

PRESS RELEASE

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Immediate Release***Immediate Release**

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During the period 2003- 2005, a local community group in West Greenville organized nearly 100 East Carolina University students in conjunction with the university's Black Student Union to begin addressing the growing achievement gap between black and white students in Pitt County Schools. These students spent thousands of hours providing tutoring services, helping with homework, and mentoring at-risk students in West Greenville's poor neighborhoods. The group began to address obvious disparities between the treatment of black and white students and Pitt County schools, excessive dropout rate for black students, disproportionate low SAT scores for black students, excessive out of school suspensions for black students, and the lack of diversity in the teaching staff and school administrations. Thus was born the Pitt County Coalition for Educating Black Children ("Coalition"). For a number of years, the Coalition worked closely with Pitt County School Superintendent Dr. Beverly Reep to introduce culturally responsive teacher training and address issues which adversely impact black, Hispanic, disabled, and other minority students

In 2005, Dr. Reep promoted a student assignment plan designed to eliminate racial isolation at Sadie Saulter Elementary School and to improve diversity in the district. The plan was opposed by a vocal group of white parents organized under the auspices of the Greenville Parents Association (GPA), which filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR), claiming reverse discrimination. As part of a settlement of the complaint with OCR, Pitt County Schools agreed to ask the U.S. District Court to reopen the original school desegregation cases (pursuant to which the board was obliged to address ongoing segregation) and determine whether the orders in those cases were still in effect. In 2008 the Coalition organized individual parents who, along with the Coalition, were substituted by the court for the original named plaintiffs in the 1967 case.

In 2009, Pitt County schools entered into a settlement agreement with both the GPA and the Coalition. The settlement was approved by U.S. District Court Judge Malcolm Howard, who stated that the school board needed to fulfill its obligation to fully address the legacy of segregation and ordered that "the parties work together to achieve unitary status."

"Unitary status" is achieved by the local school district when it has eliminated all vestiges of de jure racial segregation to the extent practicable. In this regard, the Coalition noted that Pitt County Schools did not make significant progress on improving the diversity of its teaching staff or school administration since the original court orders were implemented. The Coalition also noted the district's disproportionately high suspension rates, dropout rates, low SAT scores, and significant achievement gap. The Coalition pledged to work with the district to resolve these problems but was met with resistance by factions on the Board of Education who appeared to be adverse to the superintendent's efforts to promoting diversity.

In 2011 the school board adopted a student assignment plan which would increase segregation in the district and open the brand new Lakeforest Elementary School as the district's most segregated, 88% non-white. In defending the decision to reject an alternative plan that produced much greater diversity, certain Board of Education members noted that over a thousand white students fled the district to avoid attending the more integrated schools under the 2005 student assignment plan.

The Coalition and individual plaintiffs challenged the 2011 assignment plan for increasing segregation in the district as a violation of the 2009 settlement agreement. Judge Howard ruled against the Coalition but was subsequently overturned by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. On remand, the School Board moved to be declared unitary. Following a week-long trial in July 2013, the District Court granted the motion and closed the case, and as a result declined to rule on the validity of the 2011 reassignment plan. The plaintiffs again appealed to the Fourth Circuit, which on June 3 issued an order affirming the ruling 2-1, over a powerful dissent by Judge James Wynn.

The plaintiffs and their counsel have reviewed the appellate decision, and although disappointed by the ruling, have decided the time has come to end the litigation process over the unitary status issue. We continue to believe these efforts were necessary and important, and know that our advocacy has compelled Pitt County Schools to work toward improving diversity in staffing, reducing disproportionate suspensions, and reducing the achievement gap.

The decision to discontinue this particular fight through the courts in no way constitutes a compromise of our commitment to diversity and high quality education for all children and we will continue to monitor Pitt County Schools and engage the community around issues of equity, diversity and equal educational opportunities for all children in Pitt County.