

# The Times-Picayune was wrong to fight school desegregation: Editorial Regret

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By The Times-Picayune Editorial Board

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*Editorial Regret revisits opinions from The Times-Picayune's 181-year past. If there's an issue or historic event you would like us to explore, email [latitude@nola.com](mailto:latitude@nola.com).*

It was always a lie that separate schools for black and white children were in any way equal. In 1948, 84 percent of New Orleans' black elementary schools were declared "unfit for use," The Times-Picayune reported in "Together Apart," its 1993 series on race.

The U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 declaring segregated public schools unconstitutional was just and inevitable.

But The Times-Picayune's editorial board, along with many others in the white business community, didn't see it that way then.

The day after the court ruled in 1954, our newspaper's editorial said the decision would "do no service either to education or racial accommodation." On Nov. 15, 1960, the day after four little girls integrated two New Orleans elementary schools under court order, the editorial headline was: "Dreadful Day Comes at Last."



"The Orleans parish school board, the governor, the attorney-general and members of the Legislature have worked hard to avoid even token integration. We join more than a million fellow citizens in Louisiana in regretting that their efforts did not achieve complete success," the editorial said.

It ended with resignation: "So far as we are concerned, we don't like school integration any better in 1960 than we did in 1954, when we urged a relentless legal fight against it: but it doesn't do any good to adopt an ostrich attitude and stick our heads in the sands."

The newspaper argued against "violence, disorder and intemperate actions of any kind" in that editorial, as it had done at other moments. And it grudgingly told readers they would have to accept integration. But The Times-Picayune was solidly on the wrong side of this momentous issue.

There is no way to know how our community would have responded to school desegregation if The Times-Picayune had used its powerful platform to argue for full acceptance of integration.

But history shows that New Orleans missed the moment for integration to be accepted during the years that the newspaper and the business community resisted it. By 1970, New Orleans schools had only 4 percent white students. They had fled to private and parochial schools or to other parishes. And the city's schools have remained largely segregated ever since. Post-Katrina, only 9 percent of students are white.

"The Picayune had a great opportunity, and we didn't take it," Bill Minor, who was The Times-Picayune's correspondent in Jackson, Miss., for 30 years, said in "Together Apart" in 1993. "Civil rights was the biggest story of the day, and the Picayune didn't understand it."

"Other newspapers in the South did a much better job on this issue," University of New Orleans historian Joe Logsdon said in 1993. "When desegregation came, everybody thought New Orleans would be a good place to start. But the newspaper didn't give any leadership."

There was a perfect opportunity to be a leader. New Orleans had been home to Homer Plessy, who boarded a whites-only rail car on June 7, 1892, at Royal and Press streets. He challenged his arrest, but the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against him in 1896, keeping in place Louisiana's law requiring "equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races."

That wrongheaded view wasn't corrected by the Supreme Court until its school desegregation ruling 58 years later. Mr. Plessy was no longer living, but his city could have honored his fight by being a model for desegregation.

That didn't happen, of course. And black children in New Orleans have continued to suffer because of it.

When white families left the school system, many of them stopped caring about whether children in New Orleans public schools had good teachers and decent buildings. That attitude is changing, but even the rebuilding of the badly damaged system post-Katrina hasn't brought equity.

There are more successful schools in New Orleans than there were before the disaster, but thousands of children are stuck in subpar schools. Almost all of the students who are in D- and F-rated schools are black. They deserve much better options.

Our challenge today, 64 years after the Brown ruling, is to work together to make sure all city children have access to a quality education. The Times-Picayune clearly wasn't always committed to that, but we are now.

