

## The Power of Freedom Schools

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### Goals

Students compare two 1964 textbook excerpts about Black history, analyze a photograph, and draw conclusions about the value of good schools.

### Central Questions

In many segregated Mississippi schools, Black students were taught that white leaders had always treated African Americans kindly. Freedom Schools offered a different perspective on Black history and encouraged critical thinking. What were the consequences of these different educational messages?

### Background Information

In 1960, almost half of Mississippi's residents were African American. Two-thirds worked as field hands or as servants. Most had less than a sixth-grade education, and thousands could not read or write.

From the governor's office to the pulpit, in the classroom and the media, virtually every authority figure taught that Black people were inferior to whites and had to be kept in submission. Many people accepted white-supremacist propaganda as common sense. After decades of this indoctrination, most whites believed segregation was necessary. Most African Americans limited their hopes and dreams.

Segregated schools designed by racist administrators created two generations of uninformed Black Mississippians. The best example of this is the comment made by one elderly resident to a Freedom Summer volunteer: "I didn't know colored people could vote." If knowledge is power, then ignorance is powerlessness.

The Freedom Schools started during the 1964 Mississippi summer project were a deliberate attempt to undermine this indoctrination by teaching accurate history and encouraging critical thinking. Charles Cobb, who originated the Freedom Schools idea, argued that "to encourage questions is to encourage challenge, which is to encourage overthrow."

Cobb was right. At the end of the summer, the coordinator of the program remarked that students "began to discover that they themselves could take action against the injustices which kept them unhappy and impotent ... Through the study of Negro history they began to have a sense of themselves as a people who could produce heroes."

### Documents Used in This Lesson:

1. Excerpt from a Mississippi textbook for segregated elementary schools.  
<http://wihist.org/1CmRgrW>
2. "What Slavery Was Like" (excerpt from the Freedom School curriculum on Black history).  
<http://wihist.org/1I5oOwr>
3. "I Didn't Know Colored People Could Vote" Photograph from *The Student Voice*, May 26, 1964.  
<http://wihist.org/1vRcfyn>

Document 1: Excerpt from a Mississippi textbook for segregated elementary schools.

<http://wihist.org/1CmRgrW>

God wanted the white people to live alone. And he wanted colored people to live alone. The white men built America for you. White people built America so they could make the rules. George Washington was a brave and honest white man. The white men cut away big forests. The white man has always been kind to the Negro. We do not believe that God wants us to live together. Negro people like to live by themselves. Negroes use their own bathrooms. They do not use white people's bathrooms. The Negro has his own part of town to live in. This is called our Southern Way of Life. Do you know that some people want the Negroes to live with white people? These people want us to be unhappy. They say we must go to school together. They say we must swim together and use the bathroom together. God had made us different. And God knows best. Did you know that our country will grow weak if we mix the races? White men worked hard to build our country. We want to keep it strong and free.

Document 2: "What Slavery Was Like" (excerpt from a Freedom School textbook, 1964).

<http://wihist.org/1I5oOwr>

#### What Slavery Was Like

Perhaps the simplest way to understand what slavery was like is to read the accounts of slaves who survived to tell about it: Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington. All three lived in the Upper South (Maryland and Virginia). In the Deep South conditions were worse.

They were always hungry. On the plantation where Douglass grew up, the children were often fed scraps in a trough. Frederick recalled fighting with the dog for food. Booker Washington never remembered his family sitting down to dinner together before emancipation. Harriet Tubman was once nearly killed for stealing a lump of sugar.

Clothing was scanty. Children wore a one piece garment, a long shirt. It was made of so rough a material, Washington recalled, that it was torture to "break in" a new shirt.

Booker Washington never slept in a bed until emancipation. Douglass often slept with his head in a sack to keep out the cold, his feet sometimes splitting from frost. Harriet Tubman sometimes slept with her feet in the ashes of the fire.

Douglass saw his Aunt Esther get forty lashes. He saw a cousin walk onto his plantation from a plantation twelve miles distant, covered with blood from a beating; she was ordered to go back home. Harriet Tubman was hit in the head by a piece of iron thrown by an overseer, and suffered from dizzy spells for the rest of her life.

## Questions

Documents 1 and 2: Excerpt from a Mississippi textbook for segregated schools and “What Slavery Was Like” from a Freedom School textbook.

With a partner, agree on answers to these questions.

1. In the first document, what message do Black children get about US history and race relations? What evidence does the author give that this view is right? Who does he or she appeal to as an authority? What did the author want students to think or do?
2. How is the version of history in the second excerpt different from the first? What evidence does the author give to support these views? Who does he or she appeal to as an authority? What does the author want students to think or do?
3. Which of the two textbooks do you think is more trustworthy and accurate? Why do you think that?
4. What could happen to kids whose only sources of information were biased and incomplete?

Document 3: "I Didn't Know Colored People Could Vote," *The Student Voice*, May 26, 1964.  
<http://wihist.org/1vRcfyn>

*'I didn't know colored  
people could vote.'*



"I came up on a porch and an ancient man says "Yes, sir" and offers me his chair. An enraged white face shouts curses out of a car window. We are greeted with fear at the door: "I didn't know colored people could vote." And people ask why we are down here . . . ."

- from a white SNCC worker's field report.

## Questions

Document 3: “I Didn’t Know Colored People Could Vote,” *The Student Voice*, May 26, 1964.

1. Is the man in the photo rich, middle-class, or poor? What clues in the picture support your answer?
2. This man only went to segregated schools that used textbooks like the first one quoted in document 1. His comment reveals one effect of being educated in bad schools. List three other consequences.
3. Which Mississippians benefited if many African American kids grew up to be as uninformed as this old man? Who profits today if Americans are kept uninformed about the world?
4. List some of the messages about the United States you got from the textbooks you’ve used over the years. What are some things you assume or take for granted about your country?