

From First

BY GLENN COOK

The roots of school desegregation are found in Summerton, but progress has not had much chance in this small South Carolina town

to Footnote

The story of Summerton and its schools is a footnote to history. On the surface, daily life in this small South Carolina town today is a far cry from that of a half century ago. At the same time, little seems to have changed—and many residents seem to prefer it that way. And with good reason, for the townspeople—especially whites—continue to cast a wary eye at Summerton’s place in history. The town is home to *Briggs v. Elliott*, the first of five cases later consolidated into *Brown v. Board of Education* and arguably the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement.

To most people, *Brown* is the story of a lawsuit that occurred because an African-American girl from Kansas was not allowed to attend an all-white school. But legal observers note that *Briggs*—not *Brown*—provided the foundation for the abolishment of separate but equal schools. Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP lawyer who led the battle to end segregation in America’s classrooms, argued *Briggs*—not *Brown*—before the Supreme Court.

“This is where it began. It all started here,” says Joe De Laine Jr., the namesake and son of the pastor whose efforts led to the landmark litigation. “And yet people don’t want to acknowledge it. They would be happy if it all just went away.”

But De Laine and descendants of the original plaintiffs—many of whom moved away and returned after retiring—are

working to change that. Now in their 60s and 70s, they want Summerton to acknowledge and embrace its place in history. They want this hamlet—still dominated in population by blacks and in power by whites—to educate its children equally and equitably.

In some ways, the task is as onerous—although not as physically or economically threatening—as that of their parents and grandparents. Because while Summerton is technically desegregated, it is far from integrated. Fifty years after *Brown*, it is a place where separate still exists, and equal remains just out of its grasp.

Two separate worlds

The other *Brown* districts—in Delaware, Kansas, Virginia, and Washington, D.C.—have largely embraced their role in the desegregation movement over the past decade, converting old schools into museums and using the 50th anniversary to salve the scars of the past.

Summerton’s efforts have been limited to the establishment of an interracial economic development group and a monthly men’s prayer gathering that is held in various white and black churches. Town leaders are quick to note that the high school and the private school now play against each other in sports, and that whites and blacks mix when an entertainer—Pat Boone this past Christmas—performs in the auditorium next to the school district’s central office.

Sigms leading to Summerton can be seen by travelers on



Plaintiffs in the *Briggs v. Elliott* lawsuit pose with some of their supporters in this undated photo. Below: The state historic marker outside Liberty Hill AME Church, where 19 of the 20 plaintiffs were members, stands chipped and fading today.

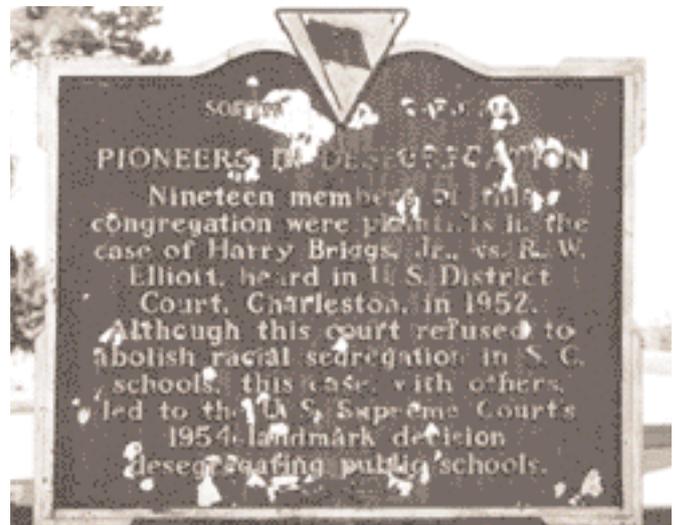
Interstate 95, but one road sign is a fitting irony in this town of contradictions. Earlier this year, as historic markers that tell the *Briggs v. Elliott* story remained chipped and fading, town leaders celebrated the renaming of U.S. 15 as the Althea Gibson Highway. While it's nice to honor a native who became a tennis star—the first African-American woman to win Wimbledon,—Gibson left Summerton at age 3 and never returned.

Beatrice Rivers came back to Summerton to live, and wishes she hadn't. A child when her father, Henry Brown, signed the *Briggs v. Elliott* petition, she returned to Summerton to care for her aging mother almost a decade ago. Rivers vividly remembers the petitioners' struggles, the jobs that were lost, the families left broken when fathers had to leave their wives and children to make a living elsewhere. What she hasn't seen are many signs of progress.

"I don't see much change here," Rivers says. "Summerton is still two separate worlds. And the blacks and whites don't interact much, if at all, unless they have to. It's no different really."

Some people say that class relations, not race relations, are the problem. Located about 65 miles southeast of Columbia, the state capital, Summerton is part of South Carolina's rural "Black Belt," a stretch of farming land with little industry and high poverty. Clarendon County School District No. 1, which serves 1,288 students from Summerton and the surrounding area, has a staggering number of children—more than 95 percent—who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

Of the districts involved in the *Brown* decision, Clarendon



No. 1 had—and still has—the largest percentage of minority students. In 1949, about 75 percent of the school-age children in Clarendon County were black; today, Summerton's three schools are 95 percent black, 3 percent white, and 2 percent Hispanic. The vast majority of white students attend Clarendon Hall, a private school that opened in the mid 1960s to blunt integration efforts.

"I don't like it," Rivers says of living in Summerton. "I wish I was back in Washington almost every day. Many days I wish I was anywhere but here."

Rivers and her brother, Harrison Brown, are dedicated to

helping the Briggs-De Laine-Pearson Foundation, a group that is working to raise awareness about Summerton's place in history. In 2002, Joe De Laine, Rivers, Brown, and others wrested control of its operations from longtime residents who, in De Laine's words, "had done nothing, not a damn thing."

Some of those residents complain today that "outsiders" now populate the foundation's board, noting that Brown lives in Sumter, and De Laine and his brother, Brumit, are in Charlotte, N.C. But the foundation's leaders say they are committed, and their actions bear it out. They've talked to Scott's Branch High School students who are working on an oral history of the lawsuit, and they're trying to raise money for a memorial fitting of *Briggs v. Elliott's* legacy.

Even more important, they're telling their story wherever they can. And what a story it is.

Drawing the line

It started, quite simply it seems today, over a bus.

In 1947, African-American children who lived in and around Summerton did not care how they got to school. They just didn't want to walk—in some cases 15 or 16 miles from the district's outskirts—while white children passed by on a bus.

Schools for black children had no running water or indoor toilets. Students studied in one- and two-room buildings with only two or three teachers, with one of the teachers doubling as the principal. In Summerton, J.A. De Laine—an educated man who also served as an AME minister—filled the dual role at Liberty Hill School.

"He had a reputation among most of the communities down there because he made himself involved with people," his son Joe says. "If he went to visit Mr. Jones and Mr. Jones was picking cotton, then my father went right out to the cotton field in his suit and picked some cotton. If Mr. Jones was plowing, he'd say, 'Here let me have the plow and you rest for a minute while I talk to you.' He came across as one of them."

Clarendon County spent almost two-thirds of its education budget to educate white children—even though blacks outnumbered whites three to one—and paid no money for transportation for black children. Or, as school board chairman R.M. Elliott told farmer Levi Pearson and others: "We ain't got no money to buy a bus for your nigger children."

De Laine, like many other black ministers of the era, was becoming heavily involved with the NAACP. In June 1947, at a state NAACP meeting in Columbia, De Laine heard State President James Hinton challenge the audience to take action. Find someone, Hinton said, who will sue the system for school transportation.

"Daddy was always for the underdog," says Brumit De Laine, commonly known as B.B. "He didn't care whether the underdog was black or white. It's a natural instinct that when people have been pushed so far down that they are kind of forced to get up. Things had gotten so bad, that he had to stop and say, 'Enough is enough.'"

De Laine drove home and found Pearson, who had gotten together with other area farmers and purchased a secondhand

bus that kept breaking down. The school district refused to pay for gas, much less repairs.

Prodded by his pastor, Pearson filed a lawsuit, but *Pearson v. Clarendon County* was dismissed in June 1948 on a technicality. According to court records, the land that Pearson farmed was within the school district's boundaries, but his home wasn't.

The line in the sand—or dirt as it may be—had been drawn. In many ways it remains there today.

Suing for equal opportunity

By the late 1940s, Thurgood Marshall had already made a reputation for himself as a rising star with the NAACP, which was taking a targeted approach to improving conditions in black schools across the nation. Marshall knew that a lawsuit in the South faced huge hurdles due to the entrenched segregation that existed, and he was hoping to find the test case for equal schools elsewhere.

But in the spring of 1949, he met with Pearson and De Laine in Columbia. By day's end, Marshall said he would file a lawsuit seeking equal school facilities if they could get 100 signatures on a petition.

Pearson and De Laine started to work, and 107 had signed on by the fall. At the top of the list were Harry Briggs, a gas station employee, and his wife, Eliza, who worked as a maid at the local hotel. When *Briggs v. Elliott* was filed in U.S. District Court later that year, it asked for equal educational opportunities but did not seek to end segregation.

Still, the payback from Clarendon County's white community came quickly. Harry Briggs lost his job, as did his wife and many others. The petition's signers suddenly could not get fertilizer for their fields or find buyers for their crops; a number lost their mortgages.

De Laine was fired from his teaching job but continued to lead from the pulpit. In 1951, firefighters watched his house—20 feet outside city limits—burn to the ground without turning on their hoses. De Laine transferred to an AME church 50 miles away in Lake City but continued his work.

"The method of intimidation against African Americans made many fearful of challenging the policies that existed," Joe De Laine says. "They were literally risking their lives. You didn't have to be told you were in jeopardy. You knew it."

Denia Stukes Hightower's father, one of the petitioners, lost his job and tried to make a living as an auto mechanic at his home. He was later crushed by a car in circumstances that some still claim are suspicious.

Hightower's family fled to Philadelphia but remained as plaintiffs in the lawsuit and picked up news of the proceedings from afar. "No one took their names off the petition," she says. "They decided you have to fight them. The wives threatened the husbands that they were going to quit them if they took their names off that petition. No one was broken."

Suing for desegregation

Many white Southerners, especially those who grew up under segregation, rationalize the actions of their ancestors by call-

ing them “products of their time.” But some took a stand against the common attitudes of their day.

One was J. Waties Waring, a U.S. District Court judge who came from a family of white Charleston aristocrats but fought against his privileged heritage. In the 1940s and '50s, as Strom Thurmond touted segregationist practices and ran for president on a “Dixiecrat ticket,” Waring took numerous positions that supported blacks. His rulings forced the state Democratic Party to integrate and required school systems to pay teachers the same salary regardless of race.

“Judge Waring is truly the unsung hero in all of this,” Joe De Laine says. “He is the first judge that I am aware of who objectively ruled on the merits of the cases rather than on the race of the individual. The African Americans of South Carolina saw him as someone who would give them a fair hearing in his courtroom.”

As *Briggs v. Elliott* moved its way through the court system, Waring urged Marshall to refile the lawsuit, saying the case was

not about equal facilities but about segregation itself. Marshall took his advice, and in 1950, the first case in the nation that addressed the issue of school desegregation was on the books.

In June 1951, a three-judge panel voted 2-1 to require South Carolina to provide equal facilities for black and white students. The ruling—considered a compromise by whites in South Carolina—was closely watched in other states faced with similar lawsuits. But in an extraordinary 28-page dissent, Waring included a phrase that would be used as a blueprint by the U.S. Supreme Court three years later.

“Segregation in education,” he wrote, “can never produce equality.”

The NAACP appealed the *Briggs* ruling to the Supreme Court, and after further legal maneuvering, it was combined with four other cases. But even though *Briggs* was filed first, and Marshall argued its merits before the Supreme Court, the case became known as *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Some theorize that *Brown* became the lead case because it

A HELPING HAND IN SUMMERTON

By Jonathan Dozier

Lawrence High spins the basketball in his hands, then gives it a good bounce, challenging the two middle schoolers to a game.

“You run the hustle,” High says. “I’ll do everything from the outside.”

The Summerton, S.C., police sergeant then takes on the students, two African-American teens he is trying to help keep off the street. As the manager of Helping Young People Excel (HYPE), an after-school program run in a converted post office next to the town hall, High knows this is perhaps his best—and last—chance.

“Unless they get their head on straight, they’re not going to make it,” High says of many Summerton youth. “We’re going to have a population here with serious unemployment problems and hanging out on the streets.”

Twenty-five boys, ages 10 to 16, participate in HYPE, a grant-funded program that runs from 3 to 6 p.m. weekdays during the school year. High tries to make sure the kids do their homework. He helps some of the older ones with driving exams. For fun, they watch a movie at least once a week.

When new students enter the program, they fill out a sheet that asks for their 10-year goals and then talk about how they intend to achieve those goals.

“A lot of them are talking about college,” he says. “I tell them, if you want to go to college, you’ve gotta get out of high school first.”

The slow, quiet life in Summerton makes it a high-risk community for adolescents, High says—especially those from poor, single-parent homes who have lots of unsupervised free time and little to entertain or stimulate them. About 23 percent of all Summerton children younger than 18 live below the poverty

level, according to census data, and more than half of all new births in Clarendon County are to single mothers.

High has seen an increase in marijuana use among teens and says HYPE represents a last chance for young people who already have one or more strikes against them in juvenile court.

Most of HYPE’s participants, though, are like Charles and Lavelle: friendly youngsters who seem to suffer mostly from boredom. Some lack discipline or encouragement from parents or an awareness of what the world has to offer beyond Summerton, High says, and some “aren’t in any trouble at all.”

High insists that individual choices—not circumstances—determine a young person’s destiny. He adds that he understands troubled adolescents because he was one himself. But after moving from New York City to Orangeburg, S.C., he turned his life around, becoming an elementary school teacher and, later, a policeman who continues to teach.

HYPE has already helped one young man who “was really destined to go to jail, for real” to make a 180-degree turn-around, High says. On the other hand, he says, three other HYPE students were expelled this past fall for “stupid things,” such as cutting class, fighting, and “attitude problems.”

Shaking his head in dismay, he notes that these boys can do much better. If they weren’t worth the hassle, he would do something else with his time.

“I was one of these kids,” he says. “If I changed my life, I know they can do it.”

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The Rev. J.A. De Laine and his wife, Mattie, stand with their three children—Joe Jr., Ophelia, and Brumit—outside their burned home in 1951.



was from the Midwest and the court did not want Southern politics to blunt the impact of a potential ruling. In 2002, U.S. Sen. Fritz Hollings told a reunion of the *Briggs* descendants that it was because Topeka's schools were partially integrated.

Amid the conjecture, and despite volumes of research on the cases, no one really knows for sure.

The aftermath

The days immediately after the May 17, 1954, decision were happy ones for Summerton's black families, although there were no open celebrations. In Lake City, the Rev. J.A. De Laine continued to face threats.

In October 1955, just a few months after the Supreme Court ruled that schools should be integrated with "all deliberate speed," whites threatened to kill De Laine if he did not leave town. A week later, his church was burned; on the 10th day after the threat, De Laine heard gunfire outside his home. He fired two shots at cars in the street, hoping to mark the vehicles as the sheriff had told him to do, then fled his home state.

"The uncertainty was traumatic because for several days I had no idea where he was," his son B.B. says. "It took us three days to find him."

De Laine, heading for New York, was never found by the authorities, who had taken out a warrant for his arrest. In Buffalo, he reestablished himself as a teacher and founded the De Laine-Waring AME Church, naming it after the judge who had moved to New York under his own cloud of controversy. War-

ing, who retired from the bench under pressure in 1952, returned to South Carolina to be buried in 1968. Attending his funeral were 300 blacks; the only whites were family members.

The state of South Carolina, bowing to political pressure from the federal government, never pursued extradition against De Laine, but he never returned to his home state. The arrest warrant remained active for 26 years after his 1974 death in Charlotte; in 2000, he was pardoned posthumously.

Summerton's schools have faced an uphill battle as well. In 1966, the first blacks were allowed to attend the all-white Summerton High School. But many white students already had left for Clarendon Hall, which had opened the year before.

"In Summerton, when the whites left, they said they would never come back, and they haven't," says Leola Parks, executive assistant to Clarendon No. 1 Superintendent Clayton Willie and one of the first blacks to attend Summerton High (now Scott's Branch).

White parents interviewed—none on the record—say they believe Clarendon Hall's academics are better. Numbers over time back them up: Scott's Branch students average only 761 on the SAT, compared with Clarendon Hall's 978.

Constance Hill, a teacher at Scott's Branch High, says some white students want to attend the public schools. Parents, she believes, continue to be the major obstacles.

"We've had some students come in from the private school to take standardized tests, and some of our students talked with them," Hill says. "The kids from the private school said they

wished they could be here, but it's their parents. ... Their parents say they can't come."

Seeking a boost

Clarendon No. 1's high poverty rates and low achievement have resulted in a vicious cycle. Financial struggles have forced cuts in staff the past two years. Meanwhile, an early childhood center—considered key to boosting student achievement—sits half-finished behind the central office for lack of funds.

The district is also one of 36 that have sued the state over a lack of adequate funding. Ironically, the lawsuit is being heard at a courthouse in Manning, the Clarendon County seat that is only 14 miles away.

Since he was hired in 2002, Willie has taken steps to boost achievement. He has cleaned house—all three schools have new principals—and pushed for more staff development and parent involvement. A facilities plan is in place, and Willie wants the board to seek a bond referendum this spring.

Willie, who came to Clarendon County from North Carolina, says his biggest struggle is changing the mind-set that he has found in Summerton, even among some of his teachers. To illustrate, he tells of meeting a white teacher during his first week on the job.

"I'd heard that we had white teachers, more than we had white students, so I was pleased to see her," says Willie, who is black. "I asked her a few questions: Do you live in Summerton? 'Yes, yes. I've lived here all my life.' Do you have children? 'Yes.' Where do they go to school? 'Clarendon Hall.' And that's when the conversation ended."

He shakes his head. "The way people relate here to each other, black and white, you see no obvious differences," he says. "But there is that line. When you talk about children in the schools here, there's a line you just don't cross."

The pull of the past

As the *Brown* anniversary nears, attention is finally being paid to the legacy of J.A. De Laine, largely due to the efforts of his oldest son.

For the past several years, Joe De Laine has been the family's public face. He serves on the federal *Brown v. Board* Commission as one of South Carolina's two representatives. He is the person quoted most often in the press and is known as someone who doesn't mince words about anything, especially the lack of attention paid to *Briggs v. Elliott*.

The irony, he notes, is that for almost 60 years, he has wanted to run away from home. He has harbored a desire for decades to live in Europe, where he says race issues don't exist the way they do in the South. And yet, after spending his professional career as a pharmaceutical executive in New Jersey, he now lives in the last house his parents owned.

Today, that house on Washington Street in Charlotte is only a few miles from the museum where *Briggs v. Elliott* is finally getting its due.

The Levine Museum of the New South, which showcases stories about the post-Civil War South, opened an eight-month

exhibit in late January titled "Courage: The Carolina Story That Changed America." All three De Laine children, including middle child Ophelia, participated in the project; her school picture serves as the focal point of the museum's posters and promotional materials.

A retired college professor who lives in New Jersey, Ophelia De Laine Gona rarely sits for interviews. Like her brother B.B., she'd rather work behind the scenes and let Joe be the spokesman.

But like others who have left and returned to Summerton, she also feels the pull of the past. With her brothers, Ophelia sat for extended interviews that are being used in the museum's interactive exhibit. She helped select photographs and resource materials from her father's extensive files. She also spoke to Scott's Branch students who attended the opening as part of their oral history project, telling them to remember and to achieve.

"You young people have a responsibility to get an education. You have a responsibility to act nice," Ophelia told the students. "I'm not talking about goodie, goodie. You have a responsibility to act a certain way. You have a responsibility not to be ground down in the dirt. It is your responsibility to succeed."

Crossing the line

Joe Elliott knows, deep down, that he has crossed the invisible line that exists in Summerton. He has become, as one resident says, the "Judge Waring of his time."

A sixth-generation Summerton resident and the grandson of *Briggs* defendant R.M. Elliott, his ancestors came to South Carolina in 1690. He lives in the plantation-style home, tucked away on a dirt road on Summerton's outskirts, owned by his mother's family for almost 200 years.

Elliott, an amateur historian, is proud of his heritage. In a tour of his house, he points to pictures of relatives who served as Confederate officers and notes that his lineage includes at least four men who were South Carolina governors. But he's also proud that he helped integrate the Greenwood County elementary school, where he served as principal, and that he has tried to promote better race relations in Summerton.

"We won't ever move ahead as long as the blacks demonize the defendants, and as long as the whites refuse to acknowledge the bravery and courage of these plaintiffs," says Elliott, who was 9 when the *Briggs* lawsuit was filed. "They took on an institution. They took on the entire South. The blacks in this community changed not just the nation, but the entire world."

In 1998, Elliott took over as headmaster at Clarendon Hall. Some blacks pointed to his heritage and said he was just carrying on the family tradition. In his three years at the school, Elliott reached out to Clarendon No. 1, promoting basketball games and holiday concerts between the two. He also helped organize a biracial group to discuss race issues.

But when he started speaking out publicly against the separation that still exists in Summerton, he saw firsthand how difficult it is to change minds. In 2003, with the federal *Brown v. Board* Commission planning to visit, the mayor asked Elliott to

speak to white civic groups and urge them to take part. The reaction to his plea to one well-established organization, he says, was “very disheartening.”

“I saw several of my long-time friends there, one close friend in particular. The whole time I was talking he looked away and drew on a piece of paper,” Elliott says. “Needless to say, I didn’t get a standing ovation. With typical Southern politeness a couple of them said, ‘Good job. Thank you for coming,’ before they moved on with business. My old friend—he didn’t say anything. And he’s hardly spoken to me since.”

“A lot of people used to call me Joe. Now they talk to me but don’t call me by name,” he says, shaking his head. “It’s not ostracism. I can’t be ostracized in Summerton because my family has been here so long. But there is a tension that I’ve never felt before. It’s as if people don’t care.”

Reaching out

At the end of the Levine Museum’s two-day opening, family and friends gather at Joe De Laine’s house for an informal supper. Food, as it is at each of these gatherings, is plentiful. Scattered throughout the house, the young and old eat, talk, and laugh, sharing stories and catching up before going home.

As everyone starts to leave, Joe steps outside and lights a cigarette. “I’m exhausted,” he says, cupping the cigarette in his hand. “But this is good. It’s been good.”

For a man of 70, Joe De Laine keeps a schedule that intimidates people half his age, all to tell a story that he believes can’t be told enough. There are more appearances, meetings, speeches, interviews, and then a ceremony and banquet sponsored by the Briggs-De Laine-Pearson Foundation. And then on May 17, the actual anniversary of a day some thought would never come.

Sometime soon, a ceremony will be held to award the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously to J.A. De Laine, Levi Pearson, and Harry and Eliza Briggs. At last, it represents national recognition for their efforts, first for a bus, but ultimately for the nation’s schoolchildren.

Summerton’s work is far from done, however. And that’s one reason Joe De Laine says he’s planning to call Joe Elliott.

“I need to reach out to him,” he says before stepping back inside. “It’s not fair the way he’s being treated here.”

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PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN SUMMERTON

By Crystal Boyles and Katie Gomez

Like a number of small towns, Summerton, S.C., continues to have a two-tiered approach to education that has prevented it from achieving the integration sought in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Private schools that catered to white parents and students popped up throughout the South from the late 1950s to late 1960s. Known as “segregation academies,” these often religious-based institutions thrived in the decade after *Brown*.

Clarendon Hall, a private school that opened in 1965 on the outskirts of Summerton, is one such place. Today, 92 percent of its 265 students in grades K-12 are white; by contrast, the 1,288 student Clarendon County School District No. 1 is 95 percent black, 3 percent white, and 2 percent Hispanic.

“Let’s call it like it is. We’re a white-flight school,” Clarendon Hall headmaster Michael “Doc” Connors says.

Black students are welcome at Clarendon Hall, Connors says, but often their parents don’t want to send them there because of the school’s history. And white parents have been reluctant to send their children to the district’s public schools, which have struggled academically in recent years.

In 2002, the average SAT score at Scott’s Branch, the public high school, was 761—228 points below the South Carolina average of 989—and only 18 of 60 seniors took the college preparation exam. By contrast, eight of Clarendon Hall’s 10 graduates in 2002 took the SAT, earning average scores of 978.

Reform is moving slowly in Clarendon No. 1, where new

Superintendent Clayton Willie has cleaned house, replacing principals at all three schools over the past 18 months. Kenneth Mance, the new principal of Scott’s Branch High School, says his primary goal is to increase test scores.

The Briggs-De Laine-Pearson Foundation, whose leaders are the descendants of the original *Briggs v. Elliott* plaintiffs, is focusing its efforts on Clarendon No. 1. The nonprofit foundation, which is supported by donations, grants, and volunteers, states that its primary goal is to improve the educational, social, and physical lives of Summerton residents.

One area of improvement is the involvement of parents in their children’s education. In Summerton’s public schools, educators cite an acute lack of parent involvement, while parents are very active at Clarendon Hall. But things are changing.

At Scott’s Branch Intermediate, which serves grades four through seven, more parents have been attending PTO meetings this year than last. This increased involvement—some parents even came out and painted the hallways—has helped boost test scores and student attitudes at the school, says principal Nathaniel Nelson.

“If we can improve participation from the parents,” he says, “we can achieve a lot.”

Crystal Boyles and Katie Gomez graduated in December 2003 from the University of South Carolina in Columbia. This article is adapted with permission from the *Carolina Reporter*, the laboratory newspaper of the University of South Carolina’s School of Journalism and Mass Communications.