

Breaking Apart: Confronting Race in East Baton Rouge Parish

Gabriella Runnels
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA



Abstract: Residents of the southeastern, unincorporated portion of East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana, an area with a long history of racial segregation, attempted to form a breakaway city and school district for the purpose of obtaining more direct, local control of their neighborhood public schools. Called “St. George,” the proposed city was disproportionately affluent and White in comparison with the surrounding parish. Belinda Davis, president of One Community, One School District (OCOSD), an organization established in 2012 and opposed to the movement to create a breakaway school district and city, denounced the St. George effort for its significant racial consequences. This case examines Belinda Davis and OCOSD’s struggle in confronting resistance to open discussions of race in the St. George movement by people who believed that race was not relevant to the issue.

Introduction

In 2012, a small crowd of volunteers gathered at the Bluebonnet Swamp Nature Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana to prepare for canvassing later that morning. Diverse in age, race, and gender, the volunteers were united by one mission: to stop the wealthier, whiter, southeastern portion of East Baton Rouge Parish from breaking away from the capital to form a separate city and school district.

Belinda Davis, an associate professor of political science at Louisiana State University (LSU) and the president of One Community, One School District (OCOSD), an organization that opposed the movement to create a breakaway school district, stood up to address the canvassers. She held up two framed photographs, both showing children in classrooms smiling for the camera. “Baton Rouge desegregated under federal court order when I was in the fifth grade,” she said. Her distinct Baton Rouge accent, apparent in her pronunciation of Baton “Roodge,” matched that of many of the others in the room. “When I was in the fourth grade, my school was probably ninety-nine percent White.” She pointed out that in the photograph in her right hand, all of the children were White with the exception of one Asian-American girl. “My fifth grade year, that changed dramatically,” she continued, bringing the room’s attention to the picture in her left hand. “All of a sudden, my school was forty percent African-American.” Davis remembered being shocked to see so many Black children in her school when she went out to recess—she had honestly had no idea that so many Black people lived in Baton Rouge. “I went to an all-White school, I went to an all-White church, my neighborhood was all White,” she said. “So my interaction with people that looked different from me was very, very limited” (Belinda Davis, personal interview, November 24, 2014).

Davis shared this story in order to emphasize the importance of the volunteers’ canvassing efforts and of their larger campaign against the proposed breakaway city, which proponents were calling “St. George.” Davis believed that if St. George broke away from Baton Rouge, the parish would see more of the same pattern of segregation in schools along racial and

socioeconomic lines that has occurred throughout the history of Louisiana and the United States. Davis recalled that it was clear to her, even as a fifth-grader, that the children who had been bused to her school were less prepared academically than the students who had been at the same school with her the previous year. “They were coming from schools that were not given equal access to resources in the same way that students in my traditionally all-White school had been,” Davis said. “That experience really cements to me in my mind why I am opposed to St. George” (Belinda Davis, personal interview, November 24, 2014). She had no doubt that St. George would set Louisiana’s racial progress back many years, but she was less certain about how she could prevent this outcome. How could she convince wealthy, White Louisianans to oppose this breakaway movement when they believed that racism is a thing of the past?

History of Desegregation

I came from a poor background . . . it was the fact that I was introduced to a broader range of people and things that allowed me to get out of those poor circumstances up to where I am now... We’ve come too far. Too much progress has been made to turn that clock back – Baton Rouge Mayor-President Kip Holden (FRONTLINE PBS 2014).

Do you think that you have to bus children all over, bus children long distances so you can say you sit in a seat next to someone diverse, different from yourself? The Justice Department, you know, they achieved their goal. Who can say we’re not desegregated? We have an African-American president. We have an African-American mayor here in Baton Rouge ... We’ve been through all that – Senator “Bodi” White (FRONTLINE PBS 2014).

After the Reconstruction Era in the United States, northern states experienced de facto segregation, while segregation in southern states was de jure (by law). In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education*. Clarence Thomas, a current African-American Supreme Court Justice, argued that “the harm that [the Brown decision] identified was tied purely to de jure segregation, not de facto segregation” (*Missouri v. Jenkins* 1995). In other words, the Brown decision primarily targeted the type of segregation occurring in southern states, including Louisiana.

Of the 132 school districts in Louisiana, the East Baton Rouge Parish School System (EBRPSS) has the largest student population and one of the country’s longest-running desegregation cases. Plaintiffs brought litigation against the school board in 1956, and the case was not closed until 2003—47 years later. In 1956, individual students and the U.S. Department of Justice filed a desegregation lawsuit against the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board (EBRPSB), and in 1960, Judge E. Gordon West ordered that the school board adopt measures to desegregate the school system. In 1963, the board finally implemented a “freedom of choice” desegregation plan that gave students the option to attend any school in the parish school system; however, this plan essentially permitted students to stay segregated voluntarily. After six years under this policy, the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled the plan unconstitutional, and, in response, the school board set up a biracial committee to create a new plan to address segregation in the district. In 1970, the court approved the committee’s new voluntary majority-to-minority transfer plan, which “allowed any student attending a school where his or her race was the majority to transfer to a school where his or her race was the

minority” (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010, 1). This plan was also ineffective, again due to its voluntary component that allowed students to remain segregated (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010, 1).

In the same year, the Supreme Court ruled in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1970) that student busing is an appropriate integration measure in school systems that have a demonstrable tradition of discrimination and segregation (U.S. Department of the Interior 2000, 92). This decision ruled busing acceptable only in school systems with a history of de jure segregation, and in practice, district courts have only ordered student busing “as a narrowly tailored tactic of last resort” (U.S. Department of the Interior 2000, 94). When school districts did use mandatory busing following the Swann decision, they generated significant controversy (U.S. Department of the Interior 2000, 69). Parents opposed court-ordered busing in this period because they were worried about sending their young children to non-neighborhood schools, especially in neighborhoods with “a different racial and class profile” from their own (U.S. Department of the Interior 2000, 93). This parental resistance threatened the feasibility of court-ordered busing as a desegregation strategy. Paradoxically, the American public at this time was strongly in favor of desegregating public schools, “even while that same public more and more opposed busing as a remedy to achieve that aim.” Whites who claimed to support integration but objected to mandatory student busing characterized busing strategies with coded racist language such as “forced busing” and “massive busing” (U.S. Department of the Interior 2000, 94).

Meanwhile in East Baton Rouge Parish, Judge John Parker replaced Judge West in overseeing the ongoing desegregation lawsuit. In 1980, he ordered the EBRPSB to prepare a new desegregation policy proposal. A year later, both the school board and the local government submitted new desegregation plans to Judge Parker, who rejected them both outright. Instead, he implemented a plan of his own that included closing several schools, requiring the school board “to receive permission from the court for any action that could affect desegregation,” and mandating student busing (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010, 1).

Judge Parker’s order remained in effect for fifteen years. By 1996, the residents and the school board of East Baton Rouge had grown tired of operating under Judge Parker’s plan, and they wanted to end the long-running desegregation litigation. Most of all, they wanted to put an end to student busing. Consequently, the school board proposed a multifaceted desegregation plan that included a majority-to-minority transfer choice for students and that predominantly depended on magnet schools, which were set up to draw gifted and talented students of all races, to attain integration. The Department of Justice and the NAACP negotiated a consent agreement with the school board that stated that “both parties could jointly petition to dismiss the lawsuit after the 2001-2002 school year, or the school board could unilaterally move to dismiss the lawsuit after the 2004-2005 school year” (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010, 2). Judge Parker would grant the school board unitary status (relinquishing the school district from court supervision) at that time only if they had sufficiently followed the conditions of the consent agreement and achieved desegregation to a practical extent. Judge Parker approved the agreement, effectively ending court-ordered busing in East Baton Rouge (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010).

In 2001, Judge Parker resigned from the case and Judge James Brady took over. Judge Brady determined that the school district had not properly complied with the consent order conditions, and he ordered all parties to work through their differences and propose a new agreement. In 2003, they all accepted a settlement agreement that entailed extending the magnet school program, adopting racial quotas for students at magnet schools, and updating the district’s

voluntary majority-to-minority transfer plan, among other provisions. Judge Brady accepted this agreement and granted the East Baton Rouge Parish School System unitary status, ending the lawsuit. According to the stipulations of the agreement, however, the district court continued to oversee the actions of the school district for a few years to ensure that they follow all of its terms. In July 2007, the court finally relinquished its supervision of the school district, ending the desegregation litigation that had last nearly half a century (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010).

Nationally, the use of mandatory student busing has been declining since the 1980s, and the 1990s saw an end to most court-ordered busing as a desegregation strategy (Frum 2000). Gary Orfield, the Co-Director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, argues that the Supreme Court has been backpedaling on desegregation since 1991, dismantling desegregation plans like mandatory busing across the country (Louisiana Public Broadcasting 2014). The result is the persistence of deeply segregated school systems in Louisiana and the rest of the nation. In East Baton Rouge Parish, the population of White students attending public schools has continually declined in the past several decades, thereby “making it more difficult to achieve racial balance within the schools” (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010, 3). When Judge Parker ordered student busing in 1981, many White families began leaving the parish or putting their children into private schools. Consequently, East Baton Rouge residents saw the 2003 desegregation resolution as a chance to start anew, fighting desegregation and improving education without the restrictive supervision of the court (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010).

Unfortunately, the end of the desegregation litigation did not bring about all the progress and freedom the school board and citizens of East Baton Rouge had desired. A 2010 report by the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives states that “the tenuous racial balance achieved by the 2003 settlement agreement has been undermined by the splintering of the EBRPSS” (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010, 3). Baker and Zachary—two cities located in the northwestern portion of East Baton Rouge Parish—broke off from the school system in 2003. Similarly, Central, a community located in the eastern portion of the parish that had long been unofficially part of the capital city, split from EBRPSS in 2007 to form its own school system after it was incorporated as a city in July 2005. Furthermore, the Cowen Institute report says:

The new Central Community School District took a sizeable proportion of EBRPSS’s White students, decreasing the percentage of White students in EBRPSS to 11% in the fall of 2007. And, since the district is no longer under a desegregation order, the remedies available to the district to maintain racial balance are limited. . . . Despite these failures, it is perhaps valuable that the failures are entirely attributable to the actions of elected board members. Without federal judicial oversight, the board is no longer able to blame its woes on the desegregation lawsuit. The board members are now fully accountable for the achievements and shortcomings of the district’s schools, and likewise, have the freedom to take action to affect the district’s success (Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives 2010, 3-4).

Since 2012, another community in East Baton Rouge Parish had been attempting to break away from Baton Rouge and form its own city and school system. This community, which was calling itself “St. George,” wanted more direct control over its local public schools. Opponents of St.

George, including LSU professor and One Community, One School District (OCOSD) president Belinda Davis, were concerned about the consequences another—and this time, much larger—breakaway school district would have for racial segregation in the parish public schools.

St. George

It had been nearly three years since Davis first learned of Senator Mack “Bodi” White’s plan to introduce legislation to create a breakaway school district in the southeast portion of East Baton Rouge Parish. She remembered attending a meeting organized by the principal of her son’s school in which Parent-Teacher Association members, Senator White, and community leader Norman Browning met to discuss the possibility of a breakaway school district. “They assured us that it would not hurt the East Baton Rouge public school system,” said Davis, “but they wanted to create a smaller school district.”

White and Browning believed that the East Baton Rouge Parish school system was “broken.” Of the eighty-four East Baton Rouge schools included on the Louisiana Department of Education’s (LDOE) 2014 report card, sixteen received an “F” rating—twice as many as had received a failing rating the year before. These ratings came at a time when the LDOE was characterizing the education in the rest of the state as experiencing “steady progress with modest improvements” (Greater Baton Rouge Business Report, 2014). According to the LDOE, in 2014 the East Baton Rouge Parish school system received a district performance score of 81.3 and a C rating, while Louisiana schools on average received a score of 89.2 and a B rating. In addition to the subpar educational performance of Baton Rouge schools, these schools also had a reputation for high student violence. In March 2014, Highland Elementary School was put on lockdown after a 12-year-old girl got into a violent fight with another student, and the police had been called to McKinley High School the month before to intervene in a fight between seven students during lunch. Sheriff Sid Gautreaux claimed in 2014 that Baton Rouge schools had “seen an increase in violence” in recent years, and an investigation by WAFB News found that Woodlawn High School, which ranked the highest for violence in Baton Rouge in 2012 and 2013, had 128 calls to the sheriff’s office resulting in 54 arrests.

White and Browning asserted that the only way to ensure decent education for their children was to break away from East Baton Rouge Parish and create a new school district altogether. Davis was immediately skeptical of the proposal. She said:

I remember being surprised to hear both of them wax nostalgic about the days when they were in school in Baton Rouge and how it was just a really great education system. I had to bring up the fact that when they were in school, we were a segregated school district. While Baton Rouge might have been great for White kids, it probably wasn’t so great for the Black children in our schools. They kind of brushed that off (Belinda Davis, personal interview, October 20, 2014).

That was the moment she realized these men were serious about this plan. “They are either ignorant of the negative consequences [for] the East Baton Rouge Parish public school system,” said Davis, “or they are just deceiving people by saying it’s not going to harm the students that are left behind in Baton Rouge” (Belinda Davis, personal interview, October 20, 2014).

Davis met up with other parents in Baton Rouge who had children in the public-school system to try to figure out how to stop the creation of a breakaway school district. During their deliberations, Davis and four other parents ended up forming One Community, One School

District (OCOSD), an organization aimed at preserving the unified East Baton Rouge Parish school system and improving public education in the community. Another education-focused organization, Local Schools for Local Children (LSLC), formed around the same time in support of the breakaway school district. LSLC proposed that the breakaway would benefit the children who are “suffering” in East Baton Rouge Parish’s “broken” school system. “These schools are some of the worst schools in the country,” said Lionel Rainey, a St. George spokesman. “They’re some of the most violent schools in the country. Nobody’s getting educated in these schools” (FRONTLINE PBS 2014). LSLC, whose president was St. George-area resident Norman Browning, hoped to shift 10 schools and over 7,000 students into a new, smaller school district that would be “more responsive to students’ needs and would allow students to attend schools in their own neighborhoods, rather than be bused to other parts of the city” (Samuels 2013a). Norman Browning argued that years of student busing had destroyed the sense of community in a many Baton Rouge public schools. He said:

Parents want schools that their children can go to in their neighborhood. I’m against transporting children out of their neighborhoods, clear across town, to go to school. I can look back to my school years in neighborhood schools. I was sent to the principal’s office, and the principal was saying, ‘Boy, you want me to call your daddy?’ . . . I knew he knew my father. It’s about bringing community back. It’s about bringing schools back to our community” (FRONTLINE PBS 2014).

Todd McCoy, a board member of OCOSD, contested the idea that children are being bused all around the city. He pointed out that only students whose parents choose to send them to schools outside their neighborhoods, either to attend gifted and talented or magnet programs or to escape their own neighborhood’s “failing” schools, are bused across town. “In [the East Baton Rouge Parish School System], no child boards a bus to attend a school that is not their neighborhood school unless their parents have chosen for them to do so,” McCoy said. “[Local Schools for Local Children] is attempting to build a wall in our city that limits the choices of these parents” (Samuels 2013a). Belinda Davis, whose three boys (ages six, nine, and twelve) were attending public school in East Baton Rouge, agreed. “We know that the East Baton Rouge Parish school system is stronger as one system,” she said. She recognized that the school system needed improvement, and she wanted to work with parents in the area to bring those improvements to fruition. “We would love to harness all of this energy and put it toward improving quality for all kids, not just 7,000,” said Davis (Kumar 2013).

The School District

The legal and political process of attempting to make the breakaway school district a reality was contentious and complex. In March 2013, Senator White authored Senate Bills 73 and 199 to create the Southeast Baton Rouge Community School System. While SB 199, which would have authorized the building of this new school district, passed the House, SB 73, a constitutional amendment to grant funding to the school district, did not garner the necessary two-thirds vote from the House floor, rendering Senator White’s plan dead for the 2013 legislative session. White had attempted and failed to push through a similar plan during the 2012 session as well, and he had based his bills on the actions of the school districts in Baker, Central and Zachary, all of which successfully broke away from the East Baton Rouge school system in recent years (Kumar 2013).

Many opponents of White’s plan argued that the area, which consists of the unincorporated, southeastern portion of Baton Rouge, cannot form its own school district because it is not its own city. With this argument in mind, proponents of the separate school district came up with a new approach: they were going to break away from Baton Rouge altogether and create their own city (Samuels 2013b). Writing for *The Times-Picayune*, reporter Diana Samuels said that St. George supporters believed that forming a separate city would render their opponents’ arguments moot and that “the law would allow them to create a school district without returning to the legislature for a constitutional amendment” (2013b).¹ Members of Local Schools for Local Children met to vote on a name for the proposed city, and in September 2013, they chose the name of St. George (Samuels 2013b).

The City

Incorporating the city of St. George was not the original intention of our grassroots group. Originally, we were attempting to provide local schools for local children through the creation of an independent school district in the southern part of the parish . . . Opposition to our efforts at improving local education from a faction of the Louisiana House of Representatives forced us to think differently. We found that incorporated cities like Baker, Zachary and Central have much better opportunities to create their own school districts. As we began debating whether to expand the fight into incorporating a city, we recognized what a wonderful opportunity we have to create Louisiana's next great municipality right here in St. George (The City of St. George 2013).

Belinda Davis believed that the attempted incorporation of St. George would be different from the incorporations of Baker, Zachary, or Central because, unlike this time, there had not been a core group of dedicated parents who had organized to oppose those breakaways. One Community, One School District was formed to be that opposing voice. It had organized against the proposed breakaway school district, and now it was organizing against the proposed breakaway city. Belinda noted that one of their strongest arguments against the breakaway school district was that it would be the first time in Louisiana’s history that a collection of neighborhoods was given the right to have its own school system—all other school districts in the state were either parish- or city-wide districts. She and other OCOSD members believed this could set a dangerous precedent: “Why couldn’t the University Country Club decide to create its own school system?” she asked. “We saw this going down a slippery slope” (Belinda Davis, personal interview, November 24, 2014). She argued, however, that the St. George proponents wrongly believed that this distinction was the only thing stopping them from getting their own school district. While it would be easier to bring legislators to their side if they formed their own city, Davis did not think it would be guaranteed. If they successfully formed their own city, they would still need to go back to the legislature to change the bill that created the Southeast Baton Rouge School District, since the boundaries would now be different. Assuming that measure passed the legislature, they would need a constitutional amendment and a vote of the people of Louisiana in order to get funding for their school district (Belinda Davis, personal interview, November 24, 2014).

¹ This belief, however, contradicts the ways in which the state legislature has handled similar issues in the past. See Appendix D for further explanation.

Before it could even reach that stage, St. George organizers would have to navigate several legal and political obstacles in order to achieve their city. First, 25 percent of the residents in the proposed area of St. George (around 18,000 people) would need to sign a petition in support of incorporation. No official time limit or deadline by which the signatures would have to be collected existed. Once a sufficient number of people had signed, the Registrar of Voters would have to certify the petition. Then, the governor would need to call a special election to vote on the issue—and only registered voters living within the proposed area would be eligible to vote. Finally, the measure would need to pass with a majority of “yes” votes (The City of St. George 2013).

The Impact

Separate and Unequal, a thirty-minute film PBS produced on the St. George issue that aired on July 15, 2014, shows Norman Browning, president of Local Schools for Local Children, addressing a crowd. Tearing up, he looks at the children in the audience. “I see these children here,” he says, and he slams his hand on table. “That’s why we’re here. These children right here are why we’re here. [East Baton Rouge] failed our children for 30-plus years.” Supporters of St. George argued that a separate city—and, more importantly, a separate school district—would benefit the children who were suffering in East Baton Rouge Parish’s failing public schools. But exactly whose children would it benefit?

According to Residents Against the Breakaway, a grassroots organization that formed to campaign against the breakaway city and school district, St. George would have a population of 107,000 if it became its own city. At twice the population of Baker, Zachary, and Central combined, St. George would be the fifth most populous city in the state. The mean family income in St. George would be about \$30,000 higher than that of Baton Rouge. According to a study by LSU economists, “more than 60 percent of the households in Baton Rouge have incomes below \$50,000, while more than 60 percent of St. George area households have incomes above \$50,000” (Richardson, Llorens, and Heidelberg 2013). The formation of the breakaway city would lead to a “major redistribution of funds from lower-income, higher-minority population to whiter, wealthier population” because St. George would drain \$85 million out of the East Baton Rouge city-parish budget, or about 30 percent of the total budget (Better Together 2014).

According to a report by Together Baton Rouge, an education-focused coalition of faith-based and community groups opposed to the St. George movement, if St. George supporters were able to successfully incorporate the city and then push through the required legislation to form a separate school district, over 8,000 public school students would be immediately displaced from their schools (Samuels 2014a). That is, because their current schools would no longer be located within their new school district, they would be forced to leave their school and transfer to a school within their new district. Of those 8,000 students, 759 lived in Baton Rouge but attended school in the proposed city, and 7,588 lived in the St. George area but went to school within the Baton Rouge city limits (Together Baton Rouge 2014, 3). Southeast Baton Rouge residents would face “a major and immediate school capacity crisis.” At the time, there were over 10,000 public school students living in the area, but only 5,000 spots available in public schools in the proposed city (Better Together 2014). Furthermore, a breakaway school district would cause a decrease in education funding of eight percent per student, which would be the largest school funding cut in the history of Baton Rouge (Better Together 2014).

The East Baton Rouge Parish School Board opposed the movement to create a new city, claiming that “it would strip them of some of the district’s most affluent areas and leave East Baton Rouge with a poorer, at-risk student population” (Samuels 2013c). One Community, One School District characterized this movement as a “threat to public education in East Baton Rouge Parish,” with OCOSD president Belinda Davis saying that “[w]e’re stronger as one than we are broken up into pieces” (Samuels 2013d). On October 10, 2013, OCOSD organized the first public forum to oppose St. George. In the forum, representatives of the organization discussed the various consequences the breakaway city would have for the community. Belinda Davis discussed the capacity issues the new city would unavoidably face and the issue of children being displaced from their schools. Another representative of OCOSD, Tania Nyman, talked about municipal concerns, such as how the Baton Rouge and St. George fire department services would be shared. Lionel Rainey, a leader of the St. George incorporation effort, said OCOSD’s presentation was just “scare tactics” (Samuels 2013e). The most significant issue—and perhaps the most difficult-to-discuss issue—however, was not an issue of capacity, municipal services, or taxes; the largest issue with the breakaway was an issue of race.

What’s Race Got to Do with It?

This is not a race issue. This is not a class issue. This is about bringing better schools to our children – Norman Browning, Local Schools for Local Children (FRONTLINE PBS 2014).

People who do things with racial implications always say race has nothing to do with it – Gary Orfield, The Civil Rights Project at UCLA (FRONTLINE PBS 2014).

Opponents of the city of St. George voiced concerns that after the civil rights victories of 1960s and decades of progress, the era of school desegregation was coming to an end. Patricia Haynes Smith, an African-American representative in the Louisiana State Legislature from Baton Rouge, believed the St. George effort would contribute to further segregation in the parish:

‘When you look at the children who will be removed from the East Baton Rouge Parish school system . . . the majority of children are White,’ she said. ‘And the majority of children that will be removed from St. George will be Black.’ She knew that St. George supporters did not like to acknowledge this fact, but she believed that people in East Baton Rouge should not ignore the reality of the situation. ‘This group of White parents wants to have the best for their children and forget about anybody else’ (FRONTLINE PBS 2014).

Supporters, however, declared that race had nothing to do with the formation of the new city. Local Schools for Local Children president Norman Browning said that St. George organizers decided the borders of the proposed city based on the city limits of Baton Rouge, the parish boundary lines, and the river. It had nothing to do with race, he said—it’s about quality of education. “I’m tired of hearing the remarks in the news media and in the paper about how it’s going to destroy East Baton Rouge Parish, how it’s going to destroy Baton Rouge,” said Browning. “The only way that happens is if they let it.” He pointed out that young families are already leaving East Baton Rouge parish, and he blamed East Baton Rouge’s failing public

schools. “This is going to save the school system,” said Browning in the PBS segment. “Baton Rouge needs to wake up” (FRONTLINE PBS 2014).

Belinda Davis and OCOSD believed that this movement was about race, whether the St. George organizers wanted it to be or not. Intentions, Davis said, are not the issue. “What we have said repeatedly is that, regardless of the intentions, there are consequences for race that cannot be denied,” said Davis. “The new city and its school district will be 75% White and 25% Black and will dramatically increase the concentration of free and reduced lunch students as well as minority students in East Baton Rouge Parish schools” (Belinda Davis, personal interview, November 24, 2014). Dustin Yates, a St. George proponent, argued that the city would be 67% White, 25% Black, and 8% Hispanic. He pointed out that 25% is twice the national average of African-Americans by population, so, he said, the new city would still be diverse (Louisiana Public Broadcasting 2014). Louisiana as a whole, however, is 32% African-American, and East Baton Rouge Parish is 54% Black and only 39% White (Suburban Stats 2014). A report from the Baton Rouge Area Chamber and the Baton Rouge Area Foundation found slightly different numbers than Yates, estimating the population of the new city to be 70% White, 23% Black and 4% Asian. Regardless of the precise statistics, it was clear that the proposed city of St. George would have a much higher proportion of White residents than East Baton Rouge Parish as a whole, which is majority Black (Samuels 2013f). “This will be the third high-income, majority White area of our school district that has been allowed to break off,” Davis said. “They’re essentially taking away the ability of East Baton Rouge’s public-school system to ever be a diverse school district in terms of race and socioeconomic status.”

Belinda Davis

I am unwilling to let my children attend schools that are segregated based on race or socioeconomic status because I believe it is bad for them, and I believe it is bad for the low-income students that are in the classroom with them – Belinda Davis (Louisiana Public Broadcasting 2014).

One Community, One School District formed to oppose the breakaway and improve public education in the community. According to their website, One Community, One School District (2014) is “a group of parents and other concerned citizens who believe that the children of the East Baton Rouge Parish School System are best served by a unified school system.” The website further states, “We are working to empower parents and other citizens to continue to improve public education in our community.”

A primary struggle for OCOSD and its president Davis was attempting to communicate effectively the racial consequences that the St. George incorporation effort would have on the parish without alienating the people who support St. George. In a personal interview on November 24, 2014, Davis said that about 90% of her motivation in opposing the incorporation of St. George was driven by the racial implications of the movement. She recognized that children of color and children living in poverty in Baton Rouge have special needs, and she believed St. George would primarily harm these most vulnerable children. “In the South, it’s very hard to disentangle race and poverty because of the legacy of racism and slavery,” she said. “We’re still dealing with the consequences of all of those things.” St. George, she said, would decrease the opportunities for low-income Black children to receive a quality education and overcome the barriers they already face due to their racial and socioeconomic identities. “That’s

(inequality) what I study as a professor,” she said. At LSU, Davis’s research focuses on American welfare policy and its influence on minority and working-class families. “I can’t just sit idly by and watch that happen.”

Were the pro-St. George organizers unaware of the racial implications of a breakaway city, or were they simply unconcerned? “To be fair,” said Davis, “I do not know that the St. George proponents have thought through all the logical consequences of what they’re doing. I know that they believe that it is going to produce a better school system for their children. And for a decent proportion of them, that may well be true.” According to Louisiana’s public-school accountability system, many of the schools in the St. George area could become A- or B-rated schools overnight, simply by expelling low-income children from their school district. At the same time, however, Davis said, they would be “throwing an additional 30,000 kids under the school bus by taking away the economic resources that we have been sharing with the community and by segregating themselves by race and class.”

Davis believed that part of the reason St. George proponents were unable or unwilling to understand the racial and economic issues of the breakaway effort is that they did not recognize their own comparative privilege. “Every American wants to think that they are a middle-class American,” she said. “Really wealthy people say they’re middle class, and even poor people say they’re middle class. But the numbers don’t support that—we cannot all be middle-class.” The St. George area, she argued, is overwhelmingly middle- and upper-class and White, and she believed those people tend to distrust anyone who presents them with data that contradicts the information their leaders have been telling them.

They don’t want to believe what we’re telling them because it’s hard to admit that something that you have been fighting for . . . is actually going to harm people. It’s not an easy thing to admit to yourself. This is an incredibly conflictual thing in our community. Can you imagine being somebody who has been in support of St. George and thinking it’s okay and then realizing, ‘Wait a minute, this is not what is going to be best for all of the residents that are currently in my school system or are currently in our consolidated government,’ and having to talk about that with your neighbors that you’ve been down in the trenches with, getting petitions signed? That would be incredibly difficult. I think that that is a large part of it, and I think that they select [from] where they want to get their news about their cause, and it’s from the people who have organized the St. George effort (Belinda Davis, personal interview, November 24th, 2014).

Davis and OCOSD struggled with how to approach the issue of race in their campaign against the breakaway school district. On one hand, they wanted people on both sides of the issue to understand and appreciate the significant racial implications of the St. George movement. On the other hand, they met serious resistance to realistic discussions of race, difference, and inequality in the community, primarily from people who supported the incorporation of St. George. Instead of engaging in these complicated discussions, St. George supporters would claim definitively that race was not relevant to the issue at hand. She said that she and OCOSD had tried to focus their discussions on the evidence that demonstrated the racial outcomes of the breakaway, and they repeatedly emphasized that they were not questioning the racial motivations of the individuals living in St. George. In a 2014 interview, Davis said, “Regardless of whether or not they intend to segregate themselves racially or economically from poor children or from

minority children, there is no doubt from the U.S. Census Bureau data that that is what's going to happen." She continued:

We're not doubting their goodwill; we're doubting the consequences of what they're trying to do. I think that by pointing out that this is a complicated issue and pointing out that you have to dig deep to see what the consequences of this are, it becomes impossible to ignore the economic and racial components to it (Belinda Davis, personal interview, November 24, 2014).

Davis noted that earlier creations of new, non-parish-based school districts in Louisiana "have all occurred over race and economic differences." She cited the example of Bogalusa and Washington Parish in Louisiana, as well as similar instances in Texas, Georgia, and Tennessee.² "We have seen this happen in the past," she said, "and it is happening right now in other parts of the country." Davis was worried about the consequences of allowing such movements to persist. She explains:

We have seen middle- and upper-class White flight from the school system and the carving-out of predominantly White independent school districts around us. If we allow what happens historically to continue yet again with St. George, it will become impossible for the city of Baton Rouge to ever attract White and middle- and upper- class families back to our school system because there won't be any left within the geographical boundaries of our school system (Belinda Davis, personal interview, November 24, 2014).

Davis said that she and OCOSD had talked about the historical context of desegregation, but they had not explicitly placed the St. George movement within the context of other, similar breakaways currently happening across the country. "That is in part [because of] a desire to not talk about this as being an intentional move to racially segregate our school systems again," she explained. "But just to point out that this is a consequence regardless of the intentions." Davis said that their strategy of caution in approaching the issue of race could be characterized by Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu's recent comments about race in Louisiana. When NBC journalist Chuck Todd asked Senator Landrieu why President Obama is so unpopular in Louisiana, she responded:

I'll be very, very honest with you. The South has not always been the friendliest place for African-Americans. It's been a difficult time for the president to present himself in a positive light as a leader. It's not always been a good place for women to present ourselves. It's more of a conservative place (Easley 2014).

"She received enormous backlash for that," Davis said, referring to the outcry from Republicans from both within and outside of Louisiana who proclaimed that race has nothing to do with the president's unpopularity in the South. "And I think that that points to the kind of line that we have tried to toe with this to avoid alienating people that might be sympathetic to what we're trying to say." Davis believed that the decision to toe this controversial line had probably been

² Bogalusa, a Louisiana city in Washington Parish, operates a separate school district from the rest of the parish (Lussier 2014). Similar breakaway efforts have occurred in Alabama, Texas, Tennessee and Georgia (Allen 2014).

the right one, “even though it’s incredibly difficult sometimes” (Belinda Davis, personal interview, November 24, 2014).

Epilogue

On October 20, 2014, a little over a year after St. George organizers first began the process of forming their own city, they turned in a petition with more than 18,000 signatures in support of the breakaway to the East Baton Rouge Parish Registrar of Voters. The organizers wanted to meet the March deadline to get the St. George issue on the ballot for the May election, and they decided to turn the petition in early. Although there had not been any official deadline by which they were required to submit the petition, once they turned it in, they had limited time to collect any further signatures after that point. They could continue to turn in signatures during the several weeks it would take for the registrar’s office to verify them, and if the registrar still found the petition insufficient, St. George organizers would have a final 60 days to get additional people to sign (Samuels 2014b). If at that time they still failed to garner the required number of signatures—one-fourth of the total residents of the proposed breakaway area, or 17,859 people—the movement would have to wait two years before beginning the petition process again from scratch (Allen 2015).

In March, the registrar’s office determined that the petition was short approximately 2,700 valid signatures. In the ensuing 60-day period, St. George organizers managed to gather 4,600 more signatures. Finally, on June 13, after hundreds of signees withdrew their signatures from the petition and the registrar deemed many other signatures to be invalid, the East Baton Rouge Parish Registrar’s Office released the final count: the petition had 17,788 legitimate signatures—a mere 71 signatures short (Samuels 2015a). St. George supporters quickly brought a lawsuit against the East Baton Rouge Parish Registrar’s Office to challenge the count, but the lawsuit was dismissed by a state judge, and St. George spokesman Lionel Rainey announced that the group would not be pursuing an appeal (Allen 2015). For now, the St. George movement was dead.

Writing for *The Times-Picayune*, reporter Emily Lane said that Baton Rouge community leaders and residents opposed the breakaway movement “in part because creating a new city from the unincorporated parts of the parish would siphon tax dollars away from the city-parish government,” but also because “creating St. George would cause a clear racial divide between the mostly Black, lower-class residents who make up much of Baton Rouge and the mostly White, middle-class residents who live within the bounds of the proposed city of St. George” (Lane 2015). In the final analysis, it is not clear whether financial or racial concerns played a larger role in the failure of the St. George movement, but the racial implications of the proposed breakaway city certainly influenced the opinions and actions of residents from both within and outside of the proposed area of St. George. At the very least, the St. George movement brought issues of race, education, and inequality into the spotlight. Leaders on both sides of the movement reported being hopeful that some positive change for the East Baton Rouge education system could come from this very public, very complex process of attempting and failing to form a new city in the name of higher-quality education. Belinda Davis said that the St. George debate has mobilized public interest in the city’s education system and its many problems, while Lionel Rainey said that, even though the breakaway city movement was ultimately unsuccessful, it was “forcing a very uncomfortable conversation to be had” and that it “brought public education . . . and education reform to the forefront” (Samuels 2015b).

References

- Allen, Rebekah. 2015. "St. George Organizers Acknowledge New City Movement Dead for Now, But Say 'Nothing Has Been Won'." *The Advocate*. 16 July. <http://theadvocate.com/sports/lsu/12929048-123/st-george-organizers-acknowledge-new> (Accessed 29 May, 2016)
- Allen, Rebekah. 2014. "Number of Signatures Needed for St. George Petition in Dispute." *City Hall Buzz*, 28 October. <http://blogs.theadvocate.com/cityhallbuzz/tag/residents-against-the-breakaway/> (Accessed 8 December, 2014).
- Better Together. 2014. "The Impact & Consequences of the St. George Incorporation." http://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/embed_code/30832711 (Accessed 8 December, 2014).
- Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives. 2010. "Louisiana Desegregation Case Studies: East Baton Rouge, West Carroll, and Tangipahoa." Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives. <http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Louisiana-Desegregation-Case-Studies.pdf> (Accessed 10 November, 2014).
- Davis, Belinda. Personal interview. 24 November 2014.
- Easley, Jason. 2014. "Sen. Mary Landrieu Bravely Calls Out Southern Republican Obama Race Based Hate." *PoliticusUSA*, 31 October. <http://www.politicususa.com/2014/10/31/sen-mary-landrieu-bravely-calls-southern-republican-obama-race-based-hate.html> (Accessed 7 December, 2014).
- FRONTLINE PBS. 2014. *Separate and Unequal*. 15 July. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/separate-and-unequal/> (Accessed 27 October, 2014).
- Frum, David. 2000. *How We Got Here: The '70s: The Decade That Brought You Modern Life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Greater Baton Rouge Business Report. 2014. "Number of Failing Schools in EBR Doubles." 21 October. <https://www.businessreport.com/article/number-of-failing-schools-in-ebr-doubles> (Accessed 21 October, 2014).
- Kumar, Sheila. 2013. "Baton Rouge Breakaway School District Dies After Long Battle in Louisiana Legislature." *The Times-Picayune*. 5 June. http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2013/06/baton_rouge_breakaway_school_d_2.html (Accessed 6 December, 2014).
- Lane, Emily. 2015. "St. George Leaders Surrender Legal Battle for Now, Vow to Explore Options." *The Times-Picayune*. 16 July. http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2015/07/st_george_lawsuit_baton_rouge.html (Accessed 29 May, 2016).

Louisiana Department of Education. 2014. <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/performance-scores> (Accessed 29 October, 2014).

Louisiana Public Broadcasting. 2014. "Breaking Away: A Louisiana Public Square Special Presentation." July 15. http://beta.lpb.org/index.php/publicsquare/topic/breaking_away_a_louisiana_public_square_special_presentation (Accessed 27 October, 2014).

Lussier, Charles. 2014. "St. George Debate: Will Creating a City Help the Schools Break Away?" *The Advocate*, January 3. <http://theadvocate.com/home/7813311-125/st-george-debate-will-creating> (Accessed 8 December, 2014).

Missouri v. Jenkins. 1995. 515 U.S. 70; No. 93-1823.

Richardson, Jim, Jared Llorens, and Roy Heidelberg. 2013. "On the Possibility of a New City in East Baton Rouge Parish." Baton Rouge Area Chamber and Baton Rouge Area Foundation (October): 5.

Samuels, Diana. 2013a. "Baton Rouge Breakaway School District Supporters Optimistic About Chances." *The Times-Picayune*. 12 March. http://www.nola.com/education/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2013/03/baton_rouge_breakaway_school_d.html (Accessed 6 December, 2014).

Samuels, Diana. 2013b. "East Baton Rouge Parish Incorporation Efforts Continue, New City Could Be Called St. George." *The Times-Picayune*. 6 September. http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2013/09/east_baton_rouge_parish_incorp.html (Accessed 6 December, 2014).

Samuels, Diana. 2013c. "Petition Drive to Incorporate 'St. George' in East Baton Rouge Parish Officially Kicks Off." *The Times-Picayune*. 18 September. http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2013/09/petition_drive_to_incorporate.html (Accessed 6 December, 2014).

Samuels, Diana. 2013d. "Meeting Set to Discuss St. George Incorporation Efforts in East Baton Rouge Parish." *The Times-Picayune*. 2 October. http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2013/10/st_george_louisiana_petition_d.html (Accessed 6 December, 2014).

Samuels, Diana. 2013e. "Proposed City of St. George Would Be 'Racially Divisive, Economically Disastrous,' Opponents Say." *The Times-Picayune*. 10 October. http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2013/10/proposed_city_of_st_george_wou.html (Accessed 6 December, 2014).

Samuels, Diana. 2013f. "St. George Report Lays Out 'Potentially Harmful' Impacts of Proposed New City in East Baton Rouge Parish." *The Times-Picayune*. 1 December.

http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2013/12/st_george_report_lays_out_pote_1.html#incart_2box (Accessed 6 December, 2014).

Samuels, Diana. 2014a. "Together Baton Rouge Releases Statement Opposing St. George Incorporation." *The Times-Picayune*. 6 February. http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2014/02/together_baton_rouge_releases.html (Accessed 7 December, 2014).

Samuels, Diana. 2014b. "St. George Organizers Turn in Signatures, Short of Goal but Vowing to Continue." *The Times-Picayune*. 20 October. http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2014/10/st_george_organizers_turn_in_s.html (Accessed 29 May, 2016).

Samuels, Diana. 2015a. "Registrar's Office Approved Invalid St. George Petition Signatures, Opposition Says." *The Times-Picayune*. 4 June. http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2015/06/registrars_office_approved_inv.html (Accessed 29 May, 2016).

Samuels, Diana. 2015b. "If St. George Doesn't Happen, What Does? Has The debate Spurred Any Real Change?" *The Times-Picayune*. 5 June. http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2015/06/st_george_baton_rouge_if_st_ge.html#incart_story_package (Accessed 29 May, 2016).

Suburban Stats. 2014. "How Many People Live in Louisiana for 2013 and 2014." <https://suburbanstats.org/population/how-many-people-live-in-louisiana> (Accessed 6 December, 2014).

The City of St. George. 2015. <http://www.stgeorgelouisiana.com> (Accessed 6 December, 2014).

Together Baton Rouge. 2014. "St. George, Student Displacement and School Capacity in Unincorporated East Baton Rouge Parish." http://www.togetherbr.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/TBR_St.-George-Student-Displacement-and-School-Capacity_11-20146.pdf (Accessed 7 December, 2014).

U.S. Department of the Interior. 2000. "Racial Desegregation in Public Education in the United States." *National Park Service*. https://www.nps.gov/nhl/learn/themes/CivilRights_DesegPublicEd.pdf. (Accessed 18 July, 2017).

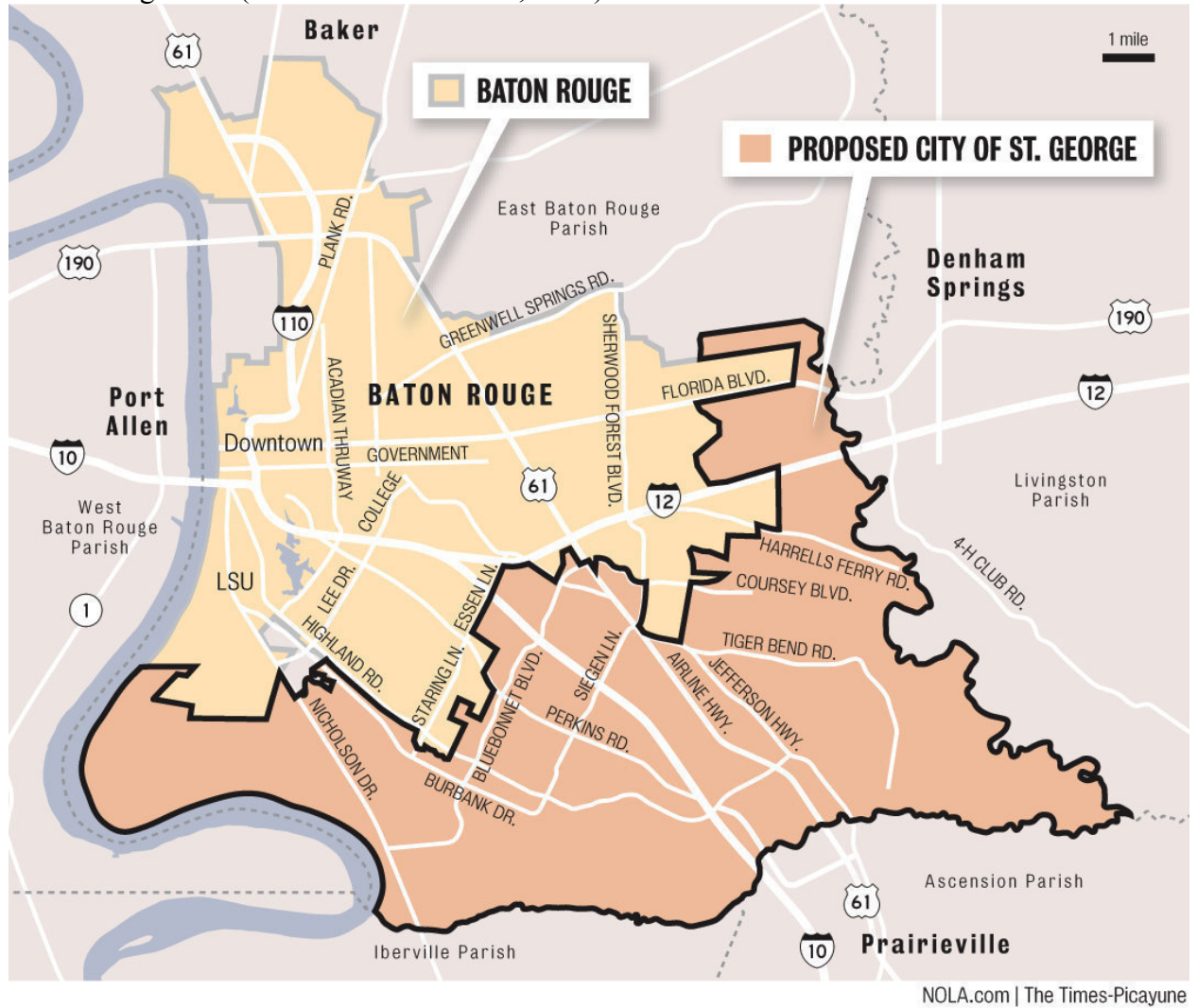
Appendix A: East Baton Rouge Parish

Google Maps. 2014. "East Baton Rouge Parish, LA." Google Maps. (Accessed 7 December, 2014).



Appendix B: St. George

The Times-Picayune. 2013. "St. George, LA." *The Times-Picayune*. 19 November.
http://www.nola.com/news/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2013/11/st_george_la_baton_rouge.html (Accessed 7 December, 2014).



Appendix C: Timeline

- 1954 — In the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Supreme Court declares segregation in public schools unconstitutional.
- 1956 — Individual students and the U.S. Department of Justice file a desegregation lawsuit against the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board.
- 1960 — Judge E. Gordon West orders the school board to adopt measures to desegregate the school system.
- 1963 — The school board implements a “freedom of choice” desegregation plan.
- 1969 — The U.S. Fifth Circuit Court rules the school board’s desegregation plan unacceptable.
- 1970 — The U.S. Fifth Circuit Court approves the committee’s new voluntary majority-to-minority transfer plan; the Supreme Court rules that student busing is an appropriate desegregation strategy in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*.
- 1980 — Judge John Parker orders the EBRPSB to prepare a new desegregation policy proposal.
- 1981 — Judge Parker rejects plans submitted by the school board and the local government and implements his own plan that includes court-ordered busing.
- 1996 — The school board proposes a desegregation plan that predominantly depends on magnet schools to attain integration; the Department of Justice and the NAACP negotiate a consent agreement with the school board; Judge Parker approves the agreement, ending court-ordered busing.
- 2001 — Judge James Brady takes over the case from Judge Parker.
- 2003 — All parties accept a new settlement agreement, and Judge Brady grants EBRPSS unitary status; Baker and Zachary break away from the EBRPSS.
- 2005 — Central incorporates as a city.
- 2007 — The court relinquishes its supervision of the school district, ending the lawsuit; Central City breaks away from EBRPSS.
- 2012 — Norman Browning and Senator “Bodi” White meet with Parent-Teacher Association members to discuss the possibility of a breakaway school district; Senator White’s breakaway school district plan fails to pass; Davis and other parents form One Community, One School District.
- 2013 — Senator White authors Senate Bills 73 and 199, but SB 73 fails to pass the House; St. George proponents decide to create a breakaway city; OCOSD organizes the first public forum to oppose St. George on October 10; BRAC and BRAF release a report on the impacts of the proposed city on December 1.
- 2014 — “Separate and Unequal” airs on PBS on July 15; St. George leaders turn in the petition to incorporate the proposed city to the Registrar of Voters Office on October 20.
- 2015 — The Registrar of Voters Office determines that the petition was short approximately 2,700 signatures in March; the Registrar of Voters Office determines that the re-submitted petition is still 71 signatures short on June 13.

Appendix D: Process for Forming a Separate School District

