Abstract: The development of public schooling in the South after the Civil War was a monumental task given economic devastation and the lack of an existing educational infrastructure. That problem was complicated in the early 20th Century by white supremacy in the Jim Crow South where public schools, if they existed at all, were racially segregated and grossly unequal. It was in that context that a set of northern foundations sought to “modernize” the South by promoting public, universal education there. My historical research documents the centrality of public education to state formation, especially in rural black communities, and demonstrates how education reform influenced the southern social and political structure in ways that went well beyond schooling. Foundation reformers collaborated with political actors from both the North and the South, including black and white citizens, in a dynamic process of education reform. This included African American teachers (particularly the Jeanes Teachers who were funded by northern philanthropists in the rural South), who collaborated with the foundations to expand black schooling, teacher training, and community development. My research considers rural black education reform in North Carolina and Mississippi, through extensive archival research that explores the initiatives of foundations and reformers at the top, the impact of that work at the state and local level, and the voices of southerners, including those in rural black communities. It challenges educators to reevaluate the relationships among political actors involved in school reform in the Jim Crow South. It demonstrates that schooling served to reorganize local black communities, promote stronger state and local governance, and provide opportunities for expanded black agency in education policy and political development.

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