**Purpose:**

This research examines racial discrimination in New York City public schools during the 1950s and 1960s. Discrimination in the North was more silent and subtle than in the South. Arguably, then, it was more dangerous because it was often hidden from sight. My research highlights how a group of women known as the “Harlem Nine” used the New York courts to demand integration and equality in the NYC public schooling system. By confronting racial and geographic discrimination, these mothers laid a foundation for future civil rights protests in the North. My research focuses on major actors in the Harlem Nine court case—Lawyer Paul Zuber, Judge Justine Polier, and the superintendent, Theobald—and on media coverage of the legal fight.

**Harlem Nine:**

Discrimination during the early Civil Rights Era pushed a small group of black mothers to protest the unjust public school system. Their children were forced to deal with in NYC. The Harlem Nine refused to accept that their children had to attend overcrowded, underfunded, and severely under-resourced schools. They demanded change and did not rest until their voices were heard. They formed a “Parents Committee for a Better Education” in 1956 to fight for a proper education for their children and to protest de facto school segregation. Mae Mallory, Shirley Rector, Bernice Skipwith, and Viola Waddy were among the most prominent figures. Early in the 1958 school year, the Harlem Nine kept their children home from their junior high schools; JHS 136 and JHS 139. Their goal was to gain attention from the court, and they certainly achieved that goal. The Board of Education charged the parents involved with violating the New York school attendance law. A very public legal fight ensued.

**Skipwith Case:**

The Harlem Nine’s children were declared truant after they missed up to 35 days of school in a row. The parents were brought before the New York courts. Their case was split—six of the parents were assigned to Judge Nathaniel Kaplan, while two others faced Judge Justine Wise Polier. Judge Kaplan declared the parents in his case were guilty on December 3rd, but he also ruled that the issue should be taken up by the Commissioner of Education instead of the New York courts. On December 15th, Judge Polier tried the parents of Charlene Skipwith and Sheldon Rector. Bernice and Stanley Skipwith, the parents of Charlene, were charged with neglecting their child by keeping her from school for 33 consecutive days. Attorney Paul B. Zuber represented the Skipwiths. Through shrewd use of statistics and by providing compelling evidence of the poor quality of education in the minority schools, he won out. On December 15th, Justine Wise Polier ruled that the Skipwiths were innocent. The Skipwith Case contribute greatly to the parents’ movement in Harlem by directly confronting the Board of Education on the issue of de facto segregation.

**Rise of Civil Rights:**

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s is well known. It involved the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the landmark 1954 supreme court case, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-6. These events and organizations gained nationwide attention. And they helped to inspire the Harlem Nine.

**Methods:**

My research required the use of many sources, both primary and secondary. My main focus was studying the Skipwith Case. I found and used many newspaper articles through the New York Times historical database. JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and Academic Search Complete provided some additional sources.

**Legacy/Conclusion:**

The Harlem Nine boycott came to an end after 156 days when Superintendent Theobald gave the parents permission to enroll their children in schools outside of their zoning districts. An Open Enrollment policy was implemented by the Superintendent in time for fall 1960. It allowed students to enroll in any school outside of their zone. However, this policy failed to show results and was later repealed. The Harlem Nine continued to inspired protests and boycotts over the next few decades. Even so, by 1996 New York City public schools were more segregated than they were in 1954. Although the Harlem Nine did not bring many long-term effects, their story still deserves retelling. In fact, it is perhaps more significant because it is still relevant. By bringing de facto school segregation in NYC to light, the remarkable mothers known as the Harlem Nine exposed the inequality of schools in majority black populated neighborhoods. But many issues in the education system sadly remain unresolved.