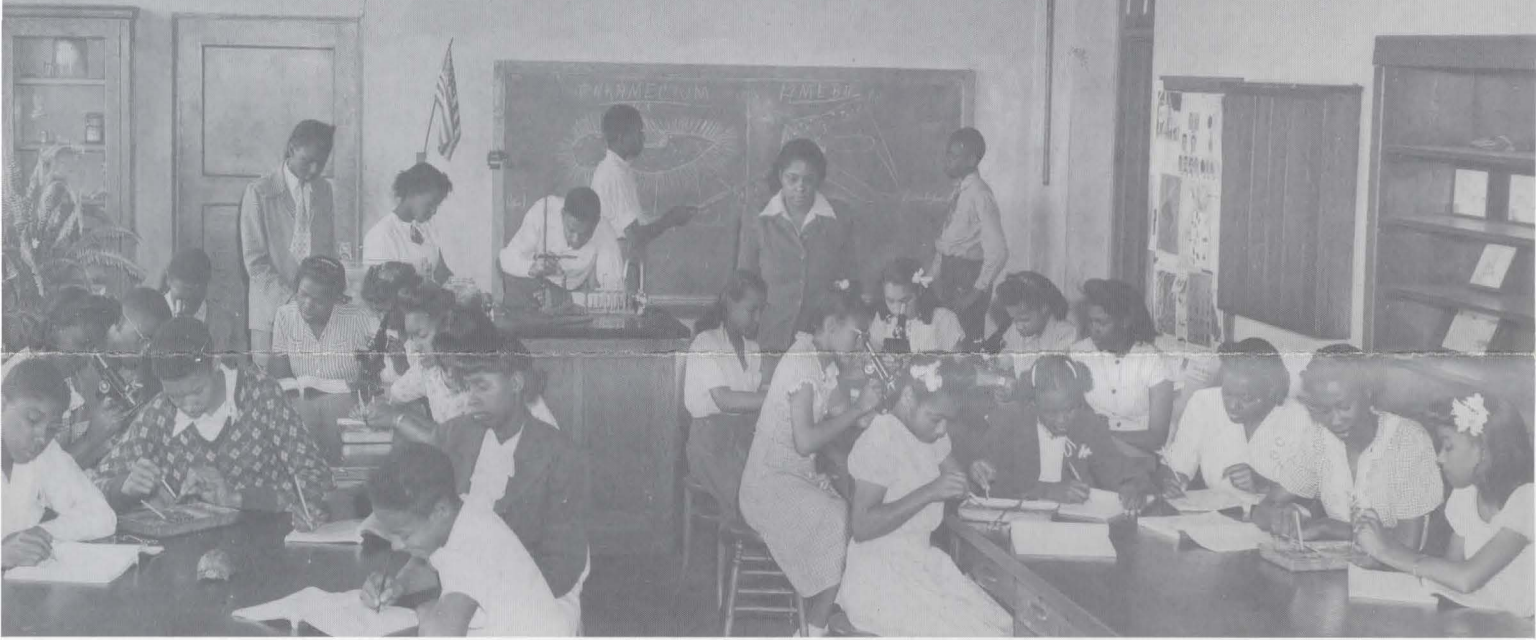




Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, 1929-1955



Biology class at Dunbar High School, 1947. Photo courtesy National Dunbar Alumni Association Historical Collection/UALR Archives.

Introduction

When it was built in 1929, Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Little Rock was the most modern and complete high school constructed for African Americans in the state. It became known as “*The Finest High School for Negro Boys and Girls in Arkansas.*”

Construction

By the late 1920s, the school for African-American students, Gibbs High School, could no longer accommodate growing class sizes. After a fire destroyed parts of Gibbs, the Little Rock School Board built Dunbar in 1929. Construction of Dunbar cost \$400,000. Because the school board spent \$1.5 million in 1927 to build the new Little Rock Senior (now Central)

High School for white students, funding was unavailable to complete Dunbar. As a result, parents and community members sought private funds to help build the school. Funding from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation and the Rockefeller General Education Fund helped pay for Dunbar’s construction.

[Dunbar] was something that the Black community could point to with pride and say that the school belonged to the Blacks...and that even though we were separate, that we did achieve educationally.

Ellen Turner Carpenter

National Dunbar Alumni Association (NDAA) Collection, University of Arkansas at Little Rock Archives and Special Collections

Who was Paul Laurence Dunbar?

Hailed by Frederick Douglass as “the most promising young colored man in America,” Paul Laurence Dunbar rose from meager beginnings to become the premier African-American poet of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Dunbar was born on June 27, 1872, in Dayton, Ohio. His parents were former slaves from Kentucky. His mother, Matilda Murphy Dunbar, worked hard to support her family after Dunbar’s father left, and she fostered a lifelong love of learning in her children.

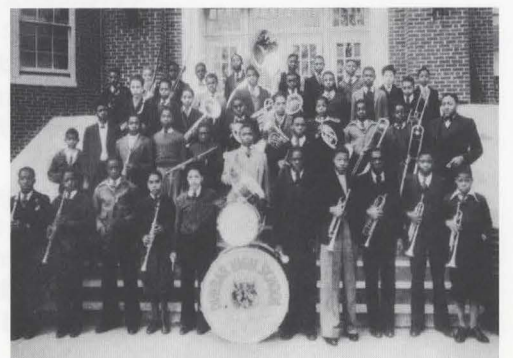
By the age of fourteen, Dunbar published poems in the *Dayton Herald*. During his lifetime his poetry was published in such mainstream journals as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Saturday Evening Post*.

Dunbar married a young writer, Alice Ruth Moore of New Orleans, and soon began working at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, from 1897-98. Dust from the

stacks of books aggravated his health problems and in 1906, Dunbar died from complications of tuberculosis.

Throughout his short life, Dunbar gave poetry recitals across the United States and Europe. His use of dialect and colorful language earned him acclaim as the “poet laureate of the Negro race.” A collection of his poems was published in 1913, seven years after his death.

In recognition of his accomplishments, many schools throughout the country are named in honor of Dunbar.



Dunbar High School Band, 1934. Photo courtesy NDAA Historical Collections/UALR Archives.

Separate and Unequal

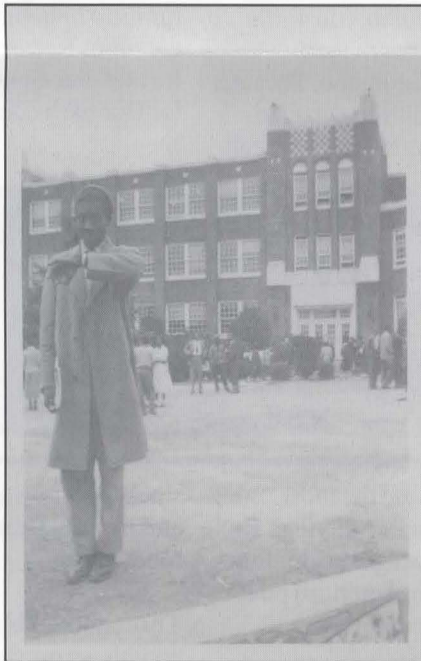
Paul Laurence Dunbar High School		Little Rock Senior High School	
\$400,000	COST	\$1,500,000	
Rosenwald Fund and Rockefeller General Education Fund	FUNDING	Little Rock School Board	
1,600	STUDENT CAPACITY	3,000	
"Hand-me-downs"	TEXTBOOKS	Purchased new	
5,000	LIBRARY BOOKS	11,000	
200,000	SQUARE FOOTAGE	600,000	
34	CLASSROOMS	100	
No gymnasium or practice fields	ATHLETIC FACILITIES	Gymnasium & stadium	
\$344/mo.	PRINCIPAL SALARIES	\$500/mo.	
Junior High, High School, Junior College	LEVELS OF INSTRUCTION	High School, Junior College	

I just couldn't wait until I finished elementary school so that I could enter Dunbar.

Boston L. Torrence, Jr.
NDAA collection/UALR Archives and Special Collections

Although Dunbar was a model school for African Americans in Arkansas before integration, facilities available to whites and African Americans remained unequal. Dunbar High School housed both a junior and senior high school, as well as a junior college. Classes emphasized vocational and liberal arts training for all pupils. Students could earn a high school

diploma, a trade certificate, or both. They also could prepare to attend college or enter the workforce, equipped with a marketable skill. The school played a large role in nurturing the children of Little Rock's African American community. Students from other parts of Arkansas came to Little Rock to live with relatives in order to have the opportunity to study at Dunbar.



Eugene Porter in front of Dunbar High School, n.d. Photo courtesy of NDAA Historical Collections/UALR Archives.

The curriculum at Dunbar provided the students with an understanding of their heritage and of African American achievements. Dunbar High School became known as a model of academic excellence for African Americans in Arkansas despite its limited facilities and funding. Dunbar gave students the foundation they needed to continue their educations and many Dunbar students earned advanced degrees.

Dunbar Magnet Middle School Today

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court mandated an end to racially segregated public schools when it rendered the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and *Brown II* decisions in 1954 and 1955, respectively. The Little Rock School Board developed a plan for gradual desegregation beginning at the high school level. In 1955, Dunbar High School became a junior high and Horace Mann opened as the new senior high school for African-American students.

Between 1955 and 1999 Dunbar served as a junior high school and now it is a Magnet Middle School, offering specialty classes in international studies. In the fall of 1980, Dunbar was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Over the years Dunbar graduates have formed nationwide alumni chapters to promote the civic, educational, and social interests of their communities.



Dunbar Magnet Middle School today. NPS Photo.