

NAACP NEWS

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Derrick Johnson
State President



Mississippi State Conference

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Media Contact: 601-353-8452

MS NAACP Media • media@naacpms.org

Decades-long battle to integrate public schools in a Mississippi Delta community concludes with new settlement

March 14, 2017 – On March 13, 2017, the federal district court adopted an agreement between parties of a five-decade long school desegregation case reached regarding the Cleveland School District’s middle and high schools. This agreement will, for the first time in history, ensure all students in the 7th through 12th grades have equal access to educational resources.

This agreement adheres closely to the federal district court’s order from May 13, 2016 requiring integration of the Cleveland School District. In that Order, the federal court adopted a desegregation plan developed by the U.S. Department of Justice, a party to this case along with the Private Plaintiffs. The plan was developed in consultation with experts on school desegregation and school facilities, and with parent and community engagement. Today’s agreement achieves integration by grade level in the 7th-12th grades, and honors the history and culture of the historically all-black schools that operated under the formerly segregated system.

In 1965, 131 African American schoolchildren and their parents initiated this legal action, challenging the District’s practice of discriminating on the basis of race in the operation of segregated public schools. Initiated ten years after the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision and its progeny, the Cleveland community’s legal claims were emblematic of the ongoing efforts to secure equality of opportunity in public education. Finally, after five decades, 7-12th grade students in Cleveland will enjoy a unified school system, without regard for race.

“We applaud this historic victory from our legal system. It is a victory that stands for equality, and upholds our courts’ long-standing commitment to sustaining public schools that serve all children equally in this great nation,” stated Derrick Johnson, President of the Mississippi State Conference of the NAACP. “The parties have taken the moral high ground, putting aside differences, to unite a community and its children. This victory will reverberate in Cleveland for generations to come.”

Plaintiff Lenden Sanders said “When I graduated from Cleveland School District’s East Side High School, it was all black and had been since it was opened. When my daughter graduated, same thing, and when my twin boys graduated it was the same thing. East Side is a wonderful school that nurtures students, but it was time to put aside racial divisions so that the children, both black and white, could learn, grow and thrive together

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