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LDF Files Brief in St. John Parish School Desegregation Case to Address Environmentally Hazardous Conditions at Fifth Ward Elementary School

On June 12, 2024, the [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) filed a [brief](#) in its ongoing St. John the Baptist Parish school desegregation case in Louisiana seeking to close Fifth Ward Elementary and relocate its students to more environmentally safer facilities at La Place Elementary School.

Fifth Ward Elementary is a school in St. John the Baptist Parish serving over 300 students, nearly all of whom are Black and Hispanic, in grades pre-kindergarten through 4th grade. The school is located a few hundred feet away from Denka Performance Elastomer, the only industrial plant in the nation that emits chloroprene. Chloroprene is a chemical compound that environmental scientists have determined when inhaled, especially by small children, can cause cancer and genetic mutations.

"For the safety and health of all students who attend Fifth Ward Elementary, it is paramount that they be relocated and that the school be closed immediately," said **Victor Jones, LDF Senior Counsel**. "Scientific experts have advised the St. John the Baptist Parish School Board that Fifth Ward Elementary students face unacceptably high cancer risks, and other health risks, from chloroprene exposure. But the Board has not closed the school or relocated the children of Fifth Ward Elementary to safer facilities. Since the Board has not acted, we are seeking a court order in the federal desegregation case requiring closure of the school."

LDF represents a class of Black children in St. John the Baptist Public Schools, fighting to ensure that all students, regardless of race, are afforded equal educational opportunities, including ensuring that children are educated in school facilities that are healthy and safe. The decades-long federal school desegregation case was originally filed by LDF in March 1963.

St. John Parish is [one of the most highly industrialized parishes](#) in Louisiana and has some of the highest rates of toxic substance releases and air emission events in the state. In October 2022, the Environmental Protection Action (EPA) [submitted a letter](#) to the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) and the Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) recommending that children attending Fifth Ward Elementary be relocated away from Denka due to their significant risk of exposure to chloroprene.

Read LDF's brief [here](#).

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Founded in 1940, the [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) is the nation's first civil rights law organization. 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 Legal Defense Fund or LDF. Please note that 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.