An upstart private school in Orange Park that pioneered racial integration 120 years ago won a David-vs.-Goliath legal victory against state-supported white supremacy.

Its amazing story has been mostly forgotten, but it's never too late to re-surface the past to learn from it.

Florida at the turn of the 20th century was a hotbed of racism and xenophobia. Blacks lost many of their political and civil rights. Florida's Constitution of 1885 outlawed interracial marriage, instituted a poll tax to disenfranchise black voters and imposed racial segregation in public schools.

William Sheats, Florida's first elected superintendent of public instruction, championed these changes.

Against that hostile backdrop, the Orange Park Normal and Industrial School dared to do the unthinkable.

"We do not refuse anyone an account of race," principal Amos W. Farnham declared in 1894.

The faith-based school was racially integrated more than 70 years before segregation was removed from the state constitution. Founded by the American Missionary Association to educate the children of freed slaves, it opened its doors to 26 black students, including 16 boarders, in October 1891. By fall 1892, enrollment swelled to 116 students.

The quality of education, along with a lack of nearby public options, attracted white students as well. By 1894, 35 white children were enrolled, including several who lived in the dorms. They and their black counterparts went to chapel, ate meals, played sports and learned together.

The Rev. T.S. Perry, minister of the Orange Park congregation, proudly boasted of the school's success. "On this very spot," Perry wrote, "where less than a generation ago gangs of slaves toiled under the overseer's lash, and within rifle-shot of the plantation whipping post, their children are now developing into worthy citizenship; and youth, both white and colored, are growing up into enlightened Christian manhood and womanhood."

Sheats lobbied the Legislature to shut down the school and in 1895 it passed the Sheats Law to prohibit white and black youths from being taught in the same school.

Those found guilty could be fined $150 to $500, or imprisoned three to six months.

In April 1896, the school's new principal, B.D. Rowlee, was arrested alongside five teachers, three donors and a minister. News of the arrests shuttered private schools for black children across the state.

The school's supporters vowed to fight in court. On Oct. 21, 1896, lawyers for the AMA argued before the Fourth Judicial Circuit Court. The verdict came a day later: The law was unconstitutional.

The Orange Park Normal and Industrial School would survive another 17 years, but growing racial hostility in Florida made things difficult.

When Sheats returned to office in 1913, he began work on yet another law, this one "prohibiting whites from teaching Negroes in Negro schools."

When it passed, the school finally closed in December 1913.

Today, no physical marker evokes the school's memory, and few know of its valiant fight. But the struggle to educate disadvantaged students is alive and well today. Massive achievement gaps persist.

Perhaps the story of the Orange Park school can inspire us to take bolder stands in education. At the least, it should spur us to more fully appreciate all the schools in our midst, public and private, that do heroic work every day.