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# In Baton Rouge, little to show for nation's longest desegregation case

By **ADAM NOSSITER**  
The Associated Press  
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BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — President Eisenhower was launching his re-election bid, blacks were still "negroes" in headlines and jeans sold for \$2.98 in 1956, when black schoolchildren here embarked on what has become the nation's oldest school desegregation lawsuit.

Now 47 years later, a judge who keeps the original, yellowed papers in a vault is set to bring the case to a close. But the decades of legal turns may not have achieved the lawsuit's goal of integration or made things much better for what are now plaintiffs' grandchildren.

Middle-class whites have largely abandoned this city's beleaguered, 45,000-student school system, which is now nearly 75 percent black. Money has been tight. No new schools were built between 1974 and 2002. At one school north of downtown, water leaks through stained ceiling-panels, and flakes of peeling paint must be swept from the children's' bathrooms.

"I don't know whether it should be over or not," said Mary Ann Pharr, whose name was put on the original complaint as a first or second grader — she can't remember, it's been so long. "I really don't see that many changes. If you're in a poor district you just don't have the same opportunities."

The settlement, up for final hearing in federal court Thursday, is itself a farrago of formulas to parcel out the few remaining whites: 55 percent here, 45 percent there, 15 percent here. Its proponents frankly admit its main virtue is to end the long-running suit.

"I don't think it's going to mean a whole lot for any kind of integration. I don't think that's possible now," said Carl Bankston, a Tulane University expert on desegregation in Louisiana schools.

It's an ironic twist on the simple plea of 1956, signed by Thurgood Marshall

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among others, that black children in the then-separate system be allowed to "enroll, enter, attend classes and receive instruction in the public schools on a non-segregated and non-discriminatory basis."

That plea was shunted aside, here as elsewhere in the South. Baton Rouge schools continued to operate largely as they had before.

When the lawsuit was finally heeded, 25 years after its filing, an angry judge, frustrated at the lack of integration, ordered busing. This was 1981, a decade after most places had gone through busing's contortions.

The cure was late and drastic, and white students, 60 percent of the system in 1980, immediately began fleeing. The numbers of whites in the city schools dropped from 42,000 then to only about 12,000 today.

"We would have more integration today if we had simply let the neighborhood schools do their work," said Christine Rossell, a Boston University expert on desegregation who has been the school district's consultant in prior decades.

"It's really kind of sad when you think about it. We forgot some important economic principles," Rossell said. "Which is that people vote with their feet."

Blacks who fought for the settlement bristle at the analysis of white sociologists.

"When you consider the attitudes of Baton Rougeans at the time, I would rather they left," said John Pierre, an NAACP attorney. "So what, they left. There is no rule that says you have to have whites to have a quality education system."

But in a city of 410,000 where nearly half of black schoolchildren live in poverty, whites have the money to pay for the schools. Voters consistently turned down school funding proposals, finally approving a modest one in 1998.

Why did school desegregation drag on longer in this city, praised by The New York Times in 1963 for having "overruled its governor and legislature to preserve moderate racial policies?"

Moderate did not mean pro-integration, however, and in that same year local U.S. District Judge E. Gordon West called the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision "one of the truly regrettable decisions of all times."

Judge West presided over the school desegregation case for nearly two decades, and his adherence to the new principles of integration were minimal. In 1975 he declared the case over and Baton Rouge's schools desegregated. A higher court overruled him, however, and busing and the closing of some schools was decreed.

The case dragged on. "Too much politics, too many people who didn't want to give up ground," said Samuel Moncrief, a tiny child when his name was put on the suit in 1956. "I wished it would have been settled a long time ago."

In 1996, officials still desperately trying to solve the Baton Rouge desegregation case substituted magnet schools for busing. But whites didn't come back and private school enrollment boomed. By 2000, of all the whites in school in Baton Rouge, 74 percent of them were outside the public system.

If busing had never been ordered, would the school system be better off today?

"We would still have segregated schools, racially identifiable schools, but I think there would have been a chance for integration to occur much more gradually

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and slowly," said Bankston, the Tulane sociologist.

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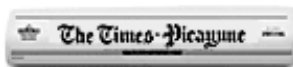
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