

Baton Rouge battling school desegregation

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - When a lawsuit was filed 45 years ago seeking a good education for blacks, they had to sit in the back of the bus, attended racially segregated schools and were outnumbered 3-to-1 by white students.

Much has changed, but the lawsuit lives on. As an estimated 52,000 students began the school year Monday, all sides in the case see no end in sight for the East Baton Rouge Parish public system's legal problems.

The federal judge who oversaw the case for 20 years got so frustrated he took advantage of his senior status last month and walked away.

"Unlike Sisyphus, who was condemned to spend eternity pushing a boulder to the top of the hill, only to have it roll back every time, this senior judge is not required to continue pushing the stone,"

Gaming

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moments and spoke to gaming boards and other legislative bodies about the lack of participation by minorities in the gaming industry.

In Las Vegas, the MGM/Mirage has taken the lead in creating a culture of diversity. During a workshop where featured speakers were supposed to include prominent officials from the major gaming entities in town, only Danny Wade, Vice Chairman of MGM/Mirage, showed up to take his seat on the dais.

During his speech, Wade thanked Gene Collins, former president of the now unchartered Las Vegas Branch of the NAACP, for "waking us up." He was referring to a speech Collins gave a year-and-a-half ago, when the MGM Grand Casino was facing the licensing board in preparation for acquisition of Mirage Resorts, Inc.

In that speech, Collins informed the board that the MGM Grand was not purchasing from minority vendors and it was not hiring minority construction companies. MGM's own figures proved Collins was right.

The company then made a commitment to diversity, and since May of 2000, Wade has led the megaresort's diversity program. He said the program focuses on four areas: employment, purchasing, construction and community relations. Diversity training was provided to all employees and is included in the new employee orientation program.

"Our ultimate goal is to educate all of our employees on diversity," Wade said. Supervisors are rewarded financially when they identify talented minority workers. Those workers are given further training and mentoring so they can move up in the company's ranks.

"We identify individuals and train them so they'll be a success," said Wade, "because tokenism failed." Wade can now boast that minorities comprise 24 percent of the company's management team.

In November 2000, only 1.5 percent of the company's purchasing dollars went to minority vendors. Since then, the number has grown to 10.9 percent, or \$38 million of the \$380 million spent by the company, Wade said. Within the past year, 23.7 percent, or \$11.5 million of the money spent by the company for construction, went to minority contractors.

"It has not been easy and we continue to struggle to find the right avenues and best ways to be effective," said Tony Gladney, Vice President of MGM/Mirage Corporate Diversity in a later interview.

"The commitment to diversity is a process that came with a price tag. Employees had to be hired and trained on issues of diversity. For instance, someone had to identify and work with minority vendors, many of whom were intimidated by the idea of doing business on a corporate level. But the cost

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U.S. District Judge John Parker said.

Blacks now outnumber whites 3-to-1, largely because of 15 years of forced busing that prodded white flight to the suburbs and creation of more private schools.

Forced busing ended after Parker allowed the Justice Department and the school board to enter into a consent decree in 1996.

The agreement encouraged racial mixing by allowing students to attend magnet schools of their choice or transfer to another regular school if they were part of the majority in their school and became part of the minority in the new one.

However, the judge complained as he bowed out of the case that nothing but disappointment had come of promises the school board made over the years to resolve the case.

Clayton Wilcox, the interim school superintendent, who is white, said the case strayed from its original intent.

"This case was filed on behalf of black children because they didn't have the resources to get the right education," he said. "I think if you asked them, they did not file for the right to sit next to white children."

True, but the resources are still missing, said Brace Godfrey, a black attorney and founder of a citizens group of

blacks and whites.

For the most part, blacks live in the inner city, attending mostly black high schools, he said.

Those schools have large numbers of uncertified teachers, and don't offer advanced courses such as calculus. And a prerequisite for calculus is Algebra I, but that isn't available in a large number of middle schools, Godfrey said.

"Say you have 10 students in middle school. Seven of them are black. Of the three whites, one is in a specialized

gifted school, leaving two whites in the regular class setting. For the most part, you'll find Algebra I taught where the two white kids go to school," he said.

The problem is getting certified teachers to teach in the inner-city schools, Godfrey said.

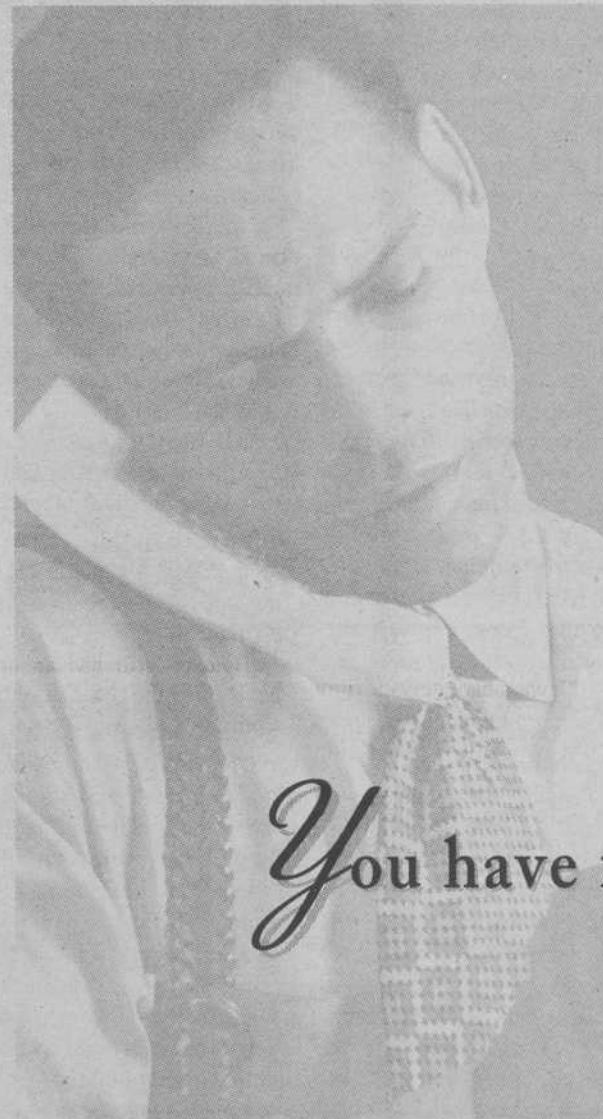
Also, some black parents are not encouraging their children to attend the magnet schools or transfer to schools with Algebra I, Godfrey acknowledged.

"A great many black par-

ents are seeing that their children get the tough courses, but not all."

Godfrey said he is not one of those who puts all the blame on the school board - a 12-member elected body that includes four blacks, roughly the same ratio as the parish population.

"One problem on all sides, I believe, is what I call 'over lawyering.' You know, you can get two lawyers on opposing sides in a room and they can keep a case going for 30 years," he said.



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