

FEDERAL LAWSUIT CALLS FOR ONE COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEM

Fayetteville— a group of Robeson County parents filed suit here Wednesday in U.S. District Court in an effort to put an end to what they consider to be the poor quality of public education available to their children; the duplicative and inefficient use of tax dollars earmarked for the schools; the perpetuation of racial segregation, especially through the planned construction of two new high schools; artificially contrived school district boundary lines; and "Tokenism" in the place of true integration of school students and faculty populations.

Named as defendants are five Robeson County school systems, the Robeson County Board of Commissioners, the N.C. Superintendent of Public Instruction, the State Board of Education, and the Secretaries of the U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services and the Department of Education. A sixth Robeson school system, Maxton, is slated to merge with the county system and is, therefore, excluded from the suit.

Concentrating on the federal statutes that mandate equal educational opportunity for all students, the suit avoids mention of the quality of education provided in Robeson County and deals only with tax dollars as they are used to support segregation. However, a spokesman for the parents, who are represented by Raeford attorney Philip A. Diehl, said that both quality of education and its cost are at the heart of the suit.

"We believe that our children are being denied the kind of education they deserve and for this we, the taxpayers of Robeson County, are paying far in

excess of what good management would require," commented one of the parents. "You cannot operate five separate school systems in a county of about 90,000 without duplicating many of the costs."

The parents back up their claims regarding the quality of education by pointing to statistics compiled by the State. In 1978-79, for example, competency testing for 11th grade students resulted in the following failure rates:

Robeson County System, 23 percent reading, 31 percent math; St. Pauls System, 14 percent reading, 24 percent math; Fairmont System, 19 percent reading, 25 percent math; Lumberton System, 10 percent reading, 16 percent math; Red Springs System, 15 percent reading, 17 percent math.

For the same year, the average dropout rate for all systems in the county was 9.25 percent, representing a

range from Fairmont's high of 11.5 percent to Red Springs' low of 7.8 percent.

These figures, among the worst in the State, are to be compared with the total per student expenditures by each of the school systems, say the parents.

"Our schools are reasonably well funded. There were only three systems in the State that received more federal money than the Robeson County administrative unit last year. Yet they continue to turn out students who are among the most poorly educated. We want to know why."

The plaintiffs point to at least one possible answer: local contributions to school funds. In the 1977-78 school year, while ranking fourth in federal funds, the Robeson County unit ranked near the bottom of the list (132nd) in local contributions.

"Local interest must be backed by local dollars," they say. "Perhaps no local dollars indicate little or no local interest."

paid fifty cents to cross Little Marsh Swamp and travel on the Plank Road in Fayetteville.

The toll house and Plank Road were constructed in 1848.

THREE NEW SCHOOLS

Contributing to the urgency of the lawsuit, according to the parents, are two proposed high schools—a new \$4.5 million facility slated to serve as a consolidated school for the western section of the county and a consolidated school for the northwestern area to be housed in the Rex-Rennett School. That facility would be renovated at an approximate cost of \$1.5 million. The third is a consolidation of the Ashpole and Rowland High Schools.

The plaintiffs contend that the three high schools have been proposed for locations that will maintain current racial identifications.

The western and northwestern consolidated high schools will have a predominantly Indian population, while the southern school will have a Black student majority. An outgrowth of these three high schools, says the suit, will be "to provide space for further expansion of predominantly White subdivision in the vicinity of Lumberton..."

Construction of the Pembroke area high school is scheduled to begin this summer.

"These new high schools are important symbols," says a spokesman for the parent group. "They are strategically located in order to keep the racial lines just as they were prior to 1954. If they ever open their doors to students, we will have opened the doors for another fifty years of segregation."

Segregation, according to the plaintiffs, has been a matter of common practice in Robeson County involving all the various Boards of Education. Each of the municipal school systems has been permitted to allow school attendance from select subdivisions and areas lying outside the town's geographic boundaries. The Robeson County Board of Education is involved in this since it establishes boundary lines for the county—and therefore for the municipal administrative units.

Boundary manipulations in the various administrative units have resulted in clearly defined racial identities. For example, the Lumberton district is predominantly White, even though there are within its boundaries schools that have Black and Indian majorities. Fairmont and Red Springs are predominantly Black and Robeson County administrative unit is predominantly Indian.

Within each of the administrative units—regardless of their ultimate racial identification—are schools with clear, and sometimes overwhelming racial majorities. For example:

Tanglewood (Lumberton unit) 92% White
South Lumberton 99% Black
West Lumberton (Lumberton unit) 99% Black

West Lumberton (Lumberton unit) 78% Indian

Southside (Robeson unit) 59% Black

East Robeson (Robeson unit) 66% White

Union Elementary (Robeson unit) 99% Indian

The result of the various school attendance districts is that nowhere in Robeson County do school populations reflect the county's total student population ratios: 30% Black, 28% White, and 42% Indian.

The parents are concerned

not only with student populations, but with faculty and staff ratios as well. They contend that faculty and staff tend to reflect student populations in individual schools rather than the total student population. "... (only) under the threat of sanction, have the Boards of Education... made any attempt to desegregate staff and faculty assignments, and such attempts have only been accomplished on a token basis."

A FEW TOO MANY

The suit which was filed today does not contain the word "merger"—that being a political, rather than legal, decision—but it does seek "a unitary and non-discriminatory public school system" for all the county's students without regard to the geographic boundaries of individual administrative units.

Historically, the concept of a single school program is one which has been bandied about periodically for years. It was the recommendation of a blue-ribbon study commission in 1970 and it has been variously fought for and warred against since the '60s. No other county in North Carolina operates more than three separate systems.

In 1968, SOUTHERN EDUCATIONAL REPORT published an article that looked at Robeson County's complex programs with an attitude approaching wide-eyed amazement. Looking at the bus service provided to students, the article stated:

"...For example, the county system operates a single bus service for all six districts, and each day 249 buses crisscross the county, covering 9,000 miles to serve 16,000 pupils. Even before desegregation, there was considerable movement of students across the boundaries of the six districts, and that movement continues; the county system operates a few schools which are located inside the township districts, and those districts have some students whose homes are outside the township boundaries."

The article continues to report that a Florida county school system, "which is about 100 square miles larger than Robeson, operates 100 fewer buses in its consolidated school system, even though its enrollment is almost four times as large as Robeson County's six school districts combined."

Little has changed in the dozen years since that article was published, say the plaintiffs. The Robeson County Board of Education still operates a single bus service for the entire county. At present it operates 245 buses to transport 16,260 students approximately 1,871,850 miles each year. "With today's fuel and maintenance costs, Hillsborough County, Florida, is getting a real bargain," says a spokesman for the parents.

Yet the parents who have filed this suit state loudly and clearly that it isn't just money that they want to save.

"Our county has been divided racially by our schools. The Blacks have the south; the Indians have the northwest; the Whites have Lumberton and the east. Who made this arrangement and how does it affect our children? asks one parent.

"We believe that the best education for our children will be the result of unified goals, of equal allocation of resources, and of a true integration of the best Robeson County has to offer—her people."

MY NAME IS LUMBEE

My name is Lumbee—
My perverters would say Lumber.
Just a crooked little river,
44 miles in length.
But I know many secrets.
And I fathered a people.
And few there should be who would harm me.

My name is Lumbee.
I join Drowning Creek
At the one end,
And the Little Peedee
On the Other.

Why do people deny I exist?
I who have birthed them?
I who have nursed them,
Like a mother from my bosom?
Am I really unworthy of them?
Or are they really unworthy of Me?
They have fished in my cool waters,
And they have swum in my swift stream.

Yet they have despised me.
They have rejected me.
And they have scorned the father,
The father who fathered them.
And they have heaped abuse upon my name

For my name is Lumbee.
What have I done to deserve disfavor?
Have I not harbored them?
Have I not hidden them?
Have I not kept their very lives safe
in times of war and peace?

And have I not lulled their
Restless children to sleep at night
With the gentle trickle of me.
Oh, listen to my sad murmuring,
And tell me, do tell me,
For which of these things
Do you now persecute me?

—Lew Barton



FIRST FAIRMONT WAREHOUSE

The first tobacco warehouse in Fairmont was the Union City Warehouse. It was located where the A.D. Lewis Store now stands.

There are now ten warehouses in Fairmont.

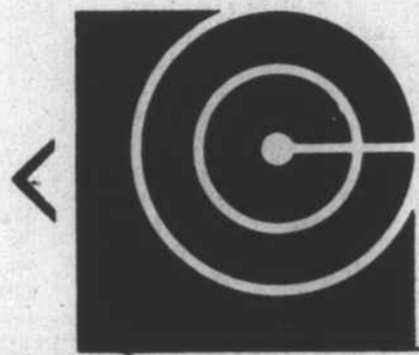
PROCTOR LAW BUILDING

Proctor Law Building is one of the oldest buildings in Lumberton. It was built in 1830 and is located at the corner of Elm and 16th Streets, downtown Lumberton.

The Proctor Law Building was restored by Historic Robeson, Inc. Mr. Woodrow Pruitt is the president.

FAMOUS PLANK ROAD

The belief, traditionally, has been that lumber used in the bridge which gave Lumber Bridge its name was used later in a toll house site where travelers



LUMBERTON — ROBESON COUNTY

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