

School's race rule prompts mom to pull kids out, AP, 2010

By HOLBROOK MOHR (AP) – 5 days ago

JACKSON, Miss. — A policy intended to achieve racial equality at a north Mississippi school has long meant that only white kids can run for some class offices one year, black kids the next. But Brandy Springer, a mother of four mixed race children, was stunned when she moved to the area from Florida and learned her 12-year-old daughter couldn't run for class reporter because she wasn't the right race.

The rules sparked an outcry on blogs and other websites after Springer contacted an advocacy group for mixed-race families. The NAACP called for a Justice Department investigation — not surprising in a state with a history of racial tension dating to the Jim Crow era.

By Friday afternoon, the Nettleton School District announced on its website that it would no longer use race in school elections.

Superintendent Russell Taylor posted a statement saying the practice had been in place for 30 years, dating back to a time when school districts across Mississippi came under close scrutiny from the U.S. Justice Department over desegregation.

"It is the belief of the current administration that these procedures were implemented to help ensure minority representation and involvement in the student body," the statement said. "It is our hope and desire that these practices and procedures are no longer needed."

Springer, who moved to Lee County from Florida in April, said her daughter was told the office of sixth-grade class reporter at Nettleton Middle School was available only to black students this year.

Her anger grew when she saw school election guidelines that allowed only whites to run for class president this year. In alternating years, the positions would be reversed so blacks could run for president and whites could hold other positions, district officials said.

Even if the rule is an attempt to ensure black and white participation, Springer said diversity is no longer a black and white issue, with a growing number of mixed-race children, Hispanics and other ethnicities attending school together.

The school agreed, saying in the statement that it "acknowledges and embraces the fact that we are growing in ethnic diversity and that the classifications of Caucasian and African-American no longer reflect our entire student body."

Springer is white. Her two older children, including the sixth grader, are half Native American. Her two younger children have a black father.

"How are they supposed to be classified?" she asked.

"My main concern is that the object of school is to prepare people for life. An employer could never do this: Advertise a position for a white man only or a black man only," she said. "This is not a lesson we want to teach."

The changes in school elections may have come too late for Springer. Springer said she moved to another school district last week and pulled her kids from Nettleton Middle School.

School administrators did not immediately respond to messages seeking further comment left Friday by The Associated Press.

Nettleton is a town of about 2,000 people with a population that is about 66 percent white and 32 percent black.

Springer's plight demonstrates the complexities faced not only by interracial families, but by school officials trying to achieve racial equality in a state known for tensions between blacks and whites. The school district also manipulated prom and homecoming elections so that the outcome is an equal division of blacks and whites.

Springer and others worried that could leave out Hispanics, Asians or any other student from another race or ethnicity, Springer said.

Springer's story spread rapidly on the Internet after she contacted a website for mixed families — mixedandhappy.com.

Suzy Richardson, the website's founder and the mother of four mixed-race children, said she and her husband have "raised our children to tell them they are black and white. They're half of me and half of dad."

"It really made me upset (to hear Springer's story). The message that were sending to kids is that they have to choose one side of who they are," she said. "The message that we're sending our children is that we do things based on race."

Before the school announced it was changing its practices, Charles Hampton, a vice president of the Mississippi NAACP, said he would ask the U.S. Justice Department to investigate.

"That's something that shouldn't be happening anywhere in America, but we still have pockets of it happening at certain schools," Hampton said. "The local community needs to get involved and demand they change the policy."Copyright © 2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.