



## The Women's Emergency Committee (WEC)



### Introduction

*The men have failed . . . It's time to call out the women.* Adolphine Fletcher Terry

In September 1958 a group of women met to form the Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools (WEC). Infuriated by the lack of response from business and community leaders, they formed the first organization to publicly condemn the school-closing action and to support reopening the schools under the Little Rock School District's desegregation plan.

Above: September 1958 WEC leaders from l to r: Vivion Brewer, Ada May Smith, Adolphine Fletcher Terry, and Dottie Morris. Courtesy of *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

### September 1957- May 1958

The Little Rock School Board, under a federal court order, admitted nine African-American students to the previously all-white Central High School. Little Rock's citizens quickly found themselves in the midst of the first major test of the federal government's commitment to upholding the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision ending racial segregation in public education.

Desegregation would not come easily for Little Rock. Governor Orval Faubus ordered Arkansas National Guard troops to, in his words, prevent violence and prohibit the nine students from entering the school. In response, President

Eisenhower sent units of the U.S. Army's 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division into Little Rock and federalized the Arkansas National Guard, charging them with protecting the nine students and escorting them into the school.

The federal troop presence remained throughout the school year at Central. Student leaders pledged to obey the law and asked their fellow students to do the same. In spite of this, some students verbally and physically harassed the Nine during the year. The Nine endured, however, and on May 25, 1958, Ernest Green, the only senior among the Little Rock Nine, became the first African-American graduate of Central High School.

### Summer 1958

After an emotionally and politically charged school year, Governor Faubus announced his intention to invoke an act passed by the state legislature in the summer of 1958 and close Little Rock's four public high schools to prevent further attempts at desegregation. As the summer of 1958 progressed, segregationist and moderate (those who advocated obeying the U.S. Supreme Court decision) whites squared off over the issue of continued desegregation. Segregationist intimidation and threats of economic boycotts silenced the city's civic and business leaders. Into this leadership void stepped

the women of the Women's Emergency Committee. The WEC held their initial meeting on September 16, 1958, in the antebellum home of Adolphine Fletcher Terry, founder of the organization and a member of one of Little Rock's most influential families. Terry felt that the city's leaders, meaning white, male leadership, had remained silent too long. Fifty-eight women attended this initial meeting and vowed to work to reopen the schools under the district's desegregation plan.

## September 27, 1958

The WEC had to act quickly. The governor set an election date for September 27 for the voters of Little Rock to decide whether they wanted integrated schools or no schools. In an effort to gain support for the reopening of integrated schools, the WEC issued this statement to local newspapers:

**We are deeply concerned that the young people are the ones to bear the hardships of this tragic situation and we are going to do everything in our power to open the four high schools.**

The ballot required voters to vote either against integration or in favor of the immediate integration

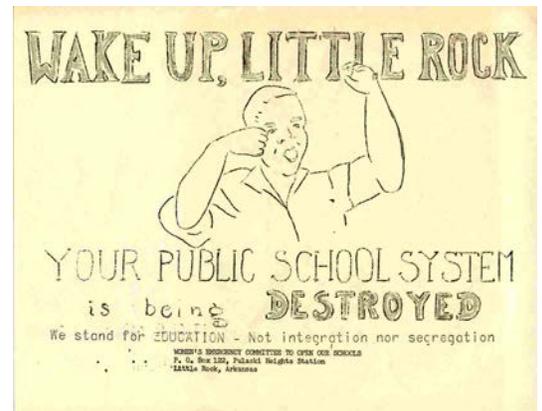
of all the schools in the district. The WEC became the only organization to publicly support voting in favor of integration.

In spite of their efforts, Little Rock's citizens voted almost three to one against integration. As a result, the city's four public high schools remained closed throughout the 1958-59 school year. The school closing affected about three thousand six hundred students. Some of them moved in with relatives or friends in other towns to attend school, but many students received no instruction at all during the year.

## October 1958- April 1959

Despite their defeat in the September 27th election, WEC members continued to advocate reopening the schools, and its members became the targets of outspoken segregationists, who labeled them "integrationists." This climate of intimidation made it difficult for white and black leaders to meet openly to try and resolve the crisis.

While their efforts made them targets for harassment, the WEC persevered. As the year progressed, attitudes among Little Rock parents, particularly those with teenage children, began to shift toward more acceptance of desegregation, if that meant reopening the schools.



WEC Flyer, 1958.

## May 1959

In a show of support for public education, the WEC passed a resolution asking the Little Rock School Board to immediately renew the contracts of all the district's teachers and administrators. The members knew that successfully reopening the schools required maintaining a cohesive group of faculty and staff.

When the school board convened its regular meeting on May 5, 1959, one of the items on the agenda was the renewal of teacher contracts. Segregationist members were against this measure, and the Board voted not to renew the contracts of forty-four teachers and administrators whom they viewed as integrationists.



Segregationist newspaper advertisement that advocated removing the school board members who supported desegregation, May 1958.

"We consider . . . that parents would not want their children trained by persons holding such [integrationist] attitudes" Board president Ed. I. McKinley.

Along with the citizen's group Stop this Outrageous Purge (STOP) and other community organizations, the WEC called for a special election to recall the segregationist board members. By contacting registered voters and visiting door-to-door, the WEC was able to create enough support to recall the three segregationist board members and retain the three moderate ones.

## August 1959- November 1963

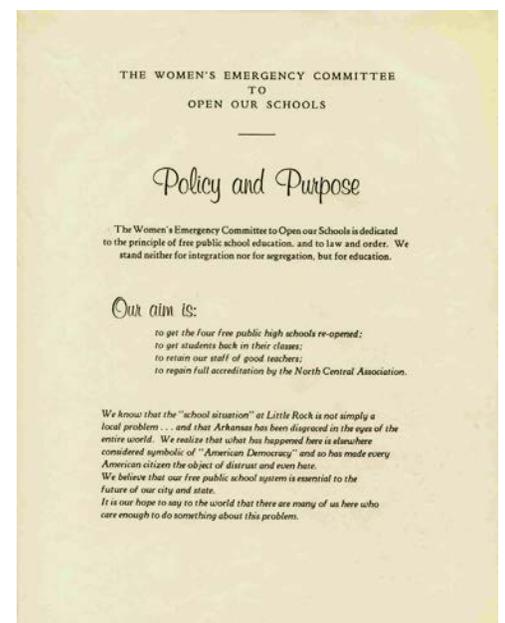
After the successful election, the Little Rock public high schools reopened on August 12, 1959, with limited desegregation. Although integration involving substantial numbers of students did not occur until the 1970's, the re-opening of the schools in the fall of 1959 brought to a close an important chapter in the history of public education in Little Rock.

The WEC's next project was the "Little Rock Report: The City, Its People, Its Business, 1957-1959." It was an impressive record of the economic devastation created by the school crisis. The survey detailed the fact that no new industries had located in Little Rock since the crisis. The organization continued its political and educational involvement into the next decade and, on November 2, 1963, the WEC voted itself out of existence. Many of its members, however, continued working for change through their involvement in other organizations.

In reporting the organization's demise, the *Pine Bluff Commercial* editorialized that:

...the committee took the lead after this state's so-called leadership had either gone over to the side of retrogression and racism or had fled through the nearest available exit.

The WEC took the lead in convincing Little Rock's citizens to support the district's desegregation plan and succeeded in helping to save public education in Arkansas.



WEC Policy and Purpose Statement, 1958.