

Maudelle Bousfield and Chicago's Segregated School System, 1922-1950

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Maudelle Brown Bousfield was a pioneer Chicago educator from 1922-1950. She was able to succeed at a time when Chicago's education was becoming increasingly segregated. In 1928, Bousfield became Chicago's first Black principal during Chicago's defacto segregated school system. Her achievements paved the way for Black teachers and principals alike. Bousfield's accomplishments were not limited to her teaching and administrative advancements. Bousfield was a club woman who headed Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority; she was a youth advocate; and she was appointed special city and federal commissions.

Bousfield's background provides pertinent information as to her determination and advantages for success. Maudelle Brown Bousfield was born June 1, 1885 to St. Louis educators, Charles Hugh Brown and Arrena Isabella Tanner Brown. Bousfield's family could be considered middle class despite Bousfield believing otherwise. She considered her family to be poor, though not paupers (*Chicago Defender*, 8 May 1943, 15). However, compared to the masses of St. Louis Blacks, who either lived in dilapidated housing or poor city environments, the Brown's suburban housing was deemed middle class. Bousfield was privileged to learn about nature and partake in private piano lessons. As a result of being an accomplished pianist, Bousfield became the first African American to be admitted to the Charles Kunkel Conservatory of Music in St. Louis. She graduated from there in 1903.

Although Bousfield's teachers thought she a musical prodigy and recommended that she study for the concert stage, she excelled in her educational endeavors as well. She graduated from St. Louis' first Black high school, Charles Sumner in 1903, after only three and a half years. After graduating from high school, Bousfield chose college over a musical career. Bousfield became the first African American woman to attend and graduate from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She continued to be the only African American female at the university for about two years. A 1943 *Chicago Defender* article states that because Bousfield was the only Black female at the university, "there was no discrimination against her. She participated in school activities and was generally accepted by the rest of the women students" (*Defender*, 8 May 1943, 15). While at the University of Illinois, Bousfield made money by tutoring in math, her major, and working in the cloakroom or playing the piano at sorority dances. In 1906, after only three years, Bousfield graduated with honors. The University's Phi Beta Kappa chapter was established in 1908, after Bousfield's graduation. But on January 14, 1965, Bousfield became an honorary initiate of the university's Gamma chapter.

Bousfield began her teaching career at East St. Louis' Lincoln High School. She taught there for one year, 1906-1907, before moving to Baltimore to teach math at the Baltimore colored high school. In 1914, she returned home to St. Louis and taught briefly at her old high school, Sumner. Maudelle Brown married Midian O. Bousfield on September 9, 1914, and gave birth to her only child, who took her name, Maudelle Brown. Soon after their marriage, the Bousfields migrated to Chicago. Bousfield took a seven year hiatus from her teaching career to raise her daughter. She furthered her interest in music by attending Chicago's Mendelssohn Conservatory of Music, where she graduated in 1920 (Cook 1996, 41).

Middle class and elite Blacks tended to marry among themselves. The Bousfields were no different. Midian Bousfield was born in 1885 in Tipton, Missouri to Willard Haymen, a barber, and Cornelia Catherine Bousfield. Dr. Midian Bousfield graduated from Kansas State University in 1907 and received his M. D. degree from Northwestern School of Medicine in 1909. After setting up medical practices in Kansas and Brazil, Dr. Bousfield and his wife settled in Chicago. Dr. Bousfield went on to hold a rather esteemed position in the Black community due to his involvement in several Black social and health organizations. From 1921, he was the co-founder, medical director, and president of Liberty Life Insurance Company. After a 1929 merger of his company and another, they were renamed Supreme Liberty and Life. Dr. Bousfield was director of the Negro Health Division of the Rosenwald Fund from 1933-1942. Starting in 1934, Dr. Bousfield served a one year term as president of the National Medical Association, an organization of Black physicians. From 1935-1939, he served as the Chicago Urban League president and as a member of the executive committee of the National Urban League. During World War II, Dr. Bousfield was the commanding officer of an all Black hospital he organized at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. He retired in 1945 after becoming the first African

American colonel in the Army Medical Corps. Dr. Bousfield died of a heart attack on February 16, 1948 (Salzman, Smith, and West 1945, 410).

During Maudelle Bousfield's teaching hiatus, she tutored students having difficulty in school. In 1921, Bousfield decided to go back to teach high school. She took a teaching examination, as was required along with two years teaching experience in Chicago's elementary schools or at an outside high school, and a college degree. After passing the examination, Bousfield was placed at Wendell Phillips High School in January 1922 to teach math. Permanent teaching jobs did not come easy for Black teachers. Many had to remain on substitute lists for a number of years before being placed permanently. African Americans remained on the list longer than whites primarily because the substitute bureau purposely identified Black teachers so that they could be placed at majority Black schools (Herrick 1931, 34-35).

In 1916, the *Defender's* editorials criticized the practice of placing "race" teachers at predominately Black schools. While forced segregation was the norm in the South, the *Defender* recognized that in the North, teachers had the opportunity (though limited) to teach at predominately white schools. Furthermore, more opportunities were available to Black teachers in a non-segregated school system as opposed to a segregated one. The editorial also suggested that racial contact in mixed schools aided in breaking down prejudice.

It is ironic that what was argued in 1916 is still being debated today. In 1984, Michael W. Homel in *Down From Equality: Black Chicagoans and the Public School 1920-45* chronicles the move of Chicago public schools from "integrated" schools to de jure segregation 1863-1865 then from desegregated to de facto segregation from 1920. The segregated status of Chicago's schools took its toll on potential African American teachers and students. Teachers had to battle white principals and a racist school board in order to be hired permanently. The placement of teachers was dependent on a particular principal's acceptance of them. Principals often rejected Black teachers due to their belief that Blacks were inferior; principals feared the response of communities where the school was located; and the school's prestige may have been lowered due to the common practice of assigning Black teachers to low status schools. Some Black teachers resorted to using their political connections to speed up their assignments to permanent positions (Gosnell 1935, 32-33).

Bousfield's quick placement was rare for African American teachers. It did not take long for Bousfield to be recognized by Wendell Phillips' administrative staff. Principal Albert Evans offered her the position of dean of girls. Bousfield agreed to take the position, however, the board of education insisted that Bousfield take an examination before she could become dean. In an interview with Harold F. Gosnell, Bousfield stated, "At that time the dean was selected by the principal, or rather the candidates for the position were selected, for we all had to take an examination, the only one in fact that has been given for this position" (Gosnell 1935, 295).

The board required teachers have a least five years teaching experience before they could take the examination. Bousfield only had four years experience. Ironically, the principal's examination only required four years. Bousfield ingeniously asked the board if she would be eligible for any position if she took and passed the principal examination. The board replied yes, but as Bousfield recalled, "They laughed in my face when I told them I'd take that exam" (1969). The board obviously believed that they had cleverly placed an obstacle in Bousfield's path. The board reasoned that since only eight African Americans had taken the exam by 1927, but none made competitive scores, Bousfield would also be unsuccessful. Bousfield scored among the top twenty out of the more than 600 individuals who took the exam. The board's discrimination tactic eventually was a boost to Bousfield's career. Bousfield became Chicago first African American dean in 1926, and remained so until 1927.

On December 20, 1927, Bousfield became the first Black principal during Chicago's defacto segregation. Her appointment to Keith Elementary School made national headlines, particularly in the Black press. Despite the celebration, rumors persisted. Many believed that Bousfield used the political connections of her husband to get appointed. Cary B. Lewis of the *Pittsburgh Courier* claimed, "It is no secret that the appointment of Mrs. Bousfield to the principalship of the Keith School had the o.k. of Mr. DePriest [Oscar DePriest, Chicago's first Black city alderman]" (Lewis 1928).

Bousfield vehemently denied allegations of politics in her appointment. She proclaimed that "If there has been

any politics in the school, I haven't come into contact with it" (Gosnell 1935, 295). Bousfield's comments indicated both her confidence in her qualification and her ability to be a formidable opponent to any school board antics. Bousfield and her husband were known locally and nationally and knew that they could muster support for protest. She appeared to be unwilling to accommodate blatant discrimination, while at the same time recognizing her importance.

Mary J. Herrick, who studied Negro employees of the Chicago school board, came to Bousfield's defense (Herrick 1931). Not only did she recognize Bousfield's qualifications, but she acknowledged that Bousfield had been assigned a school that was "the smallest, oldest, and most poorly equipped in the city." Keith Elementary was indeed an inferior school. The building had been built since 1883 and was one of the two oldest schools built that contained a sizable Black student population by 1920. Keith had no gymnasium. It also had one of the largest Black student populations at a time when Chicago's schools were becoming more and more segregated (Chicago Commission on Race Relations 1922, 242-243; Homel 1984, 6).

Bousfield stated that Keith was the kind of school that new principals were assigned. An estimated 400-500 students attended what Bousfield describes as a horrible school in a horrible location. "It was run down like I don't know what." The building was ancient, Bousfield said, "with rickety stairs. The toilets were in the basement, and somebody was needed down there to prevent tramps from coming into the school and getting girls when they went to the toilets" (1969). Keith was located in a low income neighborhood in the Black Belt (where most of Chicago's Black population was crammed). Bousfield's 1931 masters thesis from the University of Chicago entitled, "A Study of the Intelligence and School Achievement of Negro Children," which interviewed Keith students from fifth to eighth grade, revealed the high level of poverty among the families of the pupils she studied. Bousfield's appointment to Keith, while celebrated, was the very least the school board would assign her.

Bousfield was soon promoted to principal of Stephan A. Douglas Elementary School in 1931. Support from the Colored Women's Republican Clubs of Illinois, Inc., headed by Irene McCoy Gaines helped to secure Bousfield's promotion. In a letter to Gaines dated September 24, 1931, Bousfield wrote to the ladies on the Board of Directors of the Second Ward Republican expressing her appreciation of their interest in her coming to the Douglas school. On October 14 Gaines replied, the members of the Colored Women's Republican Clubs of Illinois, Inc. were happy to participate in the reception given in her honor. This correspondence revealed Bousfield's political connections.

Commenting on her promotion, Bousfield stated, "Most persons think that the Douglas assignment was a move up but it really wasn't for there was no increase in salary at all, only more work" (Gosnell 1935, 295). Douglas was viewed as a promotion primarily because it had 2000 pupils, more than four times the size of Keith. Moreover, Douglas was located in a better neighborhood of the Black Belt than Keith. While at Douglas, Bousfield faced white teacher opposition, extreme overcrowding, and depression era cutbacks which left her like other principals temporarily demoted to teacher in 1934. Bousfield had one insubordinate teacher transferred from Douglas. Several others transferred out as well, ending teacher resistance (Bousfield 1969).

The overcrowding situation at Douglas was handled with "double shift" school assignments. During Bousfield's entire tenure at Douglas, she had to operate with double shift assignments. Double shift meant that students were in school either three or four hours daily, as opposed to five hours. So many students were in school for less time than was necessary to compete with other children in the city. Overcrowding had plagued white schools as well. However, their overcrowding was rectified by the construction of more schools (Homel 1984, 76-80).

Bousfield endured at Douglas and was promoted to principal of Phillips High School in September 1939. She became the first African American principal at a Chicago high school and the first African American to head a multi-racial high school, although Phillips was overwhelmingly Black. While at Phillips, Bousfield worked to upgrade the reputation of that school. Bousfield recalled, "Phillips had a low-down name when I took it" (1969). Phillips was located in an area with a lot of negative activities. There was prostitution, gambling, illegal drug dealing, and a liquor store selling alcohol to under-aged Phillips' students. Bousfield had the liquor store owner arrested and took him to court to have the store shut down. Five judges refused to take the case against Mike Feldman. One judge claimed, "I've been on the bench too long to take such a chance. There has been too much pressure brought to bear already. I don't want to be put on the spot. Let somebody else handle it!" Eventually Mike Feldman was fined and the liquor store was put

out of business (*Defender*, 13 April 1940, 2; 4 May 1940, 1; 25 May 1940, 1-2, courtesy of Michael W. Homel). Bousfield's victory helped to booster Phillips' reputation.

Bousfield ended her career in 1950 due to forced retirement. She had spent twenty-eight years in the Chicago school system and had been a trailblazer. One of the themes of her career was that she was a fighter be it for herself or her students. Bousfield threatened to fight the school board if she had not been promoted to a principal position. Fortunately, there was no need for a fight. She got the opportunity to head Keith, although she was probably passed over for schools with larger white populations. After all, the school board did not even think Bousfield possessed the intelligence to pass the principal examination. Why would they then have give Bousfield an opportunity to head a "reputable" school in a "reputable" area?

Bousfield got the white Douglas teachers in order. She demanded the respect of her subordinates and made sure that she received it. As she gained the respect of her subordinates, her superiors recognized and promoted her. Bousfield tried her best to fight for her students. The liquor store shut down was a situation in which Bousfield passionately fought against outsiders for her students. She was both persistent and determined to close the store down. When judge after judge refused to take the case, she kept pushing until a decision was rendered. Bousfield was by no means afraid to use her political connections to benefit her and her students. Thus, Bousfield did not appear to be an accommodationist. She made the best of any situation and fought when the need arose.

Bousfield's publications expressed her deep concerns for the mis-education of Black people and the inappropriate use of intelligence tests. In her article, "The Intelligence and School Achievement of Negro Children," which appeared in the first *Journal of Negro Education* in 1932, Bousfield concluded that the test available in the 1920s and 1930s were insufficient measures of intelligence. Her evidence revealed that three tests she gave to Keith Elementary students yielded vastly different results. Bousfield had hoped that the results of her study would be a valuable aid for northern teachers and school officials supervising Black students to "interpret pupil performance intelligently" (Bousfield 1932, 395).

Bousfield's second article, "Redirection of the Education of Negroes in Terms of Social Needs," also appearing in the *Journal of Negro Education* in 1936, argued that African Americans were not being served either in kind or degree by the type of education they received at any level.

Bousfield suggested several ideas to combat the miseducation of Black people. She added that health and Black history be added to the curriculum. She recommended adult classes, special education for exceptional children, and physical and vocational education. Above all, she called for well-trained teachers (Bousfield 1936, 412-419).

Commitment and dedication to organizational activities is one of the things Bousfield is remembered for. Bousfield was initiated into Alpha Kappa Alpha, the nation's first Black sorority on a college campus in 1921. By 1927, she move through the ranks of the sorority to become national vice president. From 1929-1931, Bousfield was the sorority's national president. During her administration, she led a drive to recruit inactive members, initiated a project to print a sorority handbook, and developed a bond purchasing program for the sorority. Bousfield also headed a committee from her chapter that worked towards purchasing and maintaining a sorority house on the campus of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (Parker 1990, 52-64). Bousfield and her husband frequently went to Champaign for football games. Her trips to Champaign enabled her to keep an eye on the sorority house and serve as an advisor to the women there (Evans 1997).

Serving in numerous organizations, Bousfield kept busy throughout her life. Her organizational affiliations were mostly based on her educational and musical interests. She belonged to the National Educational Association, National Association of Deans of Women, Chicago Teacher's Federation, Central Association of Science and Mathematics Teachers, Chicago's Principal's Club, National Negro Music Association, and the National Negro Business League. She also served as vice president of the Board of Trustees of Provident Hospital. Bousfield chaired the Board of Saint Edmund's Episcopal Parochial School which she helped organize. During World War II, she was the only African American appointed to the Women's Advisory Committee on the War Manpower Commission as the representative of the 6th region. Bousfield was also appointed to Mayor Richard M. Daley's Commission on Juvenile Delinquency.

Maudelle Evans recalled that her mother contributed to every committee that she was a part of (1997). Despite

being the only Black person on War Manpower Commission, Evans said her mother spoke up on that committee. Evans called her mother a genius and said that she took every task seriously.

Maudelle Bousfield opened so many doors for African American women and African Americans in general. She was the first Black to attend the Charles Kunkel Conservatory of Music in St. Louis, the first Black woman to attend and graduate from the University of Illinois, the first Black dean in Chicago, the first Black principal in Chicago, and the first Black principal of an integrated high school. Bousfield's contributions need to be further studied and analyzed. Her role in Chicago's educational history is too important to continue to go unrecognized.

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