Redesign not easing school racial ratios

By CURT EYSINK
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The East Baton Rouge Parish school system's redesign and desegregation plan isn't having much success desegregating the parish's public schools, according to school-by-school enrollment figures released Wednesday.

Those figures show 32 of the 79 redesign schools now have more lopsided race ratios than they did during the years before they were included in the plan. Meanwhile, the ratios of only 18 redesign schools have improved and 29 others have not changed significantly.

A Morning Advocate examination of enrollment figures also indicates that the length of time various schools have been operating under the plan has had little impact on their ability to integrate.

The 12 schools that piloted the redesign plan in the 1988-89 school year appear on balance to have had no more success desegregating than the 17 that were added in August this year as part of the plan's fourth cycle.

Of the 12 pilot schools, five have better ratios, five have worse ratios and two are unchanged. Of the latest schools added, three have better ratios, three have worse ratios and 11 are unchanged.
Redesign has been masquerading as a desegregation plan for the past four or five years. Now the facts are coming in,” said Robert Williams, the desegregation lawyer for the local NAACP branch. “It is not what it is publicly touted to be. It is not a desegregation plan.”

Williams said he has routinely approved of the School Board’s attempts to expand the plan because he has never believed it has anything to do with desegregation.

However, School Board President Eva Legard said she’s along way from folding her support for the plan and believes it should be given at least another two more years to prove itself.

“If it doesn’t (succeed by) then, then I’ll say we ought to really put all our belief in what redesign can do and maybe add something,” she said.

“I just hope we will give redesign a chance to do what it can do. I know it’s not going to desegregate all the schools,” but it’s better than not having the plan, Legard said. “I still have the dream that it will be successful.”

She said student overcrowding in at least half the schools in the system has cut down on the number of transfers, thereby cutting down on the effectiveness of the plan.

Superintendent Bernard Weiss, the plan’s architect, did not return a message left at his office Wednesday afternoon. He could not be reached at his home Wednesday evening.

However, last year Weiss released projections by his staff that showed the redesign schools would have had considerably more lopsided race ratios had redesign not been implemented.

Weiss was charged by the School Board when he was hired in 1987 to find a way to end a 1981 federal court ordered desegregation plan that uses cross-parish busing to put black and white children into the same schools.

Redesign was intended to be an overlay to the federal court busing plan, enabling the school system to bus students from one school to another as long as the transfers did not conflict with the 1981 order or have a negative effect on integration.

Under redesign, parents can volunteer to send their children to redesign schools outside regular attendance zones to help desegregation, and, in return, the school system will offer free bus rides and enhanced programs.

Updated figures on how many people applied for redesign transfers and how many have been accepted have not been finalized by the school system. However, the transfers appear to have had a minimal effect on integration.

The study of enrollment information also shows:

- The redesign plan appears to have had the least effect at the middle-school level. Of the 14 middle schools operating under redesign, only Central Middle has a race ratio that has moved significantly closer to the parishwide ratio.

- Its student population has grown from 41 percent black last year to 44 percent black this year, its first year in redesign.

Among elementary schools, 22 have worse ratios, 14 have better ratios and 17 are unchanged. Among high schools, four have worse ratios, three have better ratios and five are unchanged.

- October enrollment figures for the past five years show the percentage of black students has continued to grow from 54 percent in 1987 to 56 percent this year, even though blacks make up only about a third of the parish population.

- Only six redesign schools have gone from being considered segregated before they were added to the plan to being considered integrated now. Another six have swung in the other direction.

- According to school system officials, a school is considered to be integrated if the ratio of its students falls within 15 percent of the systemwide ratio. Under that system, schools with enrollments that are 41-71 percent black students would be considered integrated this year.