Expert Group #1: Origins of Freedom Schools

NOTE: Most of the following sources are primary documents from the 1964 Freedom Schools, provided by Education & Democracy, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, and the University of Southern Mississippi Digital Collections.

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1) Describe the Freedom Schools: where did they take place? Who participated? How were Freedom Schools in the summer of 1964 different from regular schools during the school-year at that time?

2) Why do you think the organizers of Freedom Summer included a proposal for the Freedom Schools? What factors led to the urgency of the development of these Freedom Schools?

3) What kind of words, images, and information did the organizers of Freedom Schools use to recruit students and volunteers? Would you have been persuaded to sign-up as a student or volunteer - why or why not?

4) In his Prospectus for Freedom Schools, Charles Cobb writes that “the overall theme of the school would be the student as a force for social change in Mississippi.” How did the Freedom Schools encourage students to become social change agents? Why was this chosen as the major goal?

5) What were the long-term impacts of the Freedom Schools? (On students, volunteer teachers, Mississippi, etc) Do you think Freedom Schools are still needed today - why or why not?
Prior to Freedom Summer, most Movement education efforts are aimed at adults. To one degree or another, the NAACP, CORE, SCLC, and SNCC are all involved in teaching adult literacy, political education, and how to pass the various literacy tests, with the largest and most sustained effort coming from thousands of SCLC’s Citizenship School teachers.

But as more and more young people become active in the Freedom Movement, student-oriented educational activities begin to emerge and evolve. When more than a hundred Black high school students in McComb are expelled from school in 1961 for Movement activities, SNCC briefly establishes "Nonviolent High" to carry on their education. In Greenwood, the SNCC office is just down the street from the Black high school and SNCC field secretaries begin teaching impromptu after-school classes in 1962 and '63.

The need is self-evident. On average, the state of Mississippi spends four times as much educating whites as Blacks ($81.66 per pupil vs $21.77). Mississippi does not have a mandatory education law. Plantation owners can work Black (and poor white) children in the fields whenever they wish. And when Black students do manage to attend a dilapidated "Colored" school, the state-mandated curriculum glorifies the "Southern way of life," ignores Black contributions, distorts history and science to justify segregation and exploitation, and instructs them to be grateful, happy, and contented with "their place in life." Mound Bayou, for example, is an all-Black town, yet the county school board requires that "Neither foreign languages nor civics shall be taught in Negro schools. Nor shall American history from 1860 to 1875 be taught." Those Black teachers who courageously try to counter or subvert this carefully calculated socialization risk being fired, arrested on some trumped up charge, or physically attacked.

In the Fall of 1963, SNCC field secretary Charlie Cobb proposes that Freedom Schools be set up:

*To fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands, and questions ... to stand up in classrooms around the state and ask their teachers a real question ... to create an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives — ultimately new directions for action.* — Charlie Cobb. [13]

In March of 1964, the National Council of Churches (NCC) sponsors a Freedom School conference in New York. Freedom Schools are incorporated into the Summer Project, and Spelman College history professor Staughton Lynd is appointed director of the Freedom School program. But after years of struggle on the front lines, activists have no illusions. They know how tough it's going to be. At the Summer Project orientation in mid-June, Lynd warns volunteers assigned to teach in Freedom Schools:

*You'll arrive in Ruleville, in the Delta. It will be 100 degrees, and you'll be sweaty and dirty. You won't be able to bathe often or sleep well or eat good food. The first day of school, there may be four teachers and three students. And the local Negro minister will phone to say you can't use his church basement after all, because his life has been threatened. And the curriculum we've drawn up — Negro history and American government — may be something you know only a little about yourself. Well, you'll knock on doors all day in the hot sun to find students. You'll meet on someone's lawn under a tree. You'll tear up the curriculum and teach what you know.* — Staughton Lynd.
ROOTS & URGENCY: Mississippi Freedom Schools - New Houses of Liberty (1964)

I asked for your churches, and you turned me down,
But I’ll do my work if I have to do it on the ground,
You will not speak for fear of being heard,
So you crawl in your shell and say, “Do not disturb,”
You’ve protected yourself for another day.

But tomorrow surely will come,
And your enemy will still be there with the rising sun,
He’ll be there tomorrow as all tomorrows in the past,
And he’ll follow you into the future if you let him pass.

—from a poem by Joyce Brown, 16
Freedom School pupil in McComb, Mississippi

This poem was written by a 16-year old Negro girl in McComb, Mississippi. She and approximately 1,825 other Negroes—children, teen-agers and adults—are attending the 39 Freedom Schools of the Mississippi Summer Project, sponsored by the council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a statewide organization of local groups aided by field secretaries of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), CORE, NAACP, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

These students—going to “school” in churches, private homes, and backyards—are learning Negro history, civics, American history, arts and crafts, drama, music, English, arithmetic, algebra and chemistry. They are being taught by 250 Negro and white summer volunteers from 40 states in schools which have been set up in every Mississippi city or town of considerable size, as well as in rural counties where Negroes have been shot to death for attempting to register to vote.

Project coordinators state that the Freedom School program is an unqualified success. Rev. Thomas Wahman, a coordinator of religious activities at New York University, and a Freedom School coordinator, terms the project a “completely unexpected phenomenon.” Despite the fear which prevails in most Negro communities throughout the state, “several are demanding that COFO come in and set up schools,” says Wahman.

Ralph Featherstone, a 25-year old Negro speech teacher from Washington, D.C., is director of the McComb Freedom School. Featherstone explains that the opening of the school was delayed for two weeks after three civil rights workers disappeared in Philadelphia, Mississippi and advance scouts prepared the way in the dangerous Southwest area of Mississippi.

But Featherstone found the students ready and waiting. In fact, Featherstone says, “they’d heard about the school and they felt left out because we didn’t arrive on time.”

Now the registration in McComb is up to 105, with a daily attendance of 75. Many of the students are the younger brothers and sisters of the 110 high school students who walked out of school when four of their number were arrested on a sit-in charge at the Greyhound bus station in 1961.

“I think the Freedom School is inspiring the people to lend a hand in the fight,” Featherstone reports. “The older people are looking to the young people, and their courage is rubbing off. The school makes the kids feel they haven’t been forgotten. It makes them feel that at last something is coming down to help them. They feel the school is for them.”

The McComb school started in the backyard of the SNCC Freedom House a week after it was bombed. For one week, students conducted classes in the blistering heat only yards away from the spot where three explosions ripped away one wall. Now they are in a church.
The Hattiesburg Freedom School system (there are five) has the highest registration and the most varied curricula in the state. Some 575 young people and adults attend morning and evening classes in the usual academic subjects, plus music programs, discussion groups, slide exhibitions, and art classes. Three of the five schools are putting out a newspaper, and Mrs. Carolyn Reese, a Negro Detroit school teacher and administrator of the Hattiesburg Freedom Schools, reports that the other two will begin putting theirs out soon.

To understand what the Freedom Schools mean to those attending them, it is first necessary to understand several facts about the regular system of education in Mississippi.

The Mississippi educational system is geared to teach the Mississippi Educational Way of Life: Dissent is heresy. Ignorance is safer than inquiry. Fear pervades the academic atmosphere.

Example: in the spring of 1961, a number of Negro students in Jackson were expelled from (Negro) high school because they stood up in their classrooms and inquired pointedly about the Freedom Rides and their significance.

Example: More than 800 students at Alcorn A & M College (Negro) in Southwest Mississippi were tossed out of school in the spring of 1964 by the college president because they protested social conditions on the campus. The President enlisted the aid of the much-feared Mississippi Highway patrol to load the students into buses so that they could be sent home without even the opportunity to collect their belongings.

Example: also during this spring, an issue of the student newspaper at the University of Southern Mississippi (white) was confiscated by campus police under the direction of the school president W.D. McCain because it carried an article about the school administration’s refusal to grant admission to a Negro applicant. (McCain is a strong supporter of the White Citizen’s Council, and an advisory board member of the Patriotic American Youth, a campus youth organization which shares space with the John Birch Society in a Jackson bookstore. He also received a special commendation from the state legislature for refusing admittance for the fifth time to John Frazier, a student at predominantly Negro Tougaloo College.)

There are many other such examples of suppression of student rights, and even of faculty rights, e.g., the constant persecution of Ole Miss Professor James W. Silver. However, what is even more chilling is the economy of school segregation in Mississippi. Despite the fact that Alabama spends less per pupil, black and white, than any state in the nation, the expenditure in the Mississippi Delta is even less. More important, the disparity between funds spent per white student and funds spent per black student is even greater. In Mississippi, the county appropriates funds for education—according to its own budget—in addition to the funds contributed by the state. The following is the county appropriation, above the state minimum, for instruction per pupil in 1960-61:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>(non-white)%</th>
<th>white</th>
<th>Negro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Pike County (43% non-white)</td>
<td>$30.89</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(McComb)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>South Pike County</td>
<td>$59.55</td>
<td>1.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Magnolia)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forrest County  (28% non-white)</td>
<td>$67.76</td>
<td>34.19</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

ROOTS & URGENCY: Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program

The Proposal (originally submitted by Charles Cobb, Dec 1963)

(Although this original proposal was submitted for the Mississippi Summer Project, it is relative to all Black Belt communities where the conditions are deplorably similar, and the prospectus is pertinent to the Freedom School programs that can operate all year round.)

It is, I think, just about universally recognized that Mississippi education, for black or white, is grossly inadequate in comparison with education around the country. Negro education in Mississippi is the most inadequate and inferior in the state. Mississippi’s impoverished educational system is also burdened with virtually a complete absence of academic freedom, and students are forced to live in an environment that is geared to squash intellectual curiosity, and different thinking. University of Mississippi Professor James Silver, in a recent speech, talked of “social paralysis . . . where nonconformity is forbidden, where the white man is not free, where he does not dare express a deviating opinion without looking over his shoulder.” This “social paralysis” is not limited to the white community, however. There are Negro students who have been thrown out of classes for asking about the freedom rides, or voting. Negro teachers have been fired for saying the wrong thing. The State of Mississippi destroys “smart niggers” and its classrooms remain intellectual waste lands.

In our work, we have several concerns oriented around Mississippi Negro students:

1. The need to get into the schools around the state and organize the students, with the possibility of a statewide coordinated student movement developing.
2. A student force to work with us in our efforts around the state.
3. The responsibility to fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands and questions. More students need to stand up in classrooms around the state, and ask their teachers a real question.

As the summer program for Mississippi now shapes up, it seems as if hundreds of students as well as professional educators from some of the best universities and colleges in the North will be coming to Mississippi to lend themselves to the movement. These are some of the best minds in the country, and their academic value ought to be recognized, and taken advantage of.

I would like to propose summer Freedom Schools during the months of July and August, for tenth and eleventh-grade high school students, in order to:

1. supplement what they aren’t learning in high schools around the state.
2. give them a broad intellectual and academic experience during the summer to bring back to fellow students in classrooms in the state, and
3. form the basis for statewide student action such as school boycotts, based on their increased awareness.

I emphasize tenth and eleventh-grade students, because of the need to be assured of having a working force that remains in the state high schools putting to use what it has learned.

The curriculum of this school would fall into several groupings:

1. supplementary education, such as basic grammar, reading, math, typing, history, etc. Some of the already-developed programmed educational materials might be used experimentally.
2. Cultural programs such as art and music appreciation, dance (both folk and modern), music (both folk and classical), drama, possibly creative writing workshops, for it is important that the art of effective communication through the written word be developed in Mississippi students.
3. Political and social science, relating their studies to their society. This should be a prominent part of the curriculum.
4. Literature
5. Film programs.

Special projects, such as a student newspaper, voicing student opinion, or the laying of plans for a statewide student conference, could play a vital role in the program. Special attention should be given to the development of a close student-teacher relationship. Four or five students to one teacher might be good, as it offers a chance of dialogue. The overall theme of the school would be the student as a force for social change in Mississippi. If we are concerned with breaking the power structure, then we have to be concerned with building up our own institutions to replace the old, unjust, decadent ones which make up the existing power structure. Education in Mississippi is an institution which can be validly replaced, as much of the educational institutions in the state are not recognized around the country anyway.

The Program

1. General Description: About 25 Freedom Schools are planned, of two varieties: day schools in about 20 to 25 towns (commitment still pending) and one or two boarding, or residential, schools on college campuses. Although the local communities can provide schools buildings and staff housing, all equipment, supplies and staff will have to come from the outside. Students should have an opportunity to work with the staff in other areas of the project, so that the additional experience will enrich their contribution to the Freedom School sessions.

2. Curriculum: On the weekend of March 21, and 22, the National Council of Churches sponsored a conference in N.Y.C. to develop a curriculum for the Freedom Schools. This conference brought together a group of well-qualified educators and many of the more perceptive minds presently engaged in studying our society. The conference participants worked from a preliminary outline which laid out the basic skills which the students need to improve, divided into four areas:

I. Leadership development

a. to give students the perspective of being in a long line of protest and pressure for social and economic justice (i.e. to teach Negro history and the history of the movement.)
b. to educate students in the general goals of the movement, give them wider perspectives (enlarged social objectives, nonviolence, etc.)
c. to train students in the specific organizational skills that they need to develop Southern Negro communities:
   1. public speaking
   2. handling of press and publicity
   3. getting other people to work
   4. organizing mass meetings and workshops, getting speakers, etc.
   5. keeping financial records, affidavits, reports, etc.
   6. developing skill in dealing with people in the community
   7. canvassing
   8. duplicating techniques, typing, etc.
d. to plan with each other further action of the student movement.

II. Remedial Academic Program

a. to improve comprehension in reading, fluency and expressiveness in writing.
b. to improve mathematical skill (general arithmetic and basic algebra and geometry.)
c. to fill the gaps in knowledge of basic history and sociology, especially American.
d. to give a general picture of the American economic and political system.
What You Can Do:

This is your FREEDOM SUMMER. It will not work without your help.

COFO is asking you to:
- provide housing for the people who are coming to work here.
- look for buildings which can be used for Freedom Schools and Community Centers.
- get names of students who want to go to Freedom Schools.
- let us know when you have meetings or arrange meetings so we can come answer questions about the FREEDOM SUMMER.

Many people are coming here to work during our FREEDOM SUMMER. They want to learn about Mississippi. They feel that the problems here are the problems of people all over the country. Most of them will be college students, both Negro and white.

COFO is your organization. The things it is trying to do should be done by the state. The people who have been elected to run the state say that they do not have to do things for Negroes.

IT IS THE FAULT OF THE STATE that you cannot:
- find work
- read and write
- send your children to better schools.

If you work with COFO you will be working to get yourself the better conditions you deserve.

What Is COFO?

COFO is an organization made up of all the civil rights and local citizenship groups in Mississippi which decided they must work together to improve conditions in Mississippi.

For more information:

Write to - COFO STATE OFFICE
           1017 Lynch Street
           Jackson, Mississippi

Or call - 352-9605

Other offices near you:

CLARKSDALE - 213 4th Street
phone - 624-2913

COLUMBUS - 1323 6th Ave., North
phone - 528-8916

GREENWOOD - 708 Avenue N
phone - 453-1282

HATTIESBURG - 507 Mobile Street
phone - 584-7670

MERIDIAN - 2505 1/2 5th Street
phone - 485-9286
**Freedom Schools**

Freedom Schools will be during the summer. They are schools where high school students will be able to talk about things they can't talk about in regular school. They will learn about civil rights.

There will be classes for students who:
1. have trouble with their lessons in regular school and want to do better,
2. like to read and want to learn more than they are taught in regular school.

There will be singing, dancing, sports, hikes and many other things for all students.

Some of the Freedom Schools will be for people who spend 6 weeks away from home to live at them.

All of the Freedom Schools will be free.

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**Voter Registration**

Are you a registered voter?

If we were all voting then things would be better in Mississippi.

We would have:
- enough food
- more jobs
- better schools
- better houses
- paved sidewalks

People coming here this summer can work with you on Voter Registration. They can knock on doors, teach the registration forms and drive people to the courthouse. They can help in any way you want them to.

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**Community Centers**

A Community Center is a place where everyone can do many different things. It will be mostly for adults and will offer many chances for them to learn things to help them live better.

Community Centers will have:
- job training programs
- classes for people who cannot read or write
- classes on child care
- health programs
- adult education and Negro history classes
- music, drama, and arts and crafts workshops

If you have small children, they will be taken care of while you enjoy the Community Center.

Everything at the Community Center will be free.
What Can You Give MSU?

You can give your time and your talents to MSU. You will be helping other people in Mississippi and helping yourself. You are a part of Mississippi. MSU and COFO want to make Mississippi a better place for all people. If you are in high school, you can give to others by working with MSU and COFO.

The Mississippi Student Union is for every young person in the state who wants to stop:
- bad schools
- poverty
- police brutality

Everyone in MSU will participate fully in COFO's Mississippi Freedom Summer.

What Can MSU Give You?

MSU and COFO have many programs that will make Mississippi a better place to live. Many of these programs will help Mississippi students become better equipped to fight for freedom.

The WorkStudy Project is open to all students who are seniors in high school now and who want to go to college. Students in this project can get a one-year scholarship to Tougaloo College. They must spend a year working on voter registration and talking about important issues.

Freedom Schools are special schools during the summer where young people can learn many things our high schools do not teach us. There will also be lessons in regular subjects for those who want to learn more than they can in regular school. There will be classes in dancing, singing, sports and many other things. All of the Freedom Schools will be free.

Scholarships are available for students who would like to go to college outside of Mississippi.

Summer Camps will be available for young people who would like to spend a summer in the north.

MSU will offer many other programs. What are you interested in?
I. Hattiesburg

Hattiesburg, Mississippi is a town of around 30,000—which makes it one of the five or six largest cities in Mississippi. It is near the gulf coast cities which are the “moderate” part of the state, but Hattiesburg itself is a deep-dyed conservative town. It is Governor Paul B. (Stand Tall with Paul) Johnson’s hometown. It is the site of Mississippi Southern University, whose law school faculty has engineered the so-far successful defiance of Ross Barnett in the James Meredith case (also acts as consultants for the State of Miss. In other civil rights cases). Mississippi Southern also is the school where Clyde Kennard, a Negro, applied in the late 1950’s. He was subsequently sent to Parchman penitentiary on a flimsy burglary conspiracy charge, contracted cancer in prison and died. Mississippi Southern has since rejected the application of another Negro, John Frazier, five times. Hattiesburg is the seat of Forrest County. Despite its large (by Mississippi standards) university and a fairly firm economic base in commerce and manufacturing, Hattiesburg “feels” like a small, agrarian-oriented community.

Hattiesburg has had a long, tough history of civil rights activity, primarily centered on the denial of the right to vote. The Circuit Clerk of the County (registrar of voters), one Theron Lynd, has made himself the test case for all recalcitrant Mississippi registrars. As early as 1961, the Department of Justice instituted proceedings against him, charging discrimination against Negroes. After much litigation, the federal government won its case and Lynd was ordered to register 43 persons whose applications a U.S. District Judge had processed and found acceptable. Lynd consistently refused to obey these court orders, was convicted of civil contempt and STILL would not register the persons in question. The Department of Justice then instituted criminal contempt proceedings against him which are still pending. At this point, however, the civil rights groups moved independently. On January 22, designated Freedom Day in Hattiesburg, COFO people from all over the state, national civil rights leaders, but mostly the people of Hattiesburg, started a picket line around the Forrest County courthouse which, with some interruptions, is still going on. This picket line represented a breakthrough for civil rights demonstrations in Mississippi, because it was the first to last more than 10 minutes—the police did not arrest everybody. Later, after the State legislature passed a special statute outlawing picketing of public buildings, the picketers were arrested, but that passed, too, and the picketing has resumed.

The COFO project in Hattiesburg is one of the largest and most active in the state, with a high proportion of adult participation and leadership. The town is organized, with 100 block captains, 15 citizenship teachers, and uncountable canvassers, picketers and ministers from outside the state. Two candidates for national office (one for Congress and one for Senate) have come out of the movement in Hattiesburg. The atmosphere is enthusiastic and the people work very hard.

Because the project is so active, there is a lot of demand for the Freedom Schools, and the Hattiesburg people have, therefore planned a series of Freedom Schools. The facilities are presently planned for Sunday School rooms in churches around town and in surrounding counties. Project leaders in Hattiesburg are especially interested in supplementary classes for local adults and staff members in basic literacy and current issues. The project has found housing for 110 summer workers (all of which will not work in the city of Hattiesburg, however). The project has also laid hands on a movie projector and a tape recorder for the summer project. Since the community is able to support the program better than in other areas of the state, the needs are not proportionately as great, even though it is a large Freedom School project. The main needs are for equipment and transportation to outlying schools and schools in other counties. The total budget is for $2,000 to pay for food, transportation, equipment, and inescapable expenses such as phone bills.
II. Meridian

Meridian is a city of 50,000, the second largest in the state. It is the seat of Lauderdale county. It is in the eastern part of the state, near the Alabama border, and has a history of moderation on the racial issue. At the present time, the only Republican in the State Legislature is from Meridian. Registration is as easy as anywhere in the state, and there is an informal (and inactive) “biracial committee”, which, if it qualifies, is the only one in the state.

Voter registration work in Meridian began in the summer of 1963 (for COFO staff people, that is), and by autumn, when Aaron Henry ran in the Freedom Vote for Governor campaign, there was a permanent staff of two people in the city. In January, 1964, Mike and Rita Schwerner, a married couple from New York City, started a community center. In Meridian’s mild political climate, the community center has functioned more smoothly than either of the two community centers which COFO has organized in tougher areas. The center has recreation programs for children and teenagers, a sewing class and citizenship classes. It also has a library of slightly over 10,000 volumes, and ambitious plans for expansion if more staff were available. The COFO staff in Meridian uses Meridian as a base for working six other adjoining counties.

The Freedom School planned for Meridian will have a fairly large facility, in contrast to most places in the state. The Baptist Seminary is a large, 3-story building with classroom capacity for 100 students and sleeping accommodations for staff up to about 20. Besides this, there is a ballpark available for recreation. The school has running water, blackboards and a telephone. The center has a movie projector and screen which it probably would lend. The library lends books to anyone for two-week periods. The question of rent has not been decided for the school. Even if there is no rent, however, we can count on a budget of around $1300, for food for students, utilities, telephone and supplies.

III. Holly Springs

Holly Springs is a small town, the seat of Marshall County. The Methodist Negro College, Rust College, is located in the town. It’s a very attractive campus, and the students and faculty have been very active recently (since it’s a church-operated school, one can expect somewhat more cooperation of Rust than the state schools). Holly Springs is currently acting as the clearinghouse for all our library books and Freedom School materials. There has been no permanently-based COFO project with a full-time staff worker in Holly Springs; all the action has been the work of the local people. The roots in this community are somewhat recent, reflecting the fact that in the Northern, hilly part of the state, intensive civil rights work is just beginning.

In Holly Springs there are two houses available for a total of 75 students (and housing for 15 teachers). The rent will be $400, a major expense. The houses will go if we can’t raise the rent money. Besides rent, the normal expenses and food will make the project cost about $1,000.

IV. Ruleville

Ruleville is a small Delta cotton town in Senator Eastland’s home county (Sunflower County). The sheriff in Ruleville is the brother of the man believed to have killed little Emmett Till in 1954—a man with a great reputation in his own right for brutality toward Negroes. By any standard, Ruleville is a tough Delta Town. Its main attraction for us is that it is the home of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s candidate for Congress in the Second Congressional District. Mrs. Hamer’s own history is typical of much of the harassment of Negroes in the Miss. Delta: When Mrs. Hamer tried to register to vote in 1962, she was fired from her job. She and her family were run off the plantation where they had worked for years. She persisted, and became one of the great leaders of the Mississippi movement, but in the meantime she was arrested, beaten, her home shot into, her husband fired.
MAKING THE SCHOOLS A REALITY: Map of Freedom Summer Projects
LONG-TERM IMPACTS: Overview of Impact

The Freedom Schools are a great success. By the end of the summer, most schools are publishing mimeographed newspapers written and edited by the students themselves. Holly Springs students write and perform a play. Students in Hattiesburg author a new "Declaration of Independence" that begins: "In the course of human events, it has become necessary for the Negro people to break away from the customs which have made it very difficult for the Negro to get his God-given rights," it goes on to enumerate the abuses Blacks have endured and the rights they have been denied, and ends: "We, therefore, the Negroes of Mississippi assembled, appeal to the government of the State, that no man is free until all men are free. We do hereby declare independence from the unjust laws of Mississippi which conflict with the United States Constitution."

A statewide convention of Freedom School students in early August drafts and adopts resolutions on enforcement of the Civil Rights Act, the need for low-cost housing, urban renewal, free medical care, economic sanctions against the racist apartheid regime in South Africa, a Federal jobs program, better employment opportunities, abolition of House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and ending the poll tax (See Platform: Freedom School Convention).

And in the Fall, when regular school resumes, Freedom School students carry the spirit forward. In Philadelphia MS, where Chaney, Schwerner & Goodman had been lynched, Black students show up on the first day of class wearing "One Man, One Vote" buttons. And in Issaquena and Sharkey counties students mount an 4-month school boycott when administrators try to stop them from wearing their SNCC buttons.

White Mississippi does not approve. The state legislature passes a law prohibiting schools not licensed by the county superintendent of education, and forbidding a license to any school that "Counsels and encourages disobedience to the laws of the state." Klan night riders burn and bomb churches and other buildings housing Freedom Schools, students are attacked on the way to class, teachers are harassed and arrested on phony charges, and parents threatened. But their efforts fail — the Freedom Schools flourish.

The Freedom Schools challenged not only Mississippi but the nation. There was, to begin with, the provocative suggestion that an entire school system can be created in any community outside the official order, and critical of its suppositions. The Schools raised serious questions about the role of education in society: Can teachers bypass the artificial sieve of certification and examination, and meet students on the basis of a common attraction to an exciting social goal? Is it possible to declare that the aim of education is to find solutions for poverty, for injustice, for racial and national hatred, and to turn all educational efforts into a national striving for these solutions? — Howard Zinn [9]
LONG-TERM IMPACTS: Brochure recruiting for year-round schools (1964)

[Brochure with a short report on the Freedom Schools and advertising to recruit volunteers for year-round Freedom Schools so they could continue beyond the summer.]

The following is taken from a report by Liz Fusco, Coordinator of CORE Freedom Schools.

At the beginning of the summer, with rare exceptions, the kids who were tentatively exploring us and the Freedom Schools were willing to express themselves on only one thing with honesty and passion. That thing was that as soon as they could gather enough money for a ticket they were going off to Chicago or to California. To leave the state was their ambition, and about it they were certain. They had not thought any further than that; not even in terms of where the money was to come from, and certainly not in terms of what they would find where they would go and what they would do there. Behind their passion for the north was some sense of “go home to my Lord and be free,” some vague hope of a paradise beyond.

But by the end of the summer almost all of these kids were planning to stay in Mississippi.

The transformation of Mississippi is possible because the transformation of people has begun. And if it can happen in Mississippi, it can happen all over the South. The original hope of the Freedom School plan was that there would be about 1,000 students in the state coming to the informal discussion groups and other sessions. It turned out that by the end of the summer the number was closer to 3,000, and the original expectation that we would attract 16-17-18 year-olds had to be revised to include pre-school children and people whose ages ranged all the way up to 70, all anxious to learn about how to be Free.

The subjects ranged from those originally planned—Negro History, Mississippi Now and black-white relations—to typing, foreign languages and other forms of tutoring. These aspects of the program were so successful that the continuation of the Freedom Schools into the regular academic year will involve a full-scale program of tutorials and independent study as well as exploration in greater intensity of the problems raised in the summer sessions and longer range work with art, music and drama.

Freedom Schools

“It is like having the lights turned on after you have lived all your life in a darkened room.” This is the way one person described the effect of CORE’s Freedom Schools in Mississippi and other states of the Deep South. Freedom is more than the right to vote. Freedom means dignity; it means a sense of one’s worth as a person.

This is what our Freedom Schools are working to encourage. We are trying to turn on the lights for people who have lived too long in the darkness of deprivation. But we need your help.

The future of our Freedom Schools, and the work they are doing, depends on your support.

JAMES FARMER
National Director, CORE