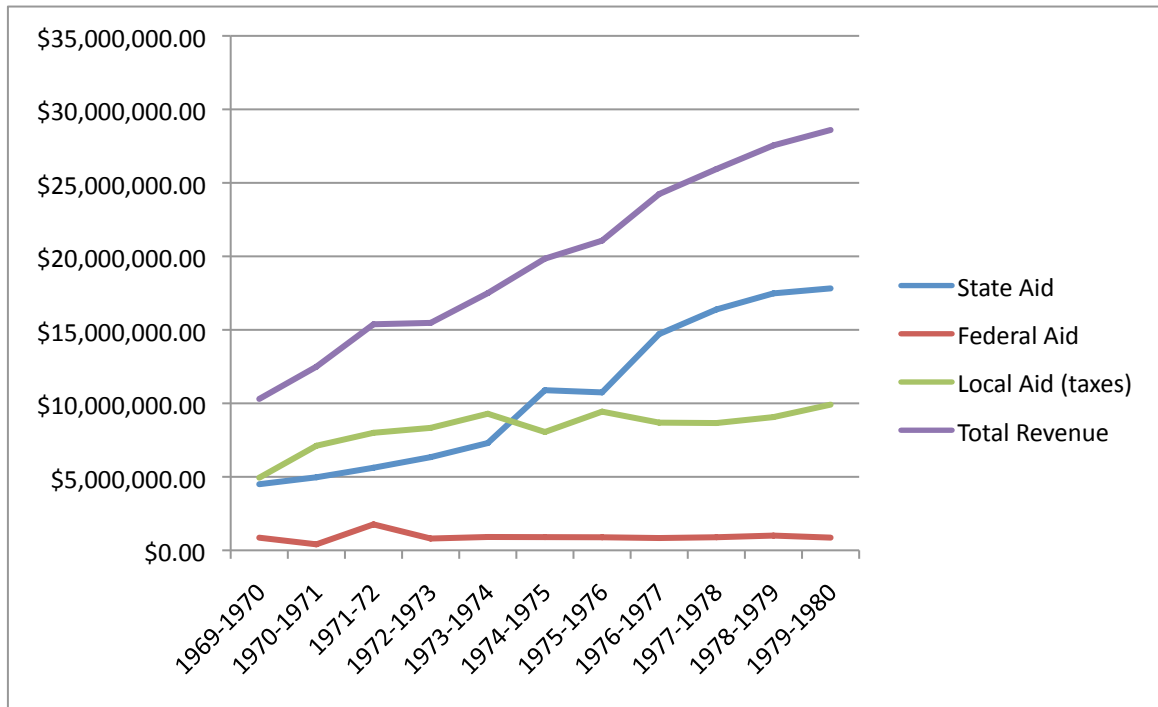
Moving forward in the area of researching school districts in decline, Willingboro offers only one side of a story. Willingboro did not successfully navigate decline. Future research should seek to identify a district with trends similar to

Willingboro in terms of finance and demographics, but one in which this process of decline does not damage the district. In other words, Willingboro demonstrated *how not to navigate decline*. Further research should be conducted by identifying a district that successfully navigated decline and analyzing that district over several years. Historical research would be well-suited to this task. Studying contemporary districts would not be effective because there would be no way to determine whether or not the district would be successful from the outset. Historical research would allow the investigator to find a district that successfully navigated decline and then examine the factors that made it possible.

There is certainly further research to be conducted in the area of district decline. Nonetheless, Willingboro offers several important lessons. First, there is a need to manage conflict. If left unchecked, the bickering, fighting, and finger-pointing make progress impossible and will destroy a district. While decline may bring about conflict, failure to manage that conflict and mitigate it will contribute to further decline. Second, the leadership must be skillful in drawing coalitions together and have the ethical credibility to make the organization work. Willingboro's story has the one redeeming quality of offering other districts a lesson in how not to address decline. The lessons are important to heed.

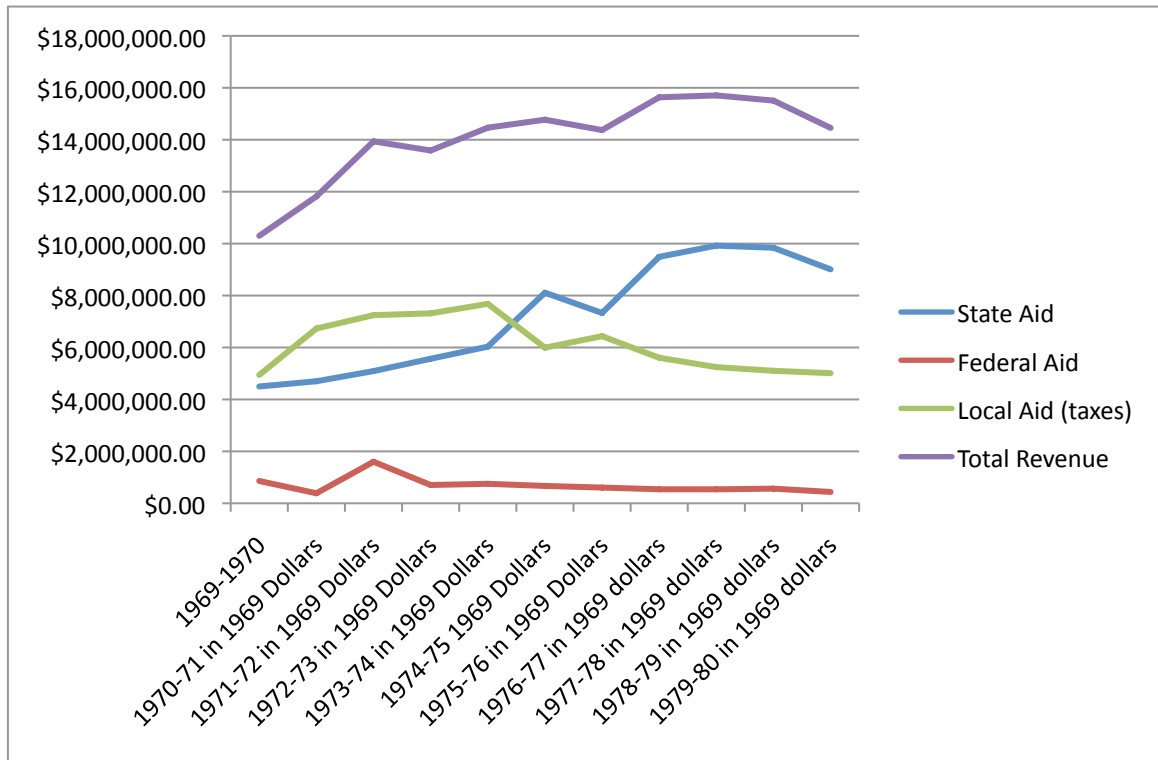
Appendix

Table A1



Income for the Willingboro School District (1969/70 – 1979/80 School Years)

Table A2



Income in Constant Dollars for the Willingboro School District (1969/70 – 1979/80 School Years)

Table A3

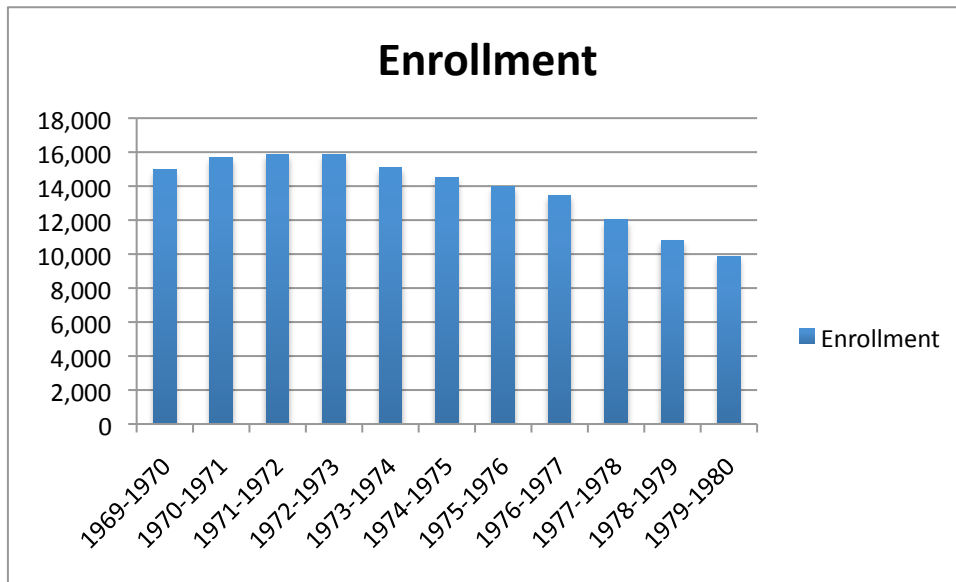


Table A4

	1969-1970	1970-1971	1971-1972	1972-1973	1973-1974	1974-1975	1975-1976	1976-1977	1977-1978	1978-1979	1979-1980
Enrollment	14,968	15,663	15,864	15,857	15,074	14,504	13,997	13,453	12,014	10,815	9,873

School Enrollment for the Willingboro School District (1969/70 – 1979/80 School Years)

Constant dollars calculated using the calculator at <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>

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