



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on August 28, 2010

A Small Victory for Colorblindness

For over 30 years the middle school in Nettleton, Mississippi, had classified students who wished to run in student elections by race. One year particular offices, such as class president, were reserved for white students; the next year they were opened only to blacks. This policy was implemented, said the school district, in response to a court order, likely involving a desegregation case.



The intent of the policy was to ensure that blacks were elected to student offices. The assumption was that white students would not vote in sufficient numbers for black students, and with whites the overwhelming majority in the district, blacks would never be elected. By setting aside certain offices each year for black students, some were guaranteed to hold office regardless of their popularity among fellow students.

The policy seems to have generated little controversy over the years — that is, until Brandy Springer's daughter showed up at Nettleton Middle School and tried to run for class reporter. "Springer, who moved to Nettleton from Florida in April, said her daughter was told the office of sixth-grade class reporter ... was available only to black students this year," [according to MSNBC](#).

The trouble is that Springer's daughter is half white and half Native American. Where does such a child — or any of Springer's other children, all of whom are mixed-race — fall in the school's binary racial classification system? Springer said the school board told her they "go by the mother's race because with minorities the father isn't generally in the home." Thus, with Springer being white, her daughter was classified as white and prohibited from running for class reporter.

This did not sit well with Springer, who said, "I have always taught my children not to see race," and promptly moved to a nearby town where her children could attend different schools.

Springer's story became national news when she contacted [mixedandhappy.com](#), a website for mixed families. However, the story got a major boost not from the fact that a half-white/half-Native American girl was denied the opportunity to run for student office because of racial set-asides but from the fact that this year the office of class president was reserved for whites. Early news reports, with such headlines as "Want to Be Class President? Not If You're Black in This School" (MSNBC), "Miss. Middle School Bars Black Students From Running for Class President" (ABC News), and (after a change in policy on August 27) "Free at Last — Black Kids Can Now Run for President at Deep South School" (*Newsweek*), focused on the exclusion of blacks and played on stereotypes of the South, rarely mentioning the alternating-race policy. Even the NAACP got in on the act, calling for the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate the school district for its seemingly anti-black policy.



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The fact is that the Nettleton school policy was unfair to blacks, whites, and everyone else, including the Springer children.

In the first place, it made race — not character, achievement, or even personality — the defining characteristic of every student in the school. A black student with straight A's this year was denied the opportunity to run for class president, while last year a white student might have faced a similar situation. Students with no easily defined race, such as Springer's daughter, had no way of knowing whether they would qualify for any offices at all. Treating everyone as a member of a racial group first, even with the best of intentions, is little better than treating everyone that way for the purposes of asserting white or black supremacy. People should be dealt with as individuals and judged, as Martin Luther King said, not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." (That King held far [more radical views](#) than this statement would indicate in no way diminishes its validity.)

Second, even if such a policy made some sense when it was instituted, at a time when mixed-race families were relatively uncommon, with so many Americans today having parents of more than one race, it is completely nonsensical. Back when the policy began, though, how many blacks, for example, did not have some white ancestors, and how many whites did not have some Native American ancestors? Heck, even the most infamous promoter of racial purity in history, Adolf Hitler, has recently been [exposed](#) as a descendant of Jews and North Africans! No one is racially pure — whatever that means — and, therefore, racial classifications are largely meaningless as well as harmful.

The good news is that as a result of the attention Springer's case brought to the school's policy, the district [announced](#) in an August 27 statement that "beginning immediately, student elections at Nettleton School District will no longer have a classification of ethnicity. It is our intent that each student has equal opportunity to seek election for any student office." The school board voted unanimously to adopt this policy.

It would, however, be premature to assume that the board has gotten the message — that race simply should not be a factor in student elections (or any other school activity) — completely. After saying that students would no longer be classified by race for student elections, the board added, "Future student elections will be monitored to help ensure that this change in process and procedure does not adversely affect minority representation in student elections." In other words, they are going to allow the students to vote for whomever they please, but if not enough minorities are elected, there will be a new, subtler quota system put in place to rectify the situation.

For now, let us rejoice that some measure of colorblindness has replaced a clearly racist school policy. Let us also hope that the students of Nettleton Middle School display a similar colorblindness in their elections and that future administrators are wise enough not to return to some form of the unjust, divisive policy of the past.



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