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Decades Later, Desegregation Still on the Docket in Little Rock

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In the 1954 case of Brown vs. Board of Education, the United States Supreme Court declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students to be unconstitutional. Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas became a focal point of the fight for integration soon after in 1957, when nine African-American students, known as the Little Rock Nine, were denied entrance to the school in defiance of the ruling. This article from National Public Radio reports on the issue of desegregation throughout United States history and the problems that still exist today. As you read, take notes on the text's central ideas and how it presents the current issue of segregation—how does it resemble or differ from the 1954 Supreme Court ruling?

[1] In Little Rock, Ark., on Monday, a federal judge is considering a deal that would end one of the longest-running and most notorious¹ school desegregation cases in the country. The state, its largest school districts and lawyers representing black students have agreed to settle a complex lawsuit over unequal education.

Little Rock has long been the symbol of the South's violent reaction to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that declared school segregation unconstitutional.



"4 - The U.S. Civil Rights Movement" is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0.

In 1957, nine black students² who tried to integrate Central High School were met by an angry white crowd.

President Eisenhower sent federal troops to force integration back then. Just about ever since, federal courts have been involved in Little Rock school affairs. That oversight is poised to end pending Monday's hearing before U.S. District Judge D. Price Marshall.

[5] "It is the last sequel in a lineage of cases going back nearly 60 years," says longtime political columnist Ernie Dumas. He says this moment is symbolic for the country in that it's a measure of the success of *Brown v. Board*.

"The Supreme Court said at the time that you've got to desegregate and end these disparities and take us forward to a glorious day when education will be equal for all Americans," Dumas says. "As we know, in Little Rock and the rest of the South and the rest of the country, it hasn't really happened quite that way."

1. **Notorious (adjective):** generally or widely known; infamous
 2. These students were referred to as the Little Rock Nine. Their names are Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Jefferson Thomas, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Minnijean Brown, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Thelma Mothershed, and Melba Pattillo Beals.

What happened instead was white flight from cities, so that by the 1980s, new, affluent and mostly white suburban schools developed in a ring around Little Rock.

"We could not continue to have any level of integrated education, racial or socioeconomic," says attorney Chris Heller, who has represented the city school district for more than 30 years.

Little Rock sued the state and the districts around it for maintaining a segregated education system. Court-ordered remedies expanded the district's boundaries to catch some white flight, and established inter-district transfers and magnet schools. The state picked up much of the tab.

- [10] If the judge approves, the settlement would phase out those programs and the state's \$70 million-a-year payments, even though the makeup of Little Rock schools hasn't changed much. It's about 66 percent black, and more than 70 percent of students get free or reduced-priced lunches.

"This is not a joyful day for African-American people in America," says attorney John Walker, who represents black students in the Little Rock desegregation case.

He acknowledges there have been pockets of progress in Little Rock, which has retained more white students than other Southern cities. But Walker says the state has not lived up to its constitutional obligation to provide an equal educational opportunity.

"The only thing that's been achieved here is that the laws are gone," Walker says. "There's nothing that overtly allows students to be segregated ... on the basis of race."

Walker says the legal system of segregation has been replaced by a defacto³ system.

- [15] Arkansas Attorney General Dustin McDaniel pushed for the settlement. He argues that the desegregation case itself sparked a new wave of public school flight.

"If there's one thing we know about parents it's that they're nervous about putting their kids into schools where there's ongoing turmoil, uncertainty, litigation⁴ [and] tension," says McDaniel. "They want to go where things are comfortable and certain and they're focused entirely on educating their kids rather than fighting their own financial or legal battles."

The federal judge is expected to approve the settlement. But one school district, in the county that surrounds Little Rock, will remain under the court's scrutiny.

Pulaski County Superintendent Jerry Guess says his district struggles with ongoing racial disparities in facilities, academic achievement and discipline.

The desegregation case has been a great safety net for students, he says, but can't solve the underlying issue: race.

- [20] "I have had a lot of people comment about their kids going to schools where black students are and not wanting to," Guess says. "And I believe that's still, unfortunately, a truth about human nature."

3. Defacto is a Latin expression which, in the context of law, means "in practice but not necessarily ordained by law" or "in practice or actuality, but not officially established."

4. **Litigation** (*noun*): the process of taking legal action

A truth, he says, that courts don't have the ability to change.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following statements best describes a central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Segregation and unequal education are still problems in the United States, fueled by years of racial and socioeconomic differences and prejudices.
 - B. Legal action is the only course of action to secure desegregation.
 - C. Despite significant improvements in the racial desegregation of schools, many people are still dissatisfied with the inequities of the educational system.
 - D. Bias and prejudice are preventing full integration of Southern schools.

2. PART A: What does the term “disparities” most closely mean as used in paragraph 6? [RI.4]
 - A. Differences
 - B. Gaps
 - C. Inequalities
 - D. Lack of progress

3. PART B: Which phrase from the text best helps the reader infer the meaning of “disparities” as it is used in paragraph 6? [RI.1]
 - A. “you’ve got to desegregate”
 - B. “take us forward to a glorious day”
 - C. “where education will be equal”
 - D. “hasn’t really happened quite that way”

4. According to the text, which TWO of the following factors are most responsible for preventing an equal and complete integration of Little Rock’s educational system? [RI.3]
 - A. Magnet schools
 - B. “White flight”
 - C. A lack of funding or budget problems
 - D. An established history of racial and socioeconomic inequality
 - E. Anti-integration protesters and demonstrators
 - F. Complicated legal and financial battles

5. Reread the following quote from paragraph 13: “The only thing that’s been achieved [RI.5] here is that the laws are gone.... There’s nothing that overtly allows students to be segregated ... on the basis of race.” How does this quote contribute to the article’s central ideas?

6. How does the author apply constitutional principles/legal reasoning in the text? [RI.8]
- A. The author deems segregation unconstitutional and condemns this settlement which would end desegregation.
 - B. The author acknowledges the historical declaration of racial segregation in schools as unconstitutional, but also reports on the lack of successful integration in modern Little Rock.
 - C. The author applies legal reasoning to the issue of the settlement, pointing out that this is the only recourse in a case in which unconstitutionality hasn’t much improved the problem of segregation.
 - D. The author overall remains objective and does not comment on the issue at all.

