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Court Orders St. Martin School Board to Continue Desegregation Efforts

On Monday, a federal district court in Louisiana ruled that the St. Martin Parish school board is violating a 2016 desegregation order in *Thomas v. School Board of St. Martin Parish*. At trial this past March, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) and co-counsel Gideon Garter of Baton Rouge, who represent Black students in this class action, urged the court to order the board to desegregate three elementary schools, end discriminatory teacher hiring and student discipline practices, and close racial disparities in academic achievement. In its ruling, the court overwhelmingly agreed.

“Monday’s ruling confirms that St. Martin Parish failed to meet the court’s requirements set forth in its 2016 consent order by not fully addressing the extreme racial disparities within the district,” said LDF Senior Counsel Monique Lin-Luse. “Five years later, they have not fulfilled their promise to remedy decades-old discriminatory practices and policies that have prevented successful racial integration in its schools. We look forward to working closely with the district to close these gaps so that Black students in St. Martin Parish receive the quality education and equal treatment they deserve.”

St. Martin Parish enrolls about 7,000 students: 50% white and 46% Black. In the school zone for the City of St. Martinville-area, the school board operates two historically Black elementary schools with a 70% Black student body, along with the historically white Catahoula Elementary School. In the 1930s, the school board organized the school zone in its current formation and built Catahoula Elementary to intentionally segregate white students from the nearby Black students. None of the parish’s other three zones still maintain racially segregated elementary schools in this manner. The court’s ruling orders the closure of Catahoula Elementary to finally desegregate this St. Martinville-area school zone.

In addition, the court found that the school district failed to ensure equal treatment of Black students and Black teachers and allowed racial bias to affect the operation of St. Martin Parish schools. For example, the court found that Black students in the district are more likely to receive suspensions and expulsions than their white peers, which an expert determined was a product of racial bias against Black students and not other factors. Moreover, the court found that white teachers have disparaged Black students’ natural hair and, in January 2021, the superintendent punished Black teachers who wore t-shirts to commemorate the inauguration of Vice President Kamala Harris as the first Black woman and first member of a Black sorority to serve as Vice President. The court further found that the district did not take steps to close substantial racial disparities in Black students’ attainment of college preparatory diplomas despite an explicit agreement to address this inequity. Because of these findings, the court’s ruling requires the school board to hire and retain more Black teachers, implement new trainings, eliminate racial disparities in student discipline, and increase Black students’ enrollment in college preparatory programs.

Read the court's June 21, 2021 order [here](#).

Read LDF's March 2021 brief in support of further relief [here](#).

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation's first civil and human rights law organization. LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF. Follow LDF on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).