

ARTICLE

Waco's First Black School Board Trustees: Navigating Institutional White Supremacy in 1970s Texas

ArCasia D. James-Gallaway* 

Department of Teaching, Learning & Culture, Texas A&M University

*Corresponding author. Email: ajamesgallaway@tamu.edu

Abstract

Through the lens of the school board, this essay examines school governance dynamics as a southern, historically white public school district struggled to implement school desegregation. In 1976, the city of Waco simultaneously elected its school district's first trustees of Color, Dr. Emma Louise Harrison and Rev. Robert Lewis Gilbert. Harrison and Gilbert used distinctly different political strategies to navigate the racially hostile school board environment, but ultimately, as this article demonstrates, neither strategy enabled them to overcome white supremacy in Waco. This seemingly obvious point reveals a notable yet underemphasized drawback of school desegregation: that it failed to upend structural racial injustice. The case of Harrison and Gilbert illustrates that this limitation was reflected in the token number of Black trustees on the boards of desegregated schools and the concerted white resistance they met in working to spur meaningful racial change.

Keywords: school desegregation; Texas; African Americans; Black elected officials; school board

In 1976, the city of Waco, Texas, simultaneously elected its first two Black school board members, Dr. Emma Louise Harrison and Rev. Robert Lewis Gilbert. Their election trailed Waco Independent School District's (WISD's) 1973 implementation of its most thorough school desegregation plan to date. This plan incited significant turmoil in this central Texas city of just under one hundred thousand, one marred by a prominent legacy of white racial terrorism.¹ While resistance to affirmative action, school violence, and student discipline concerns marked ongoing attempts to integrate Black students into the district's historically white schools, WISD's first trustees of Color joined a group that held notable sway over a school district of nearly sixteen thousand students.²

¹For more on Waco's violent racial history, see Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006); and William Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836-1916* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

²To challenge existing power dynamics that promote white supremacy and antiBlackness, I capitalize the racial identifier *Black* and use the lowercase for the racial identifier *white*. Furthermore, I capitalize the word

In a southern, historically white public school district, how did Black school board trustees' political strategies and personal histories shape their strategic engagement with institutional white supremacy? This essay explores this question, examining school governance dynamics in Waco, Texas, during the late 1970s.

This article affords unique perspective into a small southern city's racial climate as its school district struggled to desegregate. Highlighting Dr. Harrison's and Rev. Gilbert's personal histories and broader civic affairs to animate their school board membership, this project relies primarily on school board minutes, newspaper articles, and extant oral history interviews with Harrison and Gilbert, whom the community recognized as influential figures. Eager to preserve Harrison's and Gilbert's legacy, Baylor University's Institute for Oral History interviewed each individual multiple times between 1970 and the 1990s. Conceptually, this analysis is supported by sociological and political science scholarship on Black elected officials, namely, Black school board members. The primary sources and other Texas-focused contextual materials that underpin this article use the terms school board *trustees* and school board *members* interchangeably. Following this practice, this article refers to individuals like Harrison and Gilbert as both members and trustees, since their respective neighborhood districts elected them to serve on the school board and represent their interests.³

Given my focus on the persistence of institutional white supremacy throughout school desegregation, I examine how racial identity and personal history shaped the political strategies of Waco's first Black school board trustees. This angle suggests that while Harrison and Gilbert's race explains some aspects of their political maneuvers, their Blackness alone fails to clarify their many divergences. Therefore, I illustrate that Blackness is heterogeneous and often complicated by a range of factors that distinguish Black political expression in predominantly white spaces where Black leadership is precarious. This point exemplifies that "representative democracy. . . operates broadly from the premise that in the creation and support for different kinds of policies, identity matters." These insights are important because "limited literature focuses on the link between identity and education policymaking."⁴

Harrison and Gilbert used different strategies in their work with the Waco school board—Harrison used a measured approach, whereas Gilbert was much more assertive. Interviews conducted with experienced Black board members during this period reveal a spectrum of strategies they believed effective in their work with white school board members. These approaches ranged from the measured to the more assertive. For example, in recommending a measured, less confrontational presence on the board of a desegregated district, experienced Black board members suggested not using "racially divisive hate tactics" when running for election and not calling "fellow board members racists; let their votes and statements speak for them." Some recommended, "You should not exhibit frustration, be boisterous, or demanding." Others

Color when referencing people of Color (i.e., people who are not racialized as white) to honor their collective racial identity.

³"Schoolboard Members Sworn In," *Waco Citizen*, July 18, 1976, p. 1.

⁴Richard Blissett and Thomas Alsbury, "Disentangling the Personal Agenda: Identity and School Board Members' Perceptions of Problems and Solutions," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 17, no. 4 (2018), 458.



Figure 1. Emma Louise Harrison. Photo signed by Betty Denton, Feb. 1977. Courtesy of The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

recommended seeking consensus: “You should not bring things up for a board vote unless they will pass.” On the other hand, some recommended a more assertive stance, emphasizing the importance of standing up for what one believes: “You should not go along with things because someone else whom you respect says it’s all right.” Finally, experienced board members also suggested avoiding “the semblance of representing only black people”; it was important to remember one’s identity and political priorities: “Don’t be super black, yet keep your blackness in mind.”⁵

⁵James Doughty, “Black School Board Members and Desegregation,” *Theory into Practice* 17, no. 1 (Feb. 1978), 38.

My broader claim is that the case of Waco's first two Black school board members illustrates a significant drawback of school desegregation: that it failed to upend racial injustice in public school governance in historically white districts. Many advocates of racial justice in the second half of the twentieth century focused on issues related to student enrollment, the school curriculum, school funding, and the like. Far less attention, however, has been paid to the struggle for racially egalitarian governance. This article demonstrates that even amid a racial desegregation effort, Black leaders on the board faced significant hurdles that they navigated in different ways. Despite the notable obstacles Harrison and Gilbert faced as "a small minority of the school board, the mere presence of black school board members," according to one scholar, "may [have] sensitiz[e]d white policymakers to issues relating to equal educational opportunities."⁶ While it may be tempting to wholly discount their efforts as trustees given that both figures were unable to defeat white supremacy or curb white resistance, Gilbert's and Harrison's school board membership perhaps had long term benefits for subsequent generations of WISD students.

Throughout their terms on school boards during the desegregation era, Black trustees contended with institutional white supremacy. History of education scholarship has overlooked this seemingly obvious point because it has granted little sustained focus on Black school board members. This inattention has limited our understanding of the battles waged to advance racial equity and the impediments erected to thwart it during virtually any period. Addressing this gap, I proceed by characterizing the literature relevant to this topic.

Racial Identity, School Board Politics, and Waco School Desegregation

Racial identity is one pertinent social identity that certainly informs which strategies one might use to navigate political contexts such as school boards, yet informs them in different ways. Such is the case in part because "people's identities can have important influences on what they perceive to be important problems or viable solutions."⁷ In addition to having a more robust history of political activity beyond the school board compared with their white counterparts, Black men and women have historically had different motivations than whites for pursuing a seat on the school board, often wanting to "improve the condition for [their] race."⁸ Furthermore, "Black males and females both rated the desire to represent a specific group, and the disapproval of both the way their schools were run and their children educated, as important motivations for seeking office."⁹ The study that uncovered these findings also argued that "the majority of blacks regardless of sex report involvement in political party work,

⁶Christopher Dennis, "The Election and Impact of Black School Board Members: The Effect of Community Racial and Political Attitudes," *State and Local Government Review* 22, no. 1 (Winter 1990), 25.

⁷Blissett and Alsbury, "Disentangling the Personal Agenda," 475.

⁸James Ginn et al., "National Implications: Historical View of Black School Board Members of the State of Texas until 1985," *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal* 23, no. 4 (2006), 5; see also Debra Stewart et al., "The Relationship of Sex and Race to Recruitment and Policy Orientations: A National Study of School Board Members," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 9, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1981/82), 1-31.

⁹Stewart et al., "The Relationship of Sex and Race to Recruitment and Policy Orientations," 22.

whereas the majority of whites regardless of sex do not.”¹⁰ These differences are evident in discussions about racial integration, identity performance, and the sense of urgency Black school board members felt they could exhibit regarding certain educational issues.¹¹

Black school board members’ social class identity has historically set them apart from their peers, however. One study showed that, notwithstanding their racial identity, virtually all school board members, part of the political elite, occupied a higher socioeconomic status and had a higher level of formal education compared with the local population.¹² These characteristics help explain many Black school board trustees’ employment in professional positions. In many cases, racial identity has tempered this trend because, owing largely to structural racism, Black board members earned less than their white counterparts in comparable professional roles.¹³

The political context in which Black school board members have worked has mediated their ability to influence educational issues. They occupy a unique position as educational administrators working outside school buildings, and as political figures, their influence has historically been subject to heightened scrutiny and criticism. The process by which constituencies elected Black school board members also informed their capacity to influence education, for at-large elections were shown to disadvantage Black candidates whereas voting across “smaller and more homogeneous [areas] allow[ed] blacks to translate more concentrated resources into political power.”¹⁴ With “blacks . . . less well represented on Southern school boards,” these elected bodies often lacked racial diversity.¹⁵

School board membership has remained fraught for African Americans, especially during times of significant flux like school desegregation. Examining this particular case illuminates a larger trend whereby white supremacy seeks to thwart, often successfully, racial justice efforts. The increase in African Americans on school boards in the 1970s reflected both statewide and national trends. This lag behind the desegregation of students exposed the incremental pace at which institutional power was poised to shift. In Texas, larger metropolitan cities such as Houston were pioneering, electing in 1958 local Black woman activist Hattie Mae White, the second African American elected to public office since Reconstruction.¹⁶ Many other cities waited

¹⁰Stewart et al., “The Relationship of Sex and Race to Recruitment and Policy Orientations,” 10.

¹¹Doughty, “Black School Board Members and Desegregation,” 32-38; and Clifford Wirth, “Attitudes toward Integration among Black and White School Board Members: Public Comparisons and Etiological Factors,” *Political Behavior* 3 no. 3 (Sept. 1981), 201-9.

¹²Stewart et al., “The Relationship of Sex and Race to Recruitment and Policy Orientations,” 7.

¹³Clifford Wirth, “Social Bias in Political Recruitment: Ascribed and Achieved Status of Black and White School Board Members,” *Social Science Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (March 1979), 760-61; Johnnie Daniel, “A Comparative Analysis of White versus Black School Board Members,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1983), 142-43.

¹⁴Ted Robinson, Robert England, and Kenneth Meier, “Black Resources and Black School Board Representation: Does Political Structure Matter?,” *Social Science Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (Dec. 1985), 977.

¹⁵Joseph Stewart Jr., Robert E. England, and Kenneth J. Meier, “Black Representation in Urban School Districts: From School Board to Office to Classroom,” *Western Political Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (June 1989), 300.

¹⁶William Henry Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 106-12.

until the 1970s to elect their first Black, often male, school board members, evident in the 1978 establishment of the Texas Caucus of Black School Board Members. For example, Reby Cary was elected in 1974 in Fort Worth, the same year Boston elected its first Black board member, John D. O'Bryant; similarly, Clarence Bailey was elected in 1977 in Longview. Like Black contemporaries of theirs such as Harrison and Gilbert, these individuals had been active in local civic affairs and surmounted numerous other racial barriers. The simultaneous election of Waco's first two Black school board members distinguished this city from most others.

AntiBlack racism undergirded the history of race and education in Waco schools. Into the early 1970s, WISD was still segregating Black students from non-Black students. As was the case nationally, Black Waco schools had fewer resources than white schools. Black segregated schools in Waco, as in other places, nurtured and prepared Black students to highly achieve, despite unequal conditions.¹⁷ In 1962, a group of Black students tested the district's ongoing practice of school segregation by attempting to enroll in white schools; denied entry, the students sued WISD. Pending a federal hearing, this lawsuit, supported by the NAACP, prompted WISD in 1963 to craft a stair-step desegregation plan that sprinkled a few Black students into white schools. The district persisted in such evasion tactics until the 1970s.¹⁸ Legally, white status afforded students of Mexican descent, in contrast to their Black counterparts, continued access to white Waco schools.

Historically, in Waco schools the race of employees matched that of their student population, which changed with school desegregation.¹⁹ During the winter break of the 1970-1971 school year, the federal government ordered WISD to desegregate its teaching force as it had in the nearby city of Austin.²⁰ This mandate sought to establish "20 percent black teachers and 80 percent white teachers" in each school.²¹ Doing so would require significant shuffling because 60 percent of the district's 198 Black teachers were concentrated in five of WISD's thirty-seven schools.²² Unable to further prolong this racial disparity, in January 1971, WISD reassigned more than a hundred teachers and teacher-aides and vowed to relocate seventy more in the fall.²³

Student trends followed a similar pattern, shifting with school desegregation mandates. At the close of the 1970-1971 school year, WISD accepted nearly 1,300 new

¹⁷E. Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and ArCasia D. James-Gallaway, "What Got Them Through: Community Cultural Wealth, Black Students, and Texas School Desegregation," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 25, no. 2 (2022), 173-91.

¹⁸For overviews of this process, see Wei-ling Gong, "A History of Integration of the Waco Public Schools, 1954 to the Present" (master's thesis, Baylor University, 1987); and ArCasia D. James-Gallaway, "More Than Race: Differentiating Black Students' Everyday Experiences in Texas School Desegregation, 1968-1978" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2020), 1-68, 110-62.

¹⁹Gong, "A History of Integration of the Waco Public Schools," 33-67; and James-Gallaway, "More Than Race," 16-68, 110-62.

²⁰Gong, "A History of Integration of the Waco Public Schools," 33-67; and James-Gallaway, "More Than Race," 1-68, 110-62; Anna Victoria Wilson and William E. Segall, *Oh, Do I Remember! Experiences of Teachers during the Desegregation of Austin's Schools, 1964-1971* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

²¹Gong, "A History of Integration of the Waco Public Schools," 33.

²²Gong, "A History of Integration of the Waco Public Schools," 34-35.

²³Gong, "A History of Integration of the Waco Public Schools," 37.

students from an adjacent district, La Vega. La Vega Independent School District had the year before abruptly closed its only Black high school, G. W. Carver. The next year, WISD followed suit, shuttering its only Black high school, A. J. Moore.²⁴ These closures followed national patterns. By 1975, Waco schools were more racially mixed than ever before, though school population figures over a three-year stretch also indicate trends of declining enrollment and white flight following school desegregation. From 1972 to 1975, the percentage of white students in Waco schools fell from 58 percent to 54 percent. In contrast, the percentage of Mexican American students rose from 13 percent to 15 percent, and the percentage of Black students rose from 28 to 32 percent.²⁵ Harrison's and Gilbert's educational and professional lives were fashioned before and within this context.

Emma Louise Harrison and Robert Lewis Gilbert

Education and advocacy punctuated Harrison's and Gilbert's lives.

Harrison was born Emma McDonald on April 13, 1908, in Mexia, Texas—a small, rural city forty miles east of Waco, where her family owned the land on which they lived.²⁶ One of thirteen children, Harrison graduated valedictorian in 1924 from Mexia's Dunbar High School, subsequently enrolling at Waco's Paul Quinn College. At her family's urging, Harrison discontinued her education to redirect their limited resources to her brother's medical school education; after one year, she paused her educational pursuit and obtained her teaching credential, returning to her alma mater to teach.²⁷

Owing to the factors of her profession as an educator and her need to maintain employment as her family's breadwinner, Harrison regularly used the summer months to advance her academic and professional goals. After she returned to college to finish her baccalaureate, Harrison taught and coached girls' basketball at East Waco Colored School, where she worked for over a decade. Resuming her studies at Paul Quinn, she transferred to Tillotson College in Austin, and by 1936, had graduated magna cum laude.²⁸ Limited options for Black Texans to pursue graduate study likely motivated Harrison's successful application for a "tuition subsid[y] for

²⁴Gong, "A History of Integration of the Waco Public Schools," 10-32; and James-Galloway, "More Than Race," 16-68, 110-62.

²⁵Gong, "A History of Integration of the Waco Public Schools," 62; for discussion of enrollment trends during desegregation and white flight, see also Clarence H. Thornton and William T. Trent, "School Desegregation and Suspension in East Baton Rouge Parish: A Preliminary Report," *Journal of Negro Education* 57, no. 4 (Autumn 1988), 484, and Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁶US Census Bureau, "1910, Mexia, Limestone County, Texas," *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910—Population*, p. 14A, Enumeration District 42. Access granted by Ancestry.com on Jan. 13, 2021.

²⁷Emma Harrison, interview by LaWanda Ball, Oct. 22, 1975, transcript, Baylor University Oral History of the Woman in Waco Project, Junior League of Waco and Baylor University Program for Oral History, 1977, Waco, Texas (hereafter BUIOH), <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/oral-memoirs-of-emma-louise-mcdonald-harrison-series-1-transcript/1610288>, pp. 2, 6-7; "Former Mexia Resident Has Made Great Strides in Education Field," *Mexia Daily News* (Mexia, Texas), June 21, 1970.

²⁸Emma Harrison, interview by Mark England and Dawn Whitman McMinn, Feb. 24, 1993 and Mar. 21, 1994, transcript and audio, Women in Waco, BUIOH, <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/oral-memoirs-of-emma-louise-mcdonald-harrison-series-2-transcript/1610319>.

out-of-state graduate and professional study.”²⁹ Taking leave, she relocated to study at the University of Southern California, concurrently teaching in local schools while earning her master of science in education in 1942.³⁰

From the 1940s onward, Harrison’s local civic participation profile started to blossom while she continued to pursue higher education and assumed greater professional opportunities. Returning to Waco from California, Harrison worked for the next thirteen years as WISD’s health and physical education supervisor.³¹ In 1946, she joined the Council of Negro Women.³² In 1950, she began doctoral coursework in education at the University of Texas, Austin.³³ Afterward, Harrison accepted Paul Quinn’s invitation to organize its Health and Physical Education Department. By summer 1952, Harrison’s expanding network had afforded her a visit to schools across northern Europe, followed by the city of Waco inviting her to greet President Harry Truman during his 1952 visit.³⁴ From the mid-1950s into the early 1970s, Harrison instructed and worked as a professor at Paul Quinn and, as of 1953, the newly consolidated Huston-Tillotson College. During one spell at Huston-Tillotson, she took leave to attend Waco’s newly desegregated Baylor University, undertaking doctoral coursework and teaching psychology classes. It remains unknown exactly when or from where Harrison obtained her doctorate, raising the question whether it was bestowed as an honorary degree. Nevertheless, after 1970, local newspapers consistently refer to her as Dr. Harrison, a title she used for the remainder of her life.

Education and other civic affairs remained a staple across Harrison’s life, even into retirement once Waco elected her school board trustee. Given her pronounced civic investment, consistent with Black school board members’ wider political participation, Harrison served on more than forty Black and interracial boards, ranging in focus from race to gender to health to religion.³⁵

Harrison’s gradual climb contrasted with Gilbert’s trailblazing as a young Wacoan. Robert Gilbert was born more than three decades after Harrison on December 27, 1941, “in a poor section of South Waco” to, according to him, a “patriarchal home” that “was an authoritarian-, dictatorship-type.”³⁶ His working-class upbringing included four siblings. He graduated in 1960 third in his class from Waco’s

²⁹Amilcar Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy: African Americans and the Struggle for Access and Equity in Higher Education in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 38.

³⁰Emma Louise Harrison, “Safety Education in the Elementary School” (master’s thesis, University of Southern California, 1942).

³¹“Two Associations Doing Great Work for Poor Children,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, July 23, 1933, p. 18; “Praises Emma Harrison,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, May 29, 1938, p. 11.

³²“Council of Negro Women Is Organized for Waco,” *Waco News-Tribune*, Sept. 26, 1946, p. 9.

³³Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy*, 111.

³⁴Emma Harrison, *SS Homeland* passenger manifest, Aug. 29, 1952. Harrison’s name is stamped on list 36, line 16 in “List of In-Bound Passengers”; Emma Harrison interview, 1975, pp. 16-18.

³⁵Harrison interview, 1975, p. 20; “Former Mexia Resident Has Made Great Strides in Education Field.”

³⁶Randy Fiedler, “50 Years After Graduation,” *Baylor Magazine*, Winter 2017, n.p., <https://www.baylor.edu/alumni/magazine/1502/index.php?id=937836>; and Robert L. Gilbert, Cullen N. Harris, and Ulysses Cosby, interview by Rufus B. Spain, Nov. 1, 1972, transcript, Waco and McLennan County Project, BUIOH, Waco, Texas, <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/oral-memoirs-of-robert-lewis-gilbert-cullen-n.-harris-jr.-and-ulysses-cosby-transcript/1599107?item=1599113>, p. 8.

A. J. Moore High School, then enrolled at Paul Quinn. Gilbert's ongoing battle with debilitating arthritis, however, forced him to postpone his schooling.³⁷ Gilbert transferred in 1965 to Baylor University.³⁸ Like other Black students at formerly all-white institutions, he endured racial disdain, isolation, and loneliness.³⁹ Feeling underprepared for the academic rigor of white institutions, he faulted his segregated Black schools.⁴⁰ Although Gilbert's account contradicts others that laud the educational quality of Black segregated schools, it helps explain his support for school integration.⁴¹ Graduating in 1967 with his bachelor's degree in history, Gilbert and his classmate Barbara Walker became Baylor's first Black graduates.⁴² While at Baylor, he student-taught at Tennyson Junior High School, a segregated white school. Impressing school administrators, Gilbert was offered a position there after graduation, making him the district's first Black teacher to instruct at an all-white school.⁴³

The 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "creat[ed] a sense of anger" in Gilbert, making him "ready to dedicate [his] life to the cause" to help "the down and out and the disadvantaged." His "calling" to become a minister, which he initially resisted, would require "speak[ing] for those who could not necessarily speak for themselves."⁴⁴ Gilbert's ministry characterized quintessential features of social movements in which male ministers "tended to dominate official positions of power."⁴⁵ Immediately following Dr. King's assassination, Gilbert joined the Doris Miller Dialogue Group, an exclusive, invitation-only organization that met to discuss Waco's racial issues. Eventually, Gilbert left, impatient with the group's dialogue-only approach to racial change.⁴⁶ He found more alignment with various local, civic organizations such as a Waco chapter of the NAACP and the Black Federation of Waco. He and Harrison were members of both groups.⁴⁷ These explicitly racial political organizations ranged in political ideology from radical, the term Gilbert used in 1972 to describe himself, to conservative, a label that well suited Harrison.⁴⁸

³⁷Fiedler, "50 Years After Graduation," 8.

³⁸Robert Gilbert, interview by Rufus Spain, Sept.-Oct. 1971, audio and transcript, Baylor University Project, BUIOH, <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/oral-memoirs-of-robert-lewis-gilbert-series-1-transcript/1599407>, pp. 8, 12-13.

³⁹Gilbert interview, 1971, pp. 15-18. For examples of Black student distress at historically white schools in Texas, see Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy*, 196-217; Dowanna Goldstone, *Integrating the 40 Acres: The 50-year Struggle for Racial Equality at the University of Texas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

⁴⁰Gilbert interview, 1971, pp. 16-17.

⁴¹For an example of a strong, segregated Black schooling program, see Siddler Walker, *Their Highest Potential*, 93-118, 141-70.

⁴²Fiedler, "50 Years After Graduation."

⁴³Gilbert interview, 1971, pp. 27-29.

⁴⁴Robert Gilbert, interview by L. Katherine Cook, Jan.-Feb. 1992, audio and transcript, Religion and Culture Oral History Collection, BUIOH, <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/oral-memoirs-of-robert-lewis-gilbert-series-3-transcript/1599548>, p. 15.

⁴⁵Belinda Robnett, "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization," *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (May 1996), 1673.

⁴⁶Gilbert interview, 1971, pp. 49-52.

⁴⁷For an example of Gilbert's and Harrison's membership in both pro-Black organizations, see Bruce Westbrook, "School Board Requested to Create Ethnic Panel," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, Nov. 22, 1974, p. 5.

⁴⁸Gilbert, Harris, and Cosby interview, 1972, pp. 2-3.

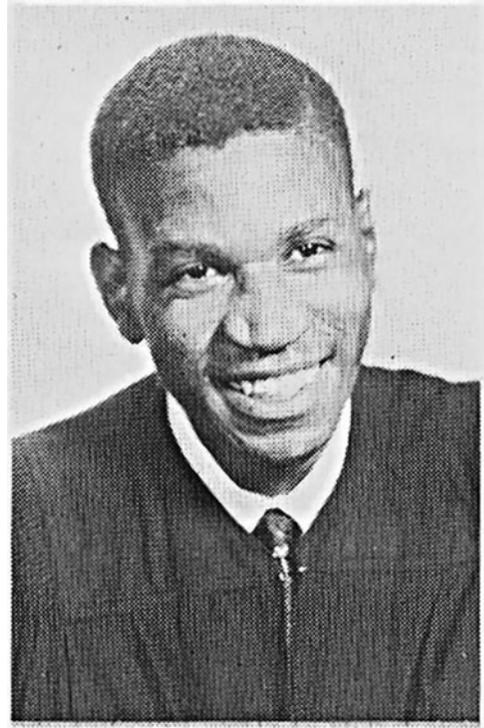


Figure 2. Robert Gilbert, 1967. Photo from the *Baylor Roundup Yearbook*. Courtesy of The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

By 1970, Gilbert had reenrolled at Baylor for a master's degree in biblical Studies. That same year, he accepted Baylor's offer to serve as the assistant director of the newly formed Upward Bound Program, a federally funded initiative erected during President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty campaign to increase educational attainment of historically underrepresented, first-generation college students. In 1971, Gilbert's health declined once again. This setback forced him out of his master's program, and he spent the next twenty-one years battling this affliction. Its severe impact on his physical mobility caused him to have to use a cane and eventually a wheelchair. Around the time he assumed his position as a trustee in 1976, Gilbert had started working as the Minority Employment Director at Paul Quinn, placing him, like Harrison, squarely in the professional class along with most other school board members.⁴⁹ Such occupations facilitated their ability to participate in the Waco school board's weekday afternoon meetings.

Gilbert's and Harrison's backgrounds reflected generational similarities and differences that help explain their divergent political strategies as trustees. Gilbert's high school and undergraduate years overlapped with the civil rights and Black Power movements. This context may have influenced his sense of urgency for racial change

⁴⁹"Employment Seminar Scheduled," *Waco Citizen*, April 23, 1976, p. 4; Daniel, "A Comparative Analysis," 142; Wirth, "Social Bias in Political Recruitment," 760-61; Stewart et al., "The Relationship of Sex and Race to Recruitment and Policy Orientations," 7.

as a trustee. Gilbert's generation relished greater educational, social, and economic opportunities, which were arguably amplified in a more urbanized setting. Harrison, by contrast, grew up in a rural environment. Living in the Jim Crow South meant Harrison had to relocate for an interracial education. Both had twentieth-century origins and both were "active in the church and other community organizations" that vocalized concern about school desegregation, characteristics reflective of successful Black board members.⁵⁰ However, Gilbert's greater interracial educational and professional opportunities typify a generational difference that would come to define differently aged Black elected officials like him and Harrison, whose childhood and young adulthood tracked with the rise of both the NAACP and the women's movement in the Black Baptist church.⁵¹ Most importantly, in terms of their work on the Waco school board, they differed in the degree to which they embraced respectability politics.⁵²

This political strategy, known as *respectability politics*, helped Black school board members and other Black political elites distinguish their public and private personas in seeking racial equality. Respectability politics "emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations."⁵³ Because respectability insisted "there could be no [African American] transgression of society's norms," some Black elected officials "condemned . . . negative practices and attitudes among their own people."⁵⁴ Like many professional contemporaries of her generation, Harrison upheld respectability politics, thus representing a form of conservatism. In contrast, Gilbert took a more assertive, confrontational approach in his work on the board, thus representing a form of radicalism.⁵⁵

Respectability aimed to challenge racial inequality and drew on deliberately constructed cultural practices. In retrospect, this strategy failed to eradicate racial injustice, and its proponents tended to denigrate African Americans in lower class statuses. In one sense, this political strategy illustrated Black political elites' tempered radicalism, being "radical in their ideals but tempered in the fact that they work[ed] within the confines of their organizations."⁵⁶ Some Black school board members endorsed this approach while trying to advance racial equality, advising other Black school board members to assume a respectable posture as part of an incisive strategy to support Black children. Many Black board members believed this tactic was important to

⁵⁰Doughty, "Black School Board Members and Desegregation," 36.

⁵¹David A. Bosisio, *Black Elected Officials: A Statistical Summary, 1993-1997* (Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1998), 7.

⁵²Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁵³Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 187.

⁵⁴Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 187. Local engagement of respectability can be seen in the *Waco Messenger* (1922-1979), a Black-owned and -operated newspaper.

⁵⁵For an example of the complicated, methodical political strategies Black school leaders historically employed, see Vanessa Siddle Walker, *The Lost Education of Horace Tate: Uncovering the Hidden Heroes Who Fought for Justice in Schools* (New York: The New Press, 2018).

⁵⁶Judy Alston, "Tempered Radicals and Servant Leaders: Black Females Persevering in the Superintendency," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Oct. 2005), 677-78.

use when working in majority-white settings alongside white colleagues, whose support they believed to be necessary.⁵⁷

Engaged Citizenship and School Board Membership

Throughout the 1970s in Waco, Black leaders like Harrison and Gilbert struggled to find a way to exercise power in a predominantly white and racially hostile environment. This section details some of those struggles as they unfolded on the school board. To contextualize their navigation strategies, I highlight key occurrences preceding, following, and during their concurrent membership as board trustees. Although Gilbert and Harrison were both outspoken about race and education during community forums that preceded their school board membership, their political navigation as school board members significantly diverged after their election on June 26, 1976.⁵⁸ As trustees, Harrison was respectable and rarely spoke during meetings, deliberately avoiding white resistance, while Gilbert was direct and vocal, provoking white resistance in pushing more urgently for sweeping racial change. Analysis reveals that despite their place on the board, white supremacy remained institutionally intact and embedded within Waco's educational establishment, undercutting both Harrison's and Gilbert's efforts to advance racial equality.

After the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation, WISD worked to preserve white enclaves of its district, one of which was the school board. Since its genesis, this seven-member political body had been composed exclusively of white members. For more than two decades, Waco's board refused to integrate its schools, and throughout this period, there is no evidence that whites on the board actively sought to recruit any Black board members. Harrison and Gilbert both became prominent in community forums over school desegregation during the 1970s, and Waco's engaged Black voters ultimately elected them to the city's board.

While the federal government pressured the district to satisfy desegregation mandates, palpable tensions emerged around how the district would resolve its—in the parlance of that time—*racially identifiable* schools, a matter WISD's 1968 desegregation plan had failed to address.⁵⁹ Concerns about busing and student discipline were integral to these debates. In 1973, after Black and Mexican American community members observed that the district was misrepresenting its strategy for addressing these problems, WISD agreed to hold community forums to solicit and share feedback on its new desegregation plan.⁶⁰ Simultaneously, some community members organized their own meetings to discuss increasing concerns about these plans.

During these meetings, Gilbert and Harrison acted as vocal local leaders who offered commentary on public education, policy, politics, and race, signaling their intention to address these ongoing issues. In the summer of 1973, Gilbert highlighted the racist nature of WISD's tentative desegregation plan, proclaiming, "I am opposed to integration if it means the blacks will be the first to lose their jobs. I am opposed to

⁵⁷Doughty, "Black School Board Members," 36-37.

⁵⁸"Trustees of the Waco Independent School District," *Waco Citizen*, July 30, 1976, p. 6.

⁵⁹"Downing Speaks on Integration," *Waco Citizen*, April 22, 1971, p. 1.

⁶⁰*Arvizu v. Waco Independent School District*, 373 F. Supp. 1264 Dist. Court, WD Texas (1973).

integration if it means 3,000 black children have to be bused while only 600 whites are being bused.” He went on to underline that the objective of integration should not be mixing races; rather, it should serve “as an instrument to help break the poverty cycle” by “insuring [*sic*] that everyone gets a quality education.”⁶¹ At this same meeting, echoing earlier, public observations about the board’s stubbornly white composition, Harrison speculated about a source of these persistent issues: that “the school board is hampered because it is not representative of all the races. I’ve been in Waco a long-time, and I can’t recall a black person ever serving on the school board.”⁶² Perhaps Harrison believed that even if outnumbered or overruled, the presence of Black school board members could lay the groundwork for equal education.

Many white stakeholders blamed the uptick in racially-charged school violence on African Americans; that white stakeholders assumed Black children to be the sole culprits revealed WISD’s institutional racism and gave Harrison another chance to publicly express her interest in children’s well-being. Like earlier forums, the district’s Blue-Ribbon Commission, initiated in response to rising student discipline issues, hosted community meetings in October and November 1973 to hear the public’s perspective on school violence; at these meetings, Black community members voiced suspicion about how the district intended to resolve these matters. Criticizing the vilification of African Americans, hundreds of Black Wacoans attended these meetings. In that group was Harrison, who recommended schools hire personnel skilled in supporting students with consistent behavior issues.⁶³ Showing little tolerance for the mistreatment of children, she also remarked, “There are teachers who have an innate dislike of children and they should be removed whether they are black or white.”⁶⁴

Given her conservatism, Harrison’s public outlook on student discipline stressed the importance of individual behavior rather than structural racism. At a subsequent community forum, Harrison said she had been riding buses and saw “laxity coming from the home.”⁶⁵ Such leniency defied respectability because for Black people to “prove [themselves] worthy of equal civil and political rights,” “there could be no laxity” in conduct.⁶⁶ Thus, Harrison’s views reflected “respectability’s emphasis on individual behavior [which] served inevitably to blame blacks for their victimization.”⁶⁷ At times, however, Harrison’s conventional outlook sought to push the board to increase access and opportunity for all working people in the community. For example, respectability encouraged her to “ask that the committee relay to the school board a request for a night meeting so that more working people might attend.”⁶⁸ Harrison

⁶¹“School Board Gets Petition against Plan,” *Waco News-Tribune*, June 22, 1973, p. 2a.

⁶²For Harrison’s quotation, see “School Board Gets Petition against Plan,” *Waco News-Tribune*, June 22, 1973, pp. 1 and 2a. For the earlier, public observations about the board’s white composition, see Westbrook, “School Board Requested to Create Ethnic Panel,” 5.

⁶³“Blacks Express Feelings at Discipline Meet,” *Waco Citizen*, Nov. 1, 1973, p. 3; “Busing and Discipline Discussed at UHS Meeting,” *Waco Citizen*, October 25, 1973, pp. 1, 3; Ira Royals, “Teachers Get Backing: Discipline Panel Urges Clear Guidelines,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, Nov. 16, 1973, p. 1.

⁶⁴“Blacks Express Feelings at Discipline Meet [*sic*],” 3.

⁶⁵“Blacks Express Feelings at Discipline Meet,” 3.

⁶⁶Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 203 and 196, respectively.

⁶⁷Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 202.

⁶⁸“Busing and Discipline Discussed at UHS Meeting,” 3.

highly valued employment because she “extolled all forms of honest labor, no matter how menial.”⁶⁹

The board’s discussions of student discipline and other racialized issues illustrated its general disinterest in addressing structural racism. Through the mid-1970s, WISD’s discipline issues intensified as trustees continued to suspend mostly Black students for “ill-defined offenses that require[d] subjective interpretation . . . and . . . [were] more likely to occur . . . where there [was] the greatest influx of black students and . . . in areas that lack[ed] strong support for desegregation efforts.”⁷⁰ This enduring disparity held across various southern school districts, but Waco was unique because its school board, rather than school building administrators, made the final decision regarding student suspensions and expulsions.⁷¹ Additionally, matters of affirmative action and school board meeting times consumed much of the board’s attention.

On the seven-person board, Gilbert and Harrison used two distinctly different approaches to navigate this context.⁷² Once she was in her official position as a board trustee, Harrison felt she needed to be cautious. Though still apparent in her civic engagement outside the school board meetings, Harrison’s outspokenness dissipated as a trustee. This is not to downplay the significance of her position on the board. That role represented a radical departure from the status quo, as most school board members in Texas were white and younger than she was, and most Black school board members were male. Facing two overlapping forms of oppression as a Black woman, Harrison contended with racism and sexism, which both Waco and its school board upheld. Board composition in terms of trustee identity symbolized such white male privilege, for she and Gilbert were the only members of Color, and Mrs. Howard Hagar was the only other woman trustee. Hagar, unlike Harrison, declined to use her given first name, Lanell, and instead used that of her husband, Howard, suggesting gender- and race-based differences in self-conception. Ultimately, Harrison’s political strategy on the board would ensure that she would maintain that role for a relatively long time.⁷³

Partly explained by their age difference, Harrison’s and Gilbert’s divergent navigation strategies became apparent almost immediately as they started their terms as trustees. As a member of an earlier generation, Harrison reified several of the “commandments for Black board members” that discouraged, for example, using explicitly racial language, exhibiting frustration, or accusing fellow board members of being racist.⁷⁴ This strategy contrasted with that of Gilbert, a young Black man unconstrained by respectability politics.

While Harrison observed in silence their new dynamics, Gilbert hastily made his new colleagues aware of his agenda for racial equality, but his directness failed to aid

⁶⁹Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 211.

⁷⁰Thornton and Trent, “School Desegregation and Suspension,” 484.

⁷¹Thornton and Trent, “School Desegregation and Suspension,” 484.

⁷²Most U.S. school boards were composed of seven persons and had two Black members, according to Daniel, “A Comparative Analysis,” 143.

⁷³J. D. Gregory et al., “A Political Profile Study of Texas Black School Board Members until 1985,” in *National Association of African American Studies Conference Proceedings*, Scarborough, NC, 2008, p. 540.

⁷⁴Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 38.

his cause. At their first meeting as trustees, Gilbert raised affirmative action concerns, conveying his suspicions regarding the board's hiring practices. At this initial meeting and regularly throughout his tenure, Gilbert "questioned administration on what objective criteria is used for hiring and firing," asking whether "a concerted effort is being made to hire minorities." Gilbert's insinuations of racist discrimination "exhibit[ed his] frustration" and "demanding" nature, disregarding guidance from more experienced Black board members.⁷⁵ In one exchange, Superintendent Kenneth McGee defended the district's hiring policies, which had yet to produce and sustain a racially diverse staff: he explained where the district posted job openings, highlighted that "six of eight positions filled today were filled with Blacks," and described the criteria used to evaluate candidates. At the same meeting, trustees appointed Harrison, who said little, as an "alternate delegate to the Texas Association of School Boards meeting."⁷⁶

Harrison and Gilbert's opposing strategies anticipated their level of eligibility for particular trustee duties. Gilbert's assertiveness regarding his colleagues' hiring and firing practices likely dissuaded their selection of him to represent their interests in a larger statewide context. Thus, it is possible that the board, like other white Waco residents, placed confidence in Harrison to maintain the "status quo" as an alternate delegate.⁷⁷ Compared with Gilbert's outspokenness "at a time when minorities . . . may be looking for change," Harrison's silence signaled to the white establishment that she was a token Black trustee unwilling to push urgently for racial equality.⁷⁸ This environment encouraged Harrison's reticence, which she rarely displayed in her local activities as an engaged community member.

Given Harrison's interest in maintaining separate public and private personas, she compartmentalized her Black racial pride, falling in line with warnings against appearing "militant" or singularly interested in issues that affect Black people as an elected official.⁷⁹ However, outside the board, she was very active in the Black community. In the summers of 1975 and 1976, she helped organize her hometown's Juneteenth celebrations. The Juneteenth Association's president, Roscoe Murphy, "said that [the Association's] primary goals are to promote better education for the black race and to instill spiritual values in their people."⁸⁰ Harrison's involvement was extensive, as she oversaw the volleyball competition and a reception honoring community elders, sponsored a talent fashion show, and narrated the Miss 19th of June Beauty Contest.⁸¹ These celebrations had been ongoing since 1898 to commemorate the Union Army informing enslaved Africans in Texas of their theretofore undisclosed freedom.

⁷⁵Doughty, "Black School Board Members," 38.

⁷⁶"WISD Trustees Approve Administrative Posts," *Waco Citizen*, July 20, 1976, p. 3.

⁷⁷For a discussion of Harrison's routine capitulation to the interest of whites in Waco, according to Gilbert and other Black men of Waco, see Gilbert, Harris, and Crosby interview, 1972, pp. 227, 238-39.

⁷⁸For quotation, see Gregory et al., "A Political Profile," 545.

⁷⁹Doughty, "Black School Board Members," 37-38.

⁸⁰"Celebration Whirls into Second Day as Crowd Gathers at Comanche Crossing," *Mexia Daily News*, June 18, 1976, p. 1. For a fuller discussion of Juneteenth and its specific significance for Texas, see Annette Gordon-Reed, *On Juneteenth* (New York: Liveright, 2021).

⁸¹"Celebration Whirls into Second Day as Crowd Gathers at Comanche Crossing," 1; "Juneteenth Festival Begins Today," *Mexia Daily News*, June 17, 1975, p. 1.

In December 1976, while Harrison maintained her stoicism, Gilbert stoked white board members' resistance by confronting racial justice issues related to hiring, promotion, and compensation, support for which the Title VII of the Equal Employment Opportunities Act provided.⁸² He again "urged the trustees to adopt an affirmative action plan for employment and increase financial benefits [specifically, a twenty cent raise and winter break resources] for food service workers," who were disproportionately Black. Gilbert knew "many of the workers found great hardship in no paychecks during the holidays." To the board, he emphasized the importance of "making this positive commitment to correct the inequities in the district," stressing that "minorities in the district do not have an equitable opportunity for promotion." Gilbert's concern for the way the board treated all people of Color was also evident, as he noted "this [inequity] is more true for the Mexican-Americans than the blacks, but both minorities are discriminated against." Repeatedly defying the suggestions of successful Black board members, Gilbert made pointed assertions about the racist intent of his white colleagues, complete with compelling examples. The board sought to quiet his pleas, instructing personnel director E. B. Jones to debunk Gilbert's concerns by sharing that the number of new white hires was dwindling, Mexican American hires was rising, and African American hires were stagnant; Jones also cited alleged legal obstacles to erecting a more aggressive affirmative action policy.⁸³

Despite their different strategies for interacting with whites on the board, evidence suggests that Harrison's and Gilbert's advocacy for Blacks was similar. Outside their official capacity as Black elected officials, on at least one occasion, they collaboratively advocated for racial justice during their school board tenures. In November 1976, fellow Wacoan Mr. Leo Simmons, a Black, blind, elderly man, stood in need of help. The city had recently condemned Mr. Simmons's home, where he had lived for three decades. Gilbert and Harrison were two of "three speakers [who] appeared at the Waco City Council . . . in behalf of an East Waco Citizen who is facing destitute circumstances concerning his home." Their advocacy likely influenced Mayor J. R. Closs's vow to address Mr. Simmons's needs.⁸⁴

Harrison had historically shown deep commitment to her majority-Black East Waco neighborhood, dedication that reveals her tempered version of Black radicalism.⁸⁵ Harrison deployed a respectable, tempered radicalism with regard to Black advocacy before becoming an elected official on the school board. Multiple accounts from the early 1970s portray her, "a frequent visitor" at city council meetings, steadily soliciting enhancements for East Waco, a disinvested area of the city.⁸⁶ In different ways, Harrison requested that the city more highly prioritize its Black residents.

⁸²Title VII is part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which President Lyndon Johnson signed into law that year. It prohibits employment discrimination based on race, sex, color, religion, and national origin. See Civil Rights Act of 1964, tit. VII, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(a) (Section 703).

⁸³"Board Discusses Employment," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, Dec. 17, 1976, p. 5; minutes of the Waco Independent School District Board of Trustees, Waco Independent School District, Board of Trustees Records, Waco, Texas, Dec. 16, 1976 (hereafter cited as Minutes, WISD Trustees).

⁸⁴"Blind Negro Being Helped about Substandard Home," *Waco Citizen*, Nov. 12, 1976, p. 1.

⁸⁵Alston, "Tempered Radicals and Servant Leaders."

⁸⁶"Visitors Enliven City Council Meeting," *Waco Citizen*, Oct. 28, 1971, p. 1.

She led outdoor East Waco beautification projects.⁸⁷ She also raised the issue of proliferating rats, cats, and dogs to the city council, underlining “the deplorable situation” they created for residents.⁸⁸

As Gilbert provoked the white trustees, his claims of racial injustice compelled the board to feign innocence while defying custom and discussing racial matters in racial terms. Pressing on WISD’s toothless affirmative action plan, Gilbert fought to include an addendum to the March 1977 meeting minutes that highlighted the board’s refusal to create a more targeted policy to support racially equitable employment and promotion practices.⁸⁹ This addition framed his “fellow board members as racist [instead of] let[ting] their votes and statements speak for them.”⁹⁰ Revising the meeting minutes reflected a strategy other Black board members used to “keep . . . the general public informed by putting key information into the official record of the proceedings.”⁹¹ Although local newspapers detailed these discussions, the school board’s official record omitted them, indicating their interest in silencing Gilbert and maintaining a harmonious image inconsistent with reality. Responding to Gilbert’s claims, “James Hawkins, trustee, asked Gilbert if his request [for an affirmative action plan] was based on race,” because Hawkins did not “know how [one] can tell from this list [of applicants] what race the person is.”⁹² Accusing Gilbert of presupposing racism while refusing to support an affirmative action policy, Hawkins deployed race-evasive logic, repudiated the possibility of racist intent, and reinforced white supremacy.

Concerted white resistance defeated another of Gilbert’s direct challenges to white supremacy—in this case a motion to advance affirmative action in the hiring of Black coaches. In many newly desegregated schools, there was a disproportionate number of Black students playing organized sports, a circumstance Gilbert felt merited Black representation in the head coaching staff. Gilbert focused on challenging the board’s decision to hire exclusively white applicants, asking his colleagues about “the criteria used for the selection of the two head coaches.” Wishing trustees would agree to reconsider their choice, Gilbert motioned that the board reevaluate all coach applications and give top consideration to applicants of Color. Despite Harrison’s attendance, Gilbert’s “motion died for lack of a second,” and all other trustees, including Harrison, voted to move forward with hiring all-white coaches. In Gilbert’s attempt to put this issue up for a vote, he ignored the advice of experienced Black board members, who implored their contemporaries “not [to] bring things up for a board vote unless they will pass.”⁹³ This thinking seemed to inform Harrison’s silence and voting behavior despite the issue’s relevance to racial equity; Harrison seconding Gilbert’s motion, as she likely knew, would have failed to produce the votes required to pass his proposal.

⁸⁷“C-C Task Force Hears Reports on Local Work,” *Waco News-Tribune*, July 25, 1973, p. 3.

⁸⁸“Rats, Cats Dogs Running Together,” *Waco Citizen*, Mar. 16, 1972, p. 1.

⁸⁹“Gilbert Stands Alone: No Affirmative Action Plan Discriminates against Minorities,” *Waco Citizen*, Mar. 18, 1977, p. 1; Minutes, Mar. 17, 1977, WISD Trustees.

⁹⁰Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 38.

⁹¹Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 36.

⁹²“WISD Management to Be Studied: Board Studying Communication Policy Draft,” *Waco Citizen*, July 22, 1977, p. 3.

⁹³Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 38.

Although Harrison seldom commented explicitly as a trustee on racial matters or the plight of vulnerable groups, her remarks in other local political settings outside her elected role depict her chief concern for children, particularly Black ones. In a 1977 city council discussion about allowing cars to drive through a previously prohibited area downtown, Harrison departed from consensus to assert, “Children enjoy scampering on the mall. The mall needs an ice skating rink, a good theatre, children’s shops. . . . I want to keep the cars off.”⁹⁴ Moreover, many of her comments continued to reflect her deep commitment to her underserved East Waco neighborhood and its Black children. A few years earlier, she had requested that the city add a traffic light there to enhance children’s safety at busy crossings.⁹⁵ Following this appeal, Harrison asked the city council to pave long-neglected East Waco streets after five children had died from falling into open gravel pits.⁹⁶ These latter actions in particular illustrate that Harrison did advocate for Black people, especially Black children, indicating that she was selective about the settings in which she openly expressed her racial interests; her school board strategy, however, relied on holding her comments regarding such overtly racial matters.

Even when Harrison deliberately brought to the board’s attention more race-neutral issues, her white colleagues overlooked her attempt to address vulnerable children’s needs, rendering her strategy, like Gilbert’s, ineffective. At a 1977 school board meeting, she raised an issue about “several cases of father sexual relations,” given that “some [victims] were as young as nine years of age,” and asked her colleagues to meaningfully address the problem.⁹⁷ The board quickly dismissed her request, with Superintendent McGee replying that school “principals [were] aware,” and moved on to the next agenda item.⁹⁸ Such a response may help to explain Harrison’s taciturnity on the school board. Her colleagues briskly disregarded her remarks repeatedly when she spoke, undermining the power her position was supposed to hold. The board’s reply underscores that her respectable approach yielded the same ineffective result as Gilbert’s more direct strategy; it also suggests that her white colleagues’ racism was meant to disempower her regardless of whether or not the issues she raised centered on race. Nevertheless, Harrison’s approach to publicly calling attention to the issue was to keep a respectable posture and highlight the plight of a vulnerable group without displaying militancy, personal interest, or “dwelling on areas where [. . . she] had been hurt, insulted, turned down, or ignored.”⁹⁹

Rather than being overtly ignored by his white colleagues, Gilbert endured their resentful engagement, illuminating the stronghold of white supremacy and how the board institutionally upheld it regardless of which strategy Black board members used. Gilbert pressed for more transparency regarding race and student suspensions. By the end of the 1976-1977 school year, he had prepared and distributed a preliminary report using incomplete data, the only data to which he had access, to summarize the district’s suspension patterns by race—a first for WISD.¹⁰⁰ The report indicated the

⁹⁴“Parking on Mall Asked,” *Waco Citizen*, May 20, 1977, p. 1.

⁹⁵“Visitors Enliven City Council Meeting,” 1.

⁹⁶“Public Misled about Annexation,” *Waco Citizen*, Nov. 8, 1973, p. 1.

⁹⁷Minutes, July 21, 1977, WISD Trustees.

⁹⁸“WISD Management to Be Studied,” 3.

⁹⁹Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 38.

¹⁰⁰Minutes, May 19, 1977, WISD Trustees.

racial disproportionality of WISD's discipline issues and suspensions, stating, "70 percent of the students suspended in the district were minorities and they comprise only 48 percent of the student population" for allegedly fighting and disobeying teachers. Proposing a solution to the district's enduring student discipline concerns, Gilbert suggested forming "a nine-man tri-ethnic committee [to] study the discipline in the district." More radical might have been a committee composed exclusively of people of Color, perhaps just Black stakeholders, but it seems Gilbert was willing to offer a more moderate suggestion in hopes of accumulating white support. Gilbert hoped his recommendation characterized an attractive mitigation strategy. Having African Americans, Mexican Americans, and European Americans deliberate on student discipline appeared prudent given that at least one of his white colleagues "was distressed by the statistics" and, citing a survey, acknowledged "discipline [as] the number one concern of parents." The white board member's concern may have demonstrated the significance of Black members on school boards; many African American trustees stood willing to raise important racial issues in their mission to equalize education even if their white colleagues immediately rendered those attempts ineffective. The other four white trustees, however, sought to obstruct this effort early on, "recommend[ing] that this item be placed on the agenda for the next board meeting."¹⁰¹

Again, Gilbert faced concerted opposition largely because the majority-white school board wanted to keep its power concentrated in the hands of white people on whom they could rely to uphold white supremacy. This endeavor permitted only a nominal number of people of Color to exercise decision-making power over the district. By June 1977, Gilbert had expanded the scope of his strategy, and "moved, seconded by Mr. Faulkner, that a 21-member committee be formed to study suspensions." Gilbert's proposal that fourteen people of Color alongside seven white people address this ongoing issue threatened to disrupt the white supremacist underpinnings on which WISD operated—no matter his or Harrison's symbolic board membership. At this summer meeting, Gilbert and Harrison's white colleagues again feigned innocence, expressing their sense of offense and disavowing the possibility that white supremacy had tainted any aspect of school governance. For example, Board President "[Ray] Hicks said . . . there has never been 'any inkling of racial prejudice'" in student suspension conversations during his five years on the board.¹⁰² Hicks's remark showed his keenness to dismiss the structural manifestations of racism Gilbert aimed to disclose and curb.

White board members sought to indict Gilbert's racial activism as he attempted to hold his colleagues accountable for sustaining institutional white supremacy. As tensions rose, white board members openly displayed their irritation with Gilbert. For instance, during one especially tense exchange about Gilbert's appearance on a local television program, in which he candidly discussed his frustrations with the board's racist behavior, trustee "[James] Hawkins, pointing across the table at Gilbert, exclaimed, 'I am sick of the bad will. . . . Our own people are destroying us!'"¹⁰³ Hawkins's finger-wagging suggests that white trustees were closely watching

¹⁰¹"WISD School Board Hires Consultants," *Waco Citizen*, May 20, 1977, p. 2.

¹⁰²Minutes, June 16, 1977, WISD Trustees.

¹⁰³"WISD-WCTA Contract Terminated," *Waco Citizen*, June 17, 1977, p. 2.

Gilbert. Predictably, the board voted “to table the motion in order to have an outline on what is to be studied and how it is to be studied.”¹⁰⁴ For this meeting, Harrison was absent, yet her attendance was unlikely to change the vote’s outcome or her white colleagues’ commitment to institutional racism. Hagar’s comment about her concerns regarding “the turning over of student confidential records to a committee” was an excuse white trustees regularly used to reject Harrison’s and Gilbert’s proposals.¹⁰⁵ This confidentiality defense was disingenuous because personal data could have been redacted and because students’ full names were typically included in meeting minutes when the board decided discipline cases. To no avail, Gilbert’s pleas for complete data persisted as he invited various community members to promote studying the district’s racially disproportionate suspension rates. Ever hopeful, in December 1977, Gilbert motioned to ascertain these data. Although Harrison was present at the meeting, “the motion died for lack of a second.”¹⁰⁶ Even with her vote, Gilbert would have lacked sufficient support, which, again, is why experienced and more respectable Black board members suggested waiting to propose initiatives until one was confident they would pass.¹⁰⁷

When the tri-ethnic committee finally came up for a vote, Gilbert pushed unrelentingly, and Harrison, perhaps for the first time publicly as a trustee, broke from her white colleagues; the strategy proved unsuccessful, however. It is likely Harrison knew the racial significance of this motion. Her track record of advocacy for Black and underserved children, coupled with the magnitude of this issue, may explain why she declined to mirror, as she had many times before, her white colleagues’ votes against the formation of the tri-ethnic committee. August and September 1977 saw Gilbert plead once again for the board to consider forming the committee. Forgoing directives to avoid “dwelling on areas [or issues] where you have been . . . turned down, or ignored,” Gilbert persisted.¹⁰⁸ Despite the support of another diverse group of community members and school building leaders, who testified at the August meeting, the board’s response in September conveyed the white board members’ refusal to address this issue.¹⁰⁹ Hawkins moved, seconded by Hagar, to deny Gilbert’s proposal, and the motion passed with the support of all five white trustees. This time, Gilbert voted no, and Harrison abstained, signaling that she neither openly supported nor opposed the committee.¹¹⁰ Regardless, an affirmative vote from her would have been inadequate to change the result. Harrison’s abstention distanced her from both Gilbert’s racial activism and her white colleagues’ white supremacy; she stopped short of openly endorsing the tri-ethnic committee, perhaps understanding, as many of her Black school board contemporaries did, that wider white support was necessary, especially for such a divisive issue.¹¹¹ In failing to offer outright support for the committee, Harrison’s respectable, less

¹⁰⁴Minutes, June 16, 1977, WISD Trustees.

¹⁰⁵“WISD-WCTA Contract Terminated,” 2.

¹⁰⁶“Estimates \$14.2 Million For School Improvements,” *Waco Citizen*, Dec. 16, 1977, p. 3.

¹⁰⁷Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 38

¹⁰⁸Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 38.

¹⁰⁹Minutes, Aug. 18, 1977, WISD Trustees.

¹¹⁰Minutes, Sept. 15, 1977, WISD Trustees.

¹¹¹Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 37.

confrontational strategy was still evident; yet, as with Gilbert's strategy, it was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Gilbert and Harrison's involvement on the board as its only Black members may have exposed some of their white colleagues to ideas germane to equal education efforts that would take generations to manifest.

It is possible that Gilbert's actions on the board regarding the committee proposal led to retaliation in the form of arson. The day following the committee formation defeat, a local newspaper reported that a "fire destroyed the home of Rev. Robert Gilbert." It started while he was inside and burned for nearly an hour before he noticed and escaped. "The assistant fire chief investigating the cause of the blaze told [Gilbert] it probably started in a hot water heater," and, at the time, Gilbert said he accepted the assessment given that he "d[idn't] have any evidence that anything else occurred." Yet, he admitted that "the timing was somewhat strange."¹¹² Years later, just before his passing in 1992, Gilbert revealed that during his time as a trustee, he "received letters from the Ku Klux Klan [and] threatening calls." He also recollected:

They never determined the real origin of the fire, but I've always believed that since it was going on during the time that I was raising a lot of controversy . . . on the school board . . . concerning [the] disproportionate expelling and suspension of minority kids from school—there was quite a bit of controversy about that when this fire occurred. But none really deterred me [because] I was about some kind of mission then.¹¹³

The possibility of domestic terror threats mapped onto established patterns of white supremacist violence that had long animated Waco.¹¹⁴ And though ill-advised for Black school board members, Gilbert's admitted militancy likely contributed to the violence he confronted.¹¹⁵ While Gilbert contended with these attacks, Harrison's school board conduct aimed to dissuade the same threats of (or actual) violence.

Racial issues concerned diverse educational stakeholders in Waco, and their ability to engage with these matters was largely determined by their access to school board assemblies. At these gatherings, the board presented its business to the community, supposedly to solicit input. However, the board had long and intentionally deterred access by the custom of scheduling the meetings on Thursday afternoons. Since the 1970s, when Harrison first raised this issue at school desegregation community meetings, she had challenged this hindrance to democracy.¹¹⁶ Teachers and parents were some of the most vocal proponents of "hold[ing] meetings at a more convenient time so that working people would not be excluded."¹¹⁷ By 1978, their calls for this change had become a regularity at meetings, as racially diverse representatives from a variety of groups sought to persuade the board, sometimes using data.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, some

¹¹²"Fire Hit Trustee's Home after Tri-Ethnic Plan Loses," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, Sept. 19, 1977, p. 6.

¹¹³Both quotes come from Gilbert interview, 1992, p. 15.

¹¹⁴Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror*; Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture*.

¹¹⁵Doughty, "Black School Board Members," 38.

¹¹⁶"Busing and Discipline Discussed at UHS Meeting," 3.

¹¹⁷Minutes, Apr. 20, 1978, WISD Trustees; quote is from Mr. Richard Coronado, president of the League of United American Citizens.

¹¹⁸Minutes, Apr. 20, 1978, and May 18, 1978, WISD Trustees.

white trustees continued to resist moving the meeting time, using tactics such as tabling requests, postponing votes, and even selectively keeping the meeting time the same “until an item on the agenda be of such interest that a night meeting be called.” By June, the board finally put to a vote the motion to move meetings to 7:30 p.m., and it passed with the support of both Gilbert and Harrison.¹¹⁹ Past meetings predicted Gilbert would vote for this change regardless of how his white colleagues did.

Undergirded by respectability politics, Harrison abstained from voting, a strategy that created a tie and prevented meeting times from changing to become less accessible. This small victory was nominally race-neutral but stood to facilitate the attendance of more working-class people of Color; abstention also allowed her to seem as if she were protecting the status quo, a cover that might, in the best of circumstances, be of use in the future. Determined to reverse this expansion of democracy, President Hagar, blaming local media deadlines, proposed at the January 1979 meeting to change meeting times back to 1 p.m., against the preferences of a wide range of education stakeholders and her colleagues Gilbert and Timothy Boswell, a white trustee.¹²⁰ In the subsequent discussion, white board members ignored Harrison’s request to “consider the wishes of the board members on Tuesday night meetings,” an option that would have facilitated working people’s participation.¹²¹ As noted above, Harrison had in the early 1970s pushed for this segment of the local population to have greater access to school board meetings. Her doing so demonstrated her alignment with respectability politics and her awareness that “successful school desegregation involve[d] parents [or caretakers] in all phases: planning, implementation, and evaluation,” planning from which they were excluded.¹²² Rather than voting against changing meeting times back to Thursday afternoons, she abstained, “creating a tie, which is the same as no action.”¹²³ This move enabled meetings to remain accessible to working-class people. Although her affirmative vote would have produced the same outcome, abstaining allowed Harrison to forgo overtly opposing her white colleagues, perhaps leaving open the possibility for future collaboration. Interracial collaboration, however, would require good faith on the part of whites, which history had shown to be sorely lacking. Harrison’s respectable outlook maintained, perhaps too optimistically, that such collaboration was within reach.

Harrison’s local political experience likely influenced her methodical use of abstention as a way to, presumably, equivocate on racial issues, which allowed her to uphold a respectable stance yet frustrated local Black community leaders. Local newspapers had long extolled her shrewd, “tactful submi[ssion],” a hallmark of her interracial political maneuvers.¹²⁴ It is noteworthy that such praise came from white-owned and -run sources positioned to constrain Harrison’s ability to establish and cultivate interracial political connections. Speaking to this point, some prominent Black men of Waco, including Gilbert, viewed her tact as consistently bolstering the status quo, a view that overlooked her wide-ranging pro-Black advocacy. They

¹¹⁹Minutes, June 15, 1978, WISD Trustees.

¹²⁰Minutes, Feb. 15, 1979, WISD Trustees.

¹²¹“WISD Board Meetings Times Remains the Same,” *Waco Citizen*, Feb. 20, 1979, p. 2.

¹²²Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 36.

¹²³Doughty, “Black School Board Members,” 36.

¹²⁴“Public Misled About Annexation,” 1.

failed to recognize her extensive civic engagement, trivializing and mocking her track record on racial issues. Seldom did they employ this response for Black men.¹²⁵ In a set of seven interviews from 1972, Gilbert and two other Black men leaders of Waco name her as a Black community leader who is, according to Gilbert, “highly regarded in the white community,” a comment Gilbert followed with laughter. Harrison, according to Gilbert, “likes to get in front of the cameras,” insinuating that her civic involvement was of little substance or consequence.¹²⁶ It is striking that during this series of interviews, these men did not similarly make light of Black male community leaders, despite having named some of them as promoters of the status quo, just as they referred to Harrison. Thus, it is possible that the combination of Harrison’s gender and her adherence to respectability politics drew ridicule from Gilbert and other Black Waco leaders.

Although Gilbert, who contended with racism until the end of his time as a trustee, never publicly admitted that the board’s unrelenting white resistance was the reason for his premature and hasty departure, it is difficult to imagine it had no influence on his decision; and despite their differences, Harrison recognized his contributions and ensured that the official record included some acknowledgment of them. Harrison and Gilbert’s time together as trustees was short-lived because Gilbert submitted his resignation on February 16, 1979. This notice followed Gilbert’s call for Black athletes to protest WISD’s prolonged refusal to hire a Black head coach by organizing a boycott where they would refuse to play for respective sports team.¹²⁷ Boycotts were a familiar strategy for Gilbert, as he had organized one in 1973 to protest WISD’s desegregation plan.¹²⁸ Once the board accepted his resignation the following week, Harrison went on record “request[ing] that the Administration send an expression to Rev. Gilbert for his years of service on the board.”¹²⁹ As the only trustee to comment on Gilbert’s abrupt departure, Harrison signaled her appreciation for his efforts. She seemed to recognize in him a positive quality that one study identified as more characteristic of Black school board members “than their white colleagues”—that of having a pointed “interest in personnel, community relations, and student . . . issues.”¹³⁰

In 1992, just before his passing, Gilbert attributed his sudden exit to a significant change in perspective toward Black people, particularly those with different political stripes than his. He admitted to becoming “somewhat disgusted about what black people were doing for themselves in the cause,” and to growing frustrated at the Black community’s “lack of participation and cooperation.”¹³¹ These comments appear to gesture to Harrison, echoing remarks Gilbert made in 1972, in which he openly “detest[ed] what contribution people like Mrs. Harrison [were] supposed to be making toward . . . our cause,” finding people like her to be “so much more . . . detriment[al] than” violent white supremacists.¹³² As such, Gilbert’s abrupt “retire

¹²⁵Gilbert, Harris, and Crosby interview, 1972, pp. 127 and 175.

¹²⁶Gilbert, Harris, and Crosby interview, 1972, p. 127.

¹²⁷“Public School Boycott Set for Monday,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, Aug. 26, 1973, p. 1.

¹²⁸“Gilbert Asks Blacks to Boycott WISD Athletics,” *Waco Citizen*, Jan. 23, 1979, p. 1.

¹²⁹Minutes, Feb. 23, 1979, WISD Trustees.

¹³⁰Daniel, “A Comparative Analysis,” 143–44.

¹³¹Gilbert interview, 1992, p. 15.

¹³²Gilbert, Harris, and Crosby interview, 1972, p. 238.

[ment] from politics” stemmed from his dissatisfaction “not at what the system necessarily was doing but the lack of participation and cooperation that I felt that black people were doing for themselves.”¹³³ In his early thirties, he thought systemic racial change was long overdue and was “fed up with gradualism”; despite having “given up on the system,” he held “radical views” while “still try[ing] to work within the system.”¹³⁴

It is unclear what exactly provoked Gilbert’s drastic shift in perspective; this examination of the school board and white supremacy’s ubiquity throughout it, however, suggests he grew unable to see how racial progress was possible without greater ideological and tactical alignment across Waco’s Black community—namely, between those with radical views, like him, and those, like Harrison and others who held tightly to respectability politics. Working to square his radical impulses with his more moderate political actions, Gilbert still found himself widely ineffective, a fact that frustrated him and made him less willing to struggle for racial equality as he grew more experienced with age. This more moderate approach raises questions about how Gilbert reconciled his hope for more progressivism in the respectable Black community with his efforts to incite sweeping racial change as a trustee, even if he was younger when he made those attempts; it also warrants consideration of what success Gilbert thought was possible as a school board member had he and Harrison voted in lockstep, as doing so on a seven-person board would have remained inadequate to pass his initiatives. In one sense, Gilbert assigned blame for ongoing racial inequality on Black Wacoans with different racial outlooks than his; this group included older, more respectable Black Wacoans like Harrison, who had arguably lived during some of the worst of Jim Crow and whose racial awareness was indelibly marked and shaped by their experiences. The trajectory of Harrison’s life, including her eventual membership on a school board in a majority-white school district, seemed incompatible with the significant racial and gender oppression she had experienced in early life and which she assumed would remain the status quo indefinitely. Hence, she had witnessed tremendous change and seemed more willing than Gilbert to wait patiently for more.

As this essay has shown, Harrison had been consistent in her strategy of respectability politics, openly voicing her conservative views on individual and family behavior even before her election to the school board. Seeing little improvement, Gilbert resigned after losing his “strong will to die for the cause” and perhaps his belief that his political tactics would invite white support for racial equality.¹³⁵ Harrison, however, served another eleven years on the school board, retiring in her early eighties. But her longevity was not rewarded with sweeping change. It was possible, nevertheless, that although Harrison and Gilbert constituted a small and seemingly inconsequential number of school board trustees, their inclusion as elected school board members may have inspired future white policymakers to more strongly promote issues central to equal educational opportunities.¹³⁶

¹³³Gilbert interview, 1992, p. 15-16.

¹³⁴Gilbert, Harris, and Crosby interview, 1972, pp. 2-3.

¹³⁵Gilbert interview, 1992, p. 16.

¹³⁶Dennis, “The Election and Impact of Black School Board Members,” 25.

Concluding Thoughts

The story of Harrison's and Gilbert's service on Waco's school board illustrates a notable limitation of school desegregation: that whites' historical control of public school governance remained largely intact. In analyzing the actions of the board's first two Black members, at first glance, it proves easy to see Gilbert as the Black radical intent on bending the racist will of WISD. In this same vein, a read of Harrison's seeming compliance suggests she buttressed the school board's acts of institutional white supremacy. Such interpretations fail to consider the different strategies they brought to their work on a school board in a historically white southern school district.

The stronghold of institutional racism in Waco influenced the different strategies Gilbert and Harrison adopted in their school board dealings. From the start, Gilbert assertively revealed his racial equality agenda and intent to challenge institutional white supremacy on the school board. Meeting his assertiveness with resentment, Gilbert's white colleagues directly engaged with his concerns. In contrast, during Harrison's 1970s stint on the board, antiBlack racism, coupled with strict adherence to respectability politics, led her to take a far more measured stance. Despite her longevity, Harrison, like Gilbert, accomplished little as a trustee beyond changing meeting times. As shown in this article, their white colleagues generally dismissed the issues they raised as trustees. With regard to Harrison, the board's exchanges insinuated that her seat and participation served strictly representational purposes. The board responded to Gilbert's assertive advocacy by arguing against him, ignoring his requests, and voting down his measures.

It proves unproductive to use present-day evaluation criteria and pit Harrison and Gilbert against each other, as both were striving to foster change according to their experiences and the political strategy they deemed best. Harrison's propensity to play by the rulebook of her era sharply contrasted with Gilbert's refusal to do so, distinctions that, alongside their personal histories, complicated these Black elected officials' political behavior. Despite their differences, they were both rendered less effective as leaders because of structural white supremacy on the board. Nevertheless, as two different yet important figures, Harrison and Gilbert made public school governance in Waco more representative of the city, a shift upon which future education leaders could build to agitate for justice and challenge white supremacy.

A WISD alumnae reared in Waco, **ArCasia D. James-Gallaway** is an assistant professor and ACES Fellow at Texas A&M University. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to ajamesgallaway@tamu.edu. She thanks Baylor University's Institute for Oral History for permission to use Dr. Harrison's and Rev. Gilbert's oral history interviews, and the anonymous reviewers and *HEQ* editors for their constructive feedback on this article.

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