

Commissioner of Education's African American History Task Force

10:40 a.m. | Session 1

*Education as Freedom: The
Schools African American
Communities Built Before
Brown v. Board of Education.*

Speaker: Ethel Kennedy,
Palm Beach County Schools





Education as Freedom

How African American Communities
Built Education Before
Brown v. Board of Education

The News
HIGH COURT BANS
SEGREGATION IN
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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What We'll Explore Together

01

Framing the Narrative

How instructional framing shapes our understanding of segregation-era education

02

Reconstruction & Freedmen's Schools

How education influenced civic development and community institutions

03

Rosenwald Schools & Community Investment

A model of shared responsibility , local leadership and educational access

04

Black Teachers & Intellectual Culture

Educators were civic anchors, cultural stewards and institutional leaders

05

Classroom Application

A benchmark-aligned mini-lesson you can take into your classroom tomorrow

Framing the Narrative

What Does the Typical Classroom Story Look Like?

Common Instructional Framing

- Instruction often emphasizes school conditions, access to materials and legal structures
- Lessons frequently focus on barriers that shaped schooling during segregation
- Narratives often begin with the limits placed on Black schools and communities and concludes with legal developments (Brown v. Board, 1954)
- Agency is often highlighted through court cases, advocacy and organized public action

Expanded Historical Perspectives

- Historical records show Black communities organized schools immediately following emancipation (Anderson, 1988; Walker, 1996)
- Communities petitioned, fundraised, and established schools through collective effort
- Teachers were civic leaders and cultural stewards
- Institutions created before any federal support existed
- Education was widely understood as central to civic participation and freedom

Reconstruction & Freedmen's Schools | 1865–1872

4,000+

Schools established
by the Freedmen's Bureau

247,000

Students enrolled
by 1870

9,000+

Teachers — many of them
Black Southerners

What the Record Shows:

- Formerly enslaved people organized literacy groups before the Bureau even arrived.
- Community members petitioned local governments for school land and funding; many contributed personal wages and resources.
- Black women were among the most prominent early educators, serving as leaders in both instruction and community development.
- Primary sources including Freedmen's Bureau petitions document communities identifying and advocating for their own educational needs.

Rosenwald Schools in Florida

This history didn't happen far away.

It happened in the counties where your students live.

Florida by the Numbers

100+

Rosenwald schools built across Florida

30+

Counties with documented Rosenwald school sites

\$4.7M

Investment by Black communities with strong leadership from Florida

Florida Teachable Connections

Alachua, Duval, Leon and Palm Beach counties all had Rosenwald school sites — searchable at rosenwald.fisk.edu

Students may have family connections to these schools

Some buildings are still standing and have been documented by the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation

Toussaint L'Ouverture High School (Palm Beach County) represents the same community-built tradition

Primary Source Analysis — Freedmen's Bureau Petition

CLOSE READING PRACTICE

Excerpt from a community petition (language reflects the historical context of the time)

"We, the colored citizens of [county], do respectfully petition that a schoolhouse be erected for the education of our children. We have subscribed among ourselves the sum of [amount] toward the purchase of land, and we pledge our continued support. We ask only for what is our lawful right as citizens of this republic — the means to educate our children and secure our freedom."

— Community Petition to the Freedmen's Bureau, c. 1866–1868 (composite representative example; actual petitions available at [archives.gov](https://www.archives.gov))

Discussion Prompts:

- What does this petition tell us about how this community understood citizenship?
- What assumptions does the language challenge — about who was asking, and how?
- How might you use a document like this to anchor a benchmark-aligned lesson?

Rosenwald Schools | 1912–1932

5,357

Schools built
across 15 states

\$4.7M

Contributed by
Black communities

663K+

Students enrolled
at peak

36%

Black students in
southern states served

A closer look at the Rosenwald Model:

- Booker T. Washington (Tuskegee Institute) advised Julius Rosenwald and helped design the model in partnership with Black communities.
- Julius Rosenwald (Sears, Roebuck executive) provided matching grants, guided by Booker T. Washington's model of community-led school building. Communities had to contribute FIRST.
- Black families contributed land, labor, lumber and cash — often more than the matching amount.
- The model required Black community ownership: if communities built it, communities controlled it.
- Many Rosenwald schools are still standing — some in Florida. The Fisk University archive has full building records and photographs.



Black Teachers & Intellectual Culture

Who Were These Educators?

Civic Anchors

Organized voter registration, led community meetings, and anchored church and civic organizations beyond the classroom.

Cultural Stewards

In segregated schools, Black teachers actively preserved and transmitted African American history, music, literature and cultural identity.

High Expectation & Care

Research by historian Vanessa Siddle Walker highlights rigorous, demanding, caring instruction. Teachers held students to high academic standards alongside fierce advocacy.

Institutional Architects

Principals and superintendents of Black schools built complex institutions under hostile political conditions — a leadership feat largely unacknowledged in history books.

Reframing the Segregated School: The Walker Framework

Vanessa Siddle Walker identified key features of effective segregated Black schools:

1

Caring Teacher-Student Relationships

Teachers knew students as whole people — families, circumstances, potential

2

High Academic Expectations

Rigor and excellence were explicit; students were prepared for college and civic life

3

Extracurricular Richness

Band, debate, drama, student government — whole-child development was built into the school model

4

Advocacy by Principals

Black principals navigated hostile systems while shielding their staff and students

5

Community as Extended School

Parents, church leaders, and community members were active partners — not passive recipients

S.D. Spady

Who He Was

Solomon David Spady was a principal, civic leader and community builder in Delray Beach, Florida.

He worked during the era of Rosenwald and Freedmen's school building.

He represents the Walker Framework in a Florida context

What He Built

Spady established and led schools that served as civic centers, organized community life, and prepared Black students for college and citizenship.



Florida Benchmarks Alignment

SS.912.A.1.1

Describe the importance of historiography, which includes how historical knowledge is obtained and transmitted, when interpreting events in history.

Connections: Examining historical interpretations; comparing traditional narratives with documented community contributions to education

SS.912.A.1.2

Utilize a variety of primary and secondary sources to identify author, historical significance, audience, and authenticity to understand a historical period.

Connections: Freedmen's Bureau petitions; primary source analysis; photographs; historical records; scholarly research from Anderson and Walker.

SS.912.A.1.6

Use case studies to explore social, political, legal, and economic relationships in history.

Connections: Rosenwald Schools initiative; Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald partnership; community investment in education; S.D. Spady as a Florida case study.

Classroom Application — Mini-Lesson Model

A Benchmark-Aligned Lesson Using Primary Sources (15–20 min)

1

Hook (2–3 min):

Show a Rosenwald school photograph. Ask: 'What do you see? What do you wonder? What assumptions are you making?'

2

Background (3–4 min):

Provide a brief context paragraph on the Rosenwald model (teacher reads aloud or students read silently). Emphasize: communities invested first.

3

Primary Source (5–7 min):

Provide students with a Freedmen's Bureau petition or Rosenwald school application excerpt. Use a structured protocol: SOURCING → CONTEXTUALIZATION → CORROBORATION.

4

Discussion (3–4 min):

Essential Question: 'What does this source tell us about how this community understood education, citizenship and freedom?'

5

Exit Ticket (2 min):

Students write: one thing this source tells us + one benchmark connection they can identify.

Your Turn — Draft Your Integration Strategy

5 minutes | Individual reflection → Partner share

1. Essential Question

Write one essential question for your grade level that this content could anchor. The question should be open, debatable and benchmark-aligned.

2. Primary Source Strategy

Identify one primary source from today's session (or the resource list) you would use. How would you scaffold it for your students?

3. Benchmark Connection

Write the specific benchmark and standard language that your lesson would address. How does the content serve as evidence for that benchmark?

Florida Connections — Bringing It Home

This history is not distant. It happened here.

Rosenwald Schools in Florida

Florida had Rosenwald schools in multiple counties — records searchable at rosenwald.fisk.edu. Students may have family connections to these schools.

Freedmen's Bureau Records (Florida)

Florida Bureau records are at the National Archives. These include labor contracts, ration records and school petitions from formerly enslaved Floridians.

Spady Cultural Heritage Museum (Delray Beach)

Documents the life and legacy of S.D. Spady — educator, civic leader and institution-builder. A model Black educator of this exact era. Available for school partnerships.

Toussaint L'Ouverture High School (Palm Beach County)

Named for the Haitian revolutionary leader — one of the historically significant named institutions in the county. Worth including in student research.

Lincoln Park Academy Legacy

Fort Pierce's historically Black high school — an example of the community-built school tradition operating in Florida. Graduates include A. Philip Randolph.

Resources for Continued Learning

SCHOLARLY TEXTS

- Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. UNC Press.
- Walker, V. S. (1996). *Their Highest Potential*. UNC Press.
- Walker, V. S. (2009). *Hello Professor*. UNC Press.
- Fairclough, A. (2007). *A Class of Their Own*. Harvard University Press.
- Ascoli, P. M. (2006). *Julius Rosenwald*. Indiana University Press.

DIGITAL ARCHIVES & TOOLS

- National Archives — Freedmen's Bureau Records
[archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau](https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau)
- Fisk University — Rosenwald Fund Archive
rosenwald.fisk.edu
- Florida State Academic Standards / CPALMS
[cpalms.org](https://www.flouris.org/cpalms)
- Section 1003.42, Florida Statutes
[leg.state.fl.us](https://www.leg.state.fl.us)
- Spady Cultural Heritage Museum
[spadmuseum.org](https://www.spadmuseum.org)

Education as Freedom

*"The function of education is to teach one to think intensively
and to think critically. Intelligence plus character —
that is the goal of true education."
— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

Questions & Discussion