

Losing a Community Catalyst: The Closure of L.C. Anderson High School

This article continues the history of the old Anderson High School from our Summer 2017 newsletter.

by Rebekah Dobrasko

In 1954, Austin was a racially segregated city. All publically-owned facilities for African Americans were in East Austin. The University of Texas had just lost a lawsuit which forced desegregation of its law school. Undergraduate education at the university remained segregated, as did public school education. All of Austin's African American students attended public schools in East Austin. The only black high school, L.C. Anderson High, had just moved into a new building in 1953. The Austin Public Schools (APS) system was rehabilitating Anderson's old building into Kealing Junior High.

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that public school segregation was unconstitutional. Austin, as well as school districts in fifteen other states, was now violating the law by operating segregated schools. Reactions to the *Brown* ruling across the South ranged from integration, especially in areas like West Texas, to complete resistance. Austin fell in the middle and implemented a "freedom of choice" plan for all its high schools, starting with the 1955 school year.

APS' plan for desegregation meant that students and their parents could choose which school to attend. In 1955, thirteen African American students chose to leave Anderson High and attend previously all-white schools. It was not until 1963 that students of every grade were allowed to choose where they attended. While about ten percent of black students attended formerly white schools, only eight white students total attended formerly black schools. Anderson High remained all black.

Austin's next step in tackling desegregation was to desegregate the system's faculty. APS assigned three teachers from Anderson High to white schools. However, in 1968 the Office of Civil Rights of the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) reviewed the desegregation status of ninety-six Texas school districts. HEW found that Austin was not in compliance, especially since Anderson remained all-black in 1968.

Austin's school board chose to continue its "freedom of choice" plan and heavily recruit white students to attend Anderson High.



Photo by Rebekah Dobrasko

Athletic Field

Seventeen white students entered Anderson in the fall of 1969. Anderson's students were glad to have them. Student Roselyn Hill noted: "We've always been open to integration, but no one ever wanted to come." The school district began a construction and upgrade project at Anderson to further attract white students. The campus was not even twenty years old, but still needed many upgrades to be equal to Austin's white high schools.

HEW did not feel that seventeen white students attending Anderson was true desegregation. For the 1970 school year, federal Judge Jack Roberts drew new attendance zones and required all students living in those zones to attend their school, regardless of race or previous school attendance. Almost 400 white students were within the attendance zone for Anderson High, yet fewer than sixty white students registered for school on the first day. Some parents rented apartments elsewhere in the city so their children could continue to attend majority-white schools.

After only four days, Judge Roberts declared his integration plan a failure due to the refusal of whites to attend Anderson. Most of the white students that did enroll in Anderson withdrew to attend other schools. Because of the city's policies that African Americans should be segregated in East Austin, it was unlikely that any true racial mixing would occur at Anderson without busing white students over from other schools. Both the APS (now the Austin Independent

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School District, or AISD) and federal government refused to consider busing white students to a black school. This meant they saw no other option but to completely close Anderson, as well as Kealing.

The class of 1971 was the last to graduate from Anderson High. Most of Anderson's books and equipment went to other schools. Anderson's former students boarded buses to attend schools across Austin. Anderson's closure ripped the heart out of the historic black community in East Austin. Parents and students no longer attended the same churches or community events as each other or their teachers, who were now mostly outside the community. The school had been a catalyst for the East Austin community, stated Ambres Kearney, a chemist and an alumnus of Anderson. "It was a bonding agent for the community. You don't have a catalyst, everything just doesn't work." Kearney noted that shortly after Anderson's closure, businesses along 10th, 11th, and 12th streets closed and remained vacant.

Anderson's closure was an act of institutional racism that repeated itself across the South. When HEW forced true integration of schools in the 1970s, many districts chose to close the black high schools and make students attend formerly all-white schools. Others



Protests at closure

Photo courtesy of Austin History Center, APL

downgraded their black high schools and reopened them as elementary schools. School traditions, colors, and memorabilia were lost. In Austin, Anderson alumni petitioned AISD to build a display case for its sports and music trophies in Rosewood Park. Now, the trophies reside in the George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center in an exhibit overlooking the 1913 site of Anderson High.

The current L.C. Anderson High School opened in 1973 more than ten miles away in northwest Austin. Based on black community demands, AISD named it after the black high school. This new school had different school colors and a different mascot. The Anderson Yellow Jackets became the Anderson Trojans. Its current principal is working with the original L.C. Anderson High School Alumni to tell their history through displays in the school and recognizing alumni at fall football games.

Also in 1973, the new Austin Community College (ACC) opened its first campus in the old Anderson building where it remained through the 1980s. Currently, the 1953 school is the home of AISD's Alternative Learning Center. The East Austin Boys and Girls Club uses the gymnasium and band areas for their programs.

AISD is undergoing a facilities master planning process to support a \$1 billion bond request in November 2017. AISD plans to move Eastside Memorial High School and International High School to the old Anderson campus. Preservation Austin is working with the Original L.C. Anderson High School Alumni group and AISD to recommend spaces and features on the school campus to preserve. The groups applied for a Texas Historical Commission Undertold Marker and are considering listing the school and campus in the National Register of Historic Places. The story and place of Austin's only black high school deserves to be preserved and remembered. ★



Current Anderson High School exhibit case