U.S. Department of Justice

Civil Rights Division

Office of the Assistant Attorney General *Washington, D.C. 20530*

MAY 25 1990

Honorable Mike Moore
Attorney General
State of Mississippi
P. O. Box 220
Jackson, Mississippi 39205-0220

Dear Mr. Attorney General:

This refers to your January 16, 1990, request for reconsideration of the March 31, 1989, objection interposed pursuant to Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 1973c, to Section 47 of the Uniform School Law of 1986, Chapter 492, insofar as it repeals Section 37-7-611 of the Mississippi Code. As you are aware, Section 611 deals with the modification of municipal school district boundaries in Mississippi when the district's parent city annexes territory outside the school district, and generally provides that any such annexation will prompt a similar annexation by the municipal school district. Your request was supplemented on February 27, March 2, and March 13, 1990.

This also refers to your related submission under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of Chapter 379, H.B. No. 1159 (1977), which partially repealed the provisions of Section 611 by providing that they do not apply when a municipal school district's parent city adopts an annexation that crosses county lines. We received your submission on March 26, 1990.

We have carefully considered the information you have provided, data from the 1970 and 1980 Censuses, and information and comments received from other interested parties. For the following reasons, it appears that the concerns set forth in the March 31, 1989, objection letter continue to weigh heavily in our review of the repeal of Section 611, and it also appears that these concerns apply with equal force to the 1977 partial repeal of the boundary extension provisions of Section 611.

At the outset, we note that the state makes several claims about the preclearance status of the instant changes which appear to seriously misconstrue the structure, purpose, and history of the preclearance requirement. The state contends that the repeal of Section 611 is not properly before the Attorney General for review because the repeal allegedly was precleared by operation of law when the state in 1986 submitted other portions of the Uniform School Law and no objection then was interposed to that submission within the 60-day review period. The state also contends that a 1978 amendment which clarified the scope of the instant 1977 change was precleared when the state in 1981 received preclearance for a separate portion of the 1978 statute.

It is well-established that to trigger Section 5 review a covered jurisdiction must submit a voting change to the Attorney General in an "unambiguous and recordable manner." Allen v. State Board of Elections, 393 U.S. 544, 571 (1969). Accord, McCain v. Lybrand, 465 U.S. 236 (1984); Procedures for the Administration of Section 5 (28 C.F.R. 51.26(d), 51.27). Both the prior submission of the Uniform School Law and the prior submission of the 1978 act identified specific voting changes adopted by those statutes, but neither submission contained any reference to the voting changes which the state now claims were precleared. Section 5, as interpreted by the courts and our submission guidelines, plainly fixes the responsibility for identifying voting changes on the state, not the United States Attorney General, yet the state appears to be arguing in both instances that the Attorney General should have uncovered voting changes of which the state itself seemingly was unaware at the time the prior submissions were made. Accordingly, neither claim has any merit.

The principal factual argument advanced here by the state is that the changes in the procedure for extending municipal school district boundaries do not have any racial aspect but rather simply reflect an ongoing contest among school districts for students and tax base. In that regard, the state asks that we compare the 1970 and 1980 Census data for cities with municipal school districts to understand the current demographic trends in the state, and also points to some school district financial data from the 1984-1985 school year. In addition, the state claims that the question whether a municipal school district's boundaries should be extended is not relevant to whether the parent city should be allowed to adopt its proposed annexation, and thus the state's uncoupling of the two issues reflects a rational, nonracial decision.

However, our review of the census data and of specific recent annexation disputes in the state confirms our prior judgment that the repeal of Section 611 will essentially freeze municipal school districts in their present boundaries which, in many instances, apparently will yield municipal districts with increasingly higher black population percentages and neighboring school districts that are increasingly white. Among the school districts that would appear to be so affected is the Hattiesburg school district, where the issue of whether suburban whites will be annexed into the more heavily black municipal school district appears to have been the linchpin for the adoption of the 1977 change. Overall, while we continue to recognize that demographic patterns are not uniform throughout the state and that some school district annexation disputes may only reflect the concerns noted by the state, there appear to be significant racial considerations involved in the instant changes which are generally understood among state political leaders and educators.

It also continues to appear that by repealing the boundary extension provisions of Section 611, the state would abandon the judicial, case-by-case approach to reviewing municipal annexations as they relate to school district boundaries, a process which the state supreme court recently confirmed fully allows for the consideration of any school district dispute involving legitimate educational concerns. Harrison County v. City of Gulfport, 557 So.2d 780 (Miss. S.Ct. 1990). We have received no nonracial explanation for reversing this longstanding practice.

Lastly, the state avers that the changes at issue relate to the administration of schools and do not deny or abridge the right to vote. Our analysis, however, indicates that the submitted changes involve the revision of political boundary lines based on race which, as indicated in our objection letter, is not permitted under Section 5. Perkins v. Matthews, 400 U.S. 379 (1971). Furthermore, as explained in that letter, the changes appear to establish a system for choosing municipal school district trustees that impacts negatively on the influence of minority city school district residents.

Under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, the submitting jurisdiction has the burden of showing that a submitted change has neither a discriminatory purpose nor a discriminatory effect. See Georgia v. United States, 411 U.S. 526 (1973); see also the Procedures for the Administration of Section 5 (28 C.F.R. 51.52). In light of the considerations discussed above, I cannot conclude, as I must under the Voting Rights Act, that the state's burden has been sustained in these instances. Accordingly, on

behalf of the Attorney General, I must decline to withdraw the objection to the repeal of Section 37-7-611 and must object to the change occasioned by Chapter 379 (1977).

As we advised in the March 31, 1989, objection letter, you have the right under Section 5 to seek a declaratory judgment from the United States District Court for the District of Columbia that the submitted changes have neither the purpose nor the effect of denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race or color. However, until these objections are withdrawn or a judgment from the District of Columbia Court is obtained, the repeal of Section 37-7-611 and the change occasioned by Chapter 379 (1977) continue to be legally unenforceable. Similarly, the unprecleared 1978 amendment to the 1977 change (adopted in Chapter 312 (1978)) is legally unenforceable. 28 C.F.R. 51.10.

To enable this Department to meet its responsibility to enforce the Voting Rights Act, please inform us of the course of action the State of Mississippi plans to take with respect to these matters. If you have any questions, please feel free to call Mark A. Posner (202-307-1388), an attorney in the Voting Section.

Sincerely,

John R. Dunne
Assistant Attorney General
Civil Rights Division