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ABSTRACT

This report relates the incidents and grievances which led to racial turmoil in Palmetto High School, Miami. The student body of this school was comprised of eight percent black students from low-income families and the remainder of white students from affluent suburban homes. A responsive and integrated panel composed of Miami Urban Coalition members conducted an investigation and quickly submitted constructive recommendations. The Board of Education's ready acceptance of the proposals--more black staff, black studies programs, intensified training in integrated instruction and human relations for faculty and administrators, and addition of late "activity busses"--is attributed to the credibility and wide-based community support for the Miami Urban Coalition. Although not all of the goals were reached, the speedy effort to remediate the situation cooled racial tensions and gave black students the sense "that somebody listened." (KG)

Program Case Study No. 8

Miami School Integration: "Someone Finally Listened. . ."

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Coalition

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Miami's Palmetto High School is a clean, well-equipped, modern school near Biscayne Bay in one of Dade County's most affluent residential areas.

It is surrounded by some of the finest homes and estate areas in the city. The lawns are broad and well-kept. The architecture is striking. The people who live there and send their children to schools in the district are mostly professional people. Nearly all of them are white.

Tucked away in a corner of the district past the motels and hamburger stands of the South Dixie Highway—and literally across the tracks—is a collection of modest homes and dilapidated shacks and shanties called Perrine. Its population is nearly all black.

In 1965 the first students from Perrine were enrolled at Palmetto High School, which previously had been all white. School desegregation, begun late, proceeded slowly. By the 1968-69 school year, there were 237 black students in a total student body of more than 3,000.

But if desegregation had come to Palmetto, it soon became painfully clear that integration had not. Racial tensions, which had mounted since 1965, boiled over in the spring of 1969, and in a tense, two-week period threatened to rip the Dade County school system apart.

It began with a confrontation between black students and Palmetto's white principal, growing out of what the students believed to be unnecessary delays in discussing and taking action on several grievances which had been presented to the principal.

Demonstrations, mass meetings and arrests followed in what was becoming an increasingly familiar patern of turmoil and escalation on campuses across the nation. Then black students staged a boycott at Palmetto, and there was an imminent threat of a total black boycott of Dade County schools. The confrontation had become a crisis.

The Palmetto episode was one of some 340 serious disturbances in high schools in 38 states that same semester. But unlike some of the others, the Palmetto story has a happy ending—or if the real ending is not yet in sight, at least a happy aftermath.

At the height of the Palmetto troubles, the principal and the Dade County Superintendent of Schools, realizing that an inquiry by the school system itself would be unacceptable to various elements in the community, turned to the Greater Miami Coalition to investigate the turmoil and find solutions. The coalition did.

As students of such things know, the easiest and quickest response to such a request for help is to appoint a study panel or task force, investigate, and issue a report. The report may be a year in the writing. And it may then sit for more years on some shelf in some official office, gathering dust, unimplemented, and forgotten.

The Miami Coalition responded conventionally enough. It appointed a blue ribbon bi-racial panel of inquiry. But there was a difference. The panel acted quickly and decisively. In less than two weeks it issued a forceful report, confirming the fact that black students at Palmetto felt they were a "black island in a white sea," citing abuses and making specific recommendations for change. The Dade County School Board promptly adopted the report, and by the opening of the 1969 school year in September nearly all the recommendations had been implemented—not just at Palmetto, but at other schools in the county with similar problems.

Miamians, black and white, militant and conservative, generally agreed that a major breakthrough in better race relations in the schools had been achieved.

What brought Palmetto High near the explosion point, of course, had been happening in schools all over America. Quite simply, the student body had been changed—black and white students now attended class together—but the faculty, the curriculum, extra-

curricular activities, the whole school environment were still geared primarily to a segregated, all-white student body.

While nearly eight percent of the Palmetto students were black, all but three of a 145-member faculty—or 98 percent—were white. (During the 1968-69 school year 33 vacancies had occurred on the faculty. All were filled with white teachers).

There were no black counselors, no black athletic coaches. "The black students had no black symbols to which to relate," a sociologist at the University of Miami was to say later.

A black Palmetto co-ed put it more simply: "They have made everything for the whites and nothing for the blacks. They brought us over here and they're trying to fit us in. It's not working."

There had been some changes, of course. There were now black students on the athletic teams, in the school band and among the cheerleaders and majorettes. In 1968 the old "blackball" policy that had kept black students out of Palmetto's prestigious service clubs was abolished. Black students could now join.

But the black minority felt a more subtle form of discrimination. Nearly all the black students were bussed to school, some from as far away as ten miles. When classes were over there was just one departure time for the bus trip home, 3:45 p.m., which had the effect of barring many of them from official after-school activities—the band, the glee club, service clubs, sports. (The after-school bus schedule made it difficult for some white students also to participate in extra-curricular activies. But none lived as far away as ten miles; many had parents with cars who would pick them up and many had cars of their own.)

Marvin Bell, a lanky black sophomore, a member of the student council, "a natural leader" in the words of a faculty member, had thought long and hard about the Palmetto situation since coming to the school at the beginning of the fall term.

"We spend 18 hours of our day in the black community and six hours a day at school," Bell was to say later. "They send black students to a white school and expect us to change. It just seemed to me that it was the school that needed to change. The school ought to begin meeting our needs, not the other way around."

On April 29, 1969, a warm and humid Tuesday, Bell decided that the time had come to do something. He and a group of black students decided on a confrontation with Palmetto's principal. They had a list of a dozen grievances, formulated with the help of several students from the University of Miami chapter of the United Black Students (who had been originally contacted, it later developed, by a white teacher at Palmetto).

The principal agreed to a meeting with Bell and his group. But when UBS members accompanied the Palmetto students into his office, he refused to discuss the grievances in the presence of the outside group.

The black student delegation, angry at the rebuff, held a demonstration that afternoon on the Palmetto campus.

The next day the boycott began. Some 200 of the 237 black students stayed out of school. The principal responded by suspending 75 boycotters who had gathered on a school patio but refused to go to class. Bell was arrested on charges of "juvenile delinquency."

Tempers shortened and tensions mounted.

With the help of adult leadership from the black community, especially a South Dade bail bondsman who had figured prominently in other battles with the school system, a "black unity rally" was held on Wednesday afternoon, and speakers called for a districtwide boycott by black students.

Pickets marched at nearby South Dade High School. The marchers chanted "Pigs are going to catch hell—No more brothers in jail." And "We've got the fever, we're hot—We can't be stopped." And "Ungawa—Black Power."

Pickets, marches, chants and a call for boycott.

Levie McCoy, vice president of the sophomore class, stood up at the rally and blasted the Palmetto service clubs. "The honkies won't let us in," he said.

Willard Butler, president of UBS at the University of Miami, took the platform: "They buy about ten busses, pick you up on your street and ship you to a white, conservative, honky school," he said. "In no case is a white student being bussed. What we're calling for is a massive black show of strength . . . a county-wide boycott of this corrupt Dade County school system."

On Thursday, 24 black students including Butler and nine other UBS members were arrested during a second demonstration at South Dade. Meanwhile, the boycott continued at Palmetto.

On Friday, Dade County School Superintendent Edward L. Whigham called for an investigation of "outside influences" on the school disturbances and succeeded only in further angering the boycotters. They regarded the move as one designed to divert attention from the real issue—grievances of black students on the Palmetto campus.

Militants began saying the boycott strategy should be scrapped as too tame and urged stronger measures. But Whigham had another announcement that brought about at least a temporary truce and ended for the moment what was becoming a real threat of violence: He said he was asking the Greater Miami Coalition to establish a panel of inquiry that he hoped might bring peace to the situation.

The Coalition responded immediately. "We saw an opportunity to really help," said R. Ray Goode, the Coalition's executive vice president. "We knew the problems at Palmetto weren't unique. We felt we might be able to help bring about change within the entire school system through a careful analysis of the problems at Palmeto. We were also especially pleased to assist the superintendent and the school board in their desire to see the business community and responsible community agencies become more involved in the public education process."

Goode and John H. Halliburton, president of the Greater Miami Coalition, immediately began consulting with a wide range of community leaders on the makeup of the fact-finding panel. Within 24 hours it was formed and had held its first meeting. These were the members:

Dr. Linkston Cryer, a dentist living in the Palmetto school district who enjoyed wide respect in the black community.

John H. Halliburton, an up-from-the-ranks vice president of Eastern Airlines.

Garth Reeves, editor and publisher of the *Miami Times*, the city's leading black newspaper.

Dr. Edwin Shirley, a general surgeon, member of the County Community Relations Board, and one of the best informed and most effective leaders against discrimination in education.

Dr. Henry King Stanford, president of the University of Miami, who had established a reputation for dealing honestly and fairly with student demonstrators on the university campus.

E. F. Swenson, Jr., a director of Miami's largest bank, chairman of Yale University's national fund-raising campaign, and owner of an investment counseling business.

Three blacks, three whites. All six were widely respected as men of integrity and good will. Still, there were some who criticized the panel as "too blue ribbon, too establishment."

Beginning Saturday, May 3, and for the next ten consecutive nights, the panel met and heard anyone who wanted to offer his views on the Palmetto situation. In sessions that sometimes continued long after midnight, the panel heard black students and white students, black parents and white parents, Palmetto faculty

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But something did.

members, school administrators, leaders of the black community and members of the United Black Students.

"We almost lived together during that period," says Reeves. "We all learned from each other. We blacks learned some things. I think the whites learned even more."

It had been decided from the beginning that all six members would try to agree on conclusions. There was to be no separate minority report. "If we can't agree among ourselves, how can we expect people in the community to live together in harmony," one of them said.

But unanimity was not automatic. As the committee members hammered out their report, there were some hot disputes. A single sentence took 45 minutes to construct to everyone's satisfaction. But in the end, all said what emerged was truly their product and one that all six endorsed.

The report was issued on May 15—17 days after the outbreak of trouble at Palmetto High School and just 13 days after the Greater Miami Coalition was asked to help. It wasted no time on rhetoric or wordy preambles.

The panel found "serious racial problems" at Palmetto and widespread discrimination against black students—some of it "institutional," inadvertent and unintentional; some of it the product of "overt racist attitudes" on the part of at least a few faculty and staff members—all of it real.

"Black students at Palmetto High School have been brought into an environment very dissimilar to their own," the report said. "Even though the majority of white students, faculty and administration are not hostile to the black students and basically want a harmonious relationship, the black students feel themselves a black island in a white sea, and the resultant lonliness is coming to express itself more and more. The feeling of isolation by black students . . . made an indelible impression on this panel."

The report outlined the "facts" about the escalation of racial tension at the school, but it emphasized that "facts themselves quite often are less important than what the students and others think the facts are," and that "impressions were frequently more important than substantiated facts in the Palmetto situation."

"The general rule of 'black comes to white' has created a negative attitude in the black community toward integration. The bussing of black students to Palmetto High School has necessitated a far greater adjustment for blacks than for whites. Blacks and whites now realize that significant cultural differences existed at the time of desegregation and still exist. Not enough training and exposure have been provided in prior years for teachers and students to make the transition with understanding and consideration, in an atmosphere conducive to more comfortable feelings for those who have to make the greater adjustment.

"Lack of knowledge of black history and black culture causes some white teachers and counselors to be offensive without meaning to do so. White teachers, never having been exposed to the dress habits, special word connotations, diet preferences, etc., can create suspicions, fears and feelings of inferiority and isolation among black students."

The report made 16 specific recommendations, including these:

—more black teachers

—the hiring of black counselors

—a black assistant principal

—intensified training "in integrated instruction and human relations" for faculty and administrators

—"restructuring of social science and humanities courses to include appropriate emphasis on the black man's contribution to world society and that of the United States "

—establishment of a black history-culture course

—addition of a late "activity bus" for students in extracurricular activities

—special orientation sessions for entering students,

black and white

—a reorganized bi-racial Human Relations Committee at Palmetto to "anticipate racial problems" and deal with them "before they reach the confrontation stage"

The recommendations were aimed at Palmetto. But the problems, the report noted, were symptomatic of problems in other parts of the school system, and the recommendations could be applied elsewhere.

Reaction to the report was prompt. Miami's leading daily newspaper ran the entire 5,000-word text, a practice usually reserved only for presidential inaugural addresses. Newspaper editorials and Miami's leading citizens praised the report as a major contribution to improved race relations.

The black community was more cautious.

"There's racism in the Miami schools?" a black parent asked rhetorically. "So what else is new? We didn't need a fancy committee to tell us that."

Said Bell, the leader of the boycott: "The school wouldn't listen to us. Maybe they'll listen to the panel, but I'm not holding my breath."

"Another piece of paper," commented a United Black Students member from the University of Miami. "Just like the Supreme Court desegregation decision. This is the South, man. Nothing's going to happen with that report."

But something did.

Six days after its release, the Dade County School Board met to consider the report. Superintendent Whigham presented a point-by-point analysis of the coalition reforms, informing the board: "We gave this report thorough study. These are things that need to be done." Board member William Lehman responded: "I think these steps should have been taken a long time ago."

After a brief but spirited discussion, the school board voted to accept and implement all of the Coalition report's major recommendations.

Nor did school administrators drag their feet in putting them into effect. There were some changes even as the waning school year was ending. And by the opening of school again in September, all of the basic reforms were in effect—not only at Palmetto, but at other Dade County schools.

At Palmetto, ten additional black teachers had been hired, making a total of 13 and there were plans to hire more. A black assistant principal and a black football coach were hired. Special activities busses were added, leaving campus at 5 p.m. and 6:45 p.m. for students in after school activities.

Three courses in black culture and history were added to the curriculum (less than one-third of the black students and only a handfull of whites had elected to take the courses). In-service human relations workshops for faculty and staff were instituted, and a summer training program had been held. There were orientation sessions for incoming students. The school's Human Relations Committee was reorganized and revitalized; lines of communication were unclogged.

As classes got underway at Palmetto, the signs of protest and demonstration were gone, replaced by posters reading "Beat Killian High," "Sock Hop," "Pep Club Says Slaughter 'Em Panthers."

"We're a school again," said one veteran of the confrontation in the spring, though it was clear to many that more trouble inevitably lies ahead for Palmetto and Dade County as school integration accelerates.

Why did the schools turn to the Urban Coalition in the Miami crisis? No one involved has a clear-cut answer to that question, and executive vice president Ray Goode has no do-it-yourself kit for other coalitions around the country who may see a similar role for themselves.

"I think they turned to us," said Goode, "because we had established some credibility in Miami. Our jobs program for the hard-core unemployed was going well, and people were becoming aware of our activities

in economic development and housing. The word was out that we wanted to bring people together, that representatives of all segments of the Miami community were involved and active in what we were doing.

"Because we had some credibility, they turned to us. Now, having done an acceptable job, people's confidence in us is further enhanced. There is no question that the Coalition here is stronger and better accepted than it was before. More important, the community is stronger."

Why did the Coalition's report have such great impact?

The panel of inquiry managed to unearth no new "facts." Its analysis of the problems at Palmetto was conventional enough, and its conclusions and recommendations were not particularly original. The panel members themselves would be the first to agree with these statements.

Marvin Bell could have told school officials what the problems were and what they could do about them, if they had let him. Others had tried. There was little in the report that had not been said before—by students, by parents, by members of the County Community Relations Board, by the Urban League and by other groups and individuals.

But nothing happened, nothing changed. Yet the Coalition's report brought action—quick, fundamental, and far-reaching.

The Coalition's response was prompt and its message was forthright and plain spoken. But probably more important than what it said was who said it. Nearly everyone involved in the Palmetto situation knew that any changes in the schools would have to have broad community support. They felt the Greater Miami Coalition had that support. And as it happened in Miami in the spring of 1969, it was perhaps the *only* organization that did.

"Everyone knew we had no ax to grind," said Goode, "unless it was the ax of a better community."

When the panel spoke it was not just the black community speaking, or the white establishment, or a band of student militants, or educators, or businessmen. The panel managed to voice in unmistakably clear language what needed to be said by all these groups.

No one believes the road ahead at Palmetto or the Dade County school system will be all smooth and peaceful.

While it responded to the recommendations with almost astonishing speed, Palmetto fell short of the number of black teachers it had hoped to hire, The new course in black culture and history is a one semester elective course that does not have the enrollment, black or white, originally hoped for. In addition, meaningful involvement of black parents in the affairs of Palmetto High School has not been achieved as called for in the Coalition report. And some school employees still appear unable to grasp the mood and the feelings of students.

When school ended in June 1969 after ten years of integration as a policy, less than 15 percent of Dade County's more than 200 schools met the standard measure of "integration"—more than five percent, but less than 95 percent black. Some schools were still totally segregated. And Miami, of course, like all communities, has its share of bitter-enders who will fight any change to the last breath.

But as one black Miami leader said, "We've finally made a breakthrough."

How does Marvin Bell, the leader of the boycott, feel now?

"It's still lonely," he said after two weeks of the new school year. "We're still a little black island in a big white sea. But it's better. At least someone finally listened. At least someone cared."