



Nellie M. Gorbea  
Secretary of State

# Primary Source Document Transcription

Made available through the Rhode Island State Archives

## Petition for equal schooling, 1864

*This is a petition from John Hawson, Francis Jackson, and 372 others asking for equal school rights. It was received and read by the Committee on Education on January 29, 1864.*

---

To the Honorable General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island

We the undersigned Colored Citizens would respectfully represent, that we are deprived of our Just and Constitutional rights. Our Children are deprived of equal School privileges with the Children of white citizens. They are subjected to hardships that others residing in the same districts are not. They are forced to walk long distances to reach the proscribed Schools assigned them. And are deprived of the advantages of the High School altogether. The Constitution of this State makes no distinction among citizens on account of color but guarantees to colored Citizens every civil and political right and privilege, which it secures to every other class. Again the Constitution charges the General Assembly with the duty of promoting education by public schools, which like the sunlight of heaven should be free to all. The colored people of this state bear their full proportion of every public burden, are peaceable and law abiding, and are anxious to perform all the duties of citizens. We feel ourselves entitled to all the privileges belonging to that relation. Nevertheless we are subjected to serious and peculiar inconveniences. The School Houses exclusively appropriated to our Children are, in many instances so far removed from our residences, that the attendance of the pupils is of necessity irregular, and their education imperfect, therefore they do not enjoy an equal participation of the advantages for which they contribute their equitable proportion. And by the establishment of a distinction founded on the principal of cast. Our Children suffer from a feeling of social degradation, and lose the benefit which arises from equal and honorable emulation the effect of this distinction is unfavorable to their intellectual and moral improvement, and consequently to the best interest of the community at large. Besides it costs the state nearly Three Thousand Dollars annually, all of which might be saved by a simple act of justice. As these distinctions are the last relics of slavery and barbarism remaining in this state, we ask that it may be removed from between us and the light that we may be able to give our Children as wide and comprehensive an education as is accorded to others.

We therefore respectfully ask you honorable body, so to amend the laws relating to the public schools, as to provide for the admission of all the Children, irrespective of color, in the schools, for which their qualifications fit them. We only ask for equal and exact justice.

*This transcript is intended to capture the substance of the document.  
For details of capitalization, punctuation, spelling and spacing, we recommend consulting the original document.*

And for this we will ever pray.

*[The petition is signed by 12 men and 37 women. Names followed by an "x" generally indicate that the signer was illiterate; in these cases someone else wrote their name for them and they affirmed the signature with their mark, an "x."]*

---

*This primary source comes from the Rhode Island State Archives, C#0628 – Petitions to the General Assembly, Failed / Withdrawn, folder 12.*