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Integration, Rockford Style, Is Called System of Apartheid

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Rockford, Ill. — By the numbers, the public schools in this manufacturing city were desegregated during the 1970s and 1980s, as required by court order and government agencies. In real life, however, the students could not have been more divided by race.

Integration, Rockford style, meant making sure that black and white children in the same school building were learning in separate classrooms. At several schools, they ate at separate lunch times, even entered through separate doors and used separate bathrooms in separate corridors.

Hispanic students traveling for the bilingual-education program to schools in white neighborhoods were forced to wait on the bus before morning classes while the local white children played football and basketball and talked among themselves outside.

All children in kindergarten were placed in an academic "track" that most of them would stay in for the rest of their student careers. One district official described the Rockford tracking as "a

system of apartheid." The whites went into honors and college-prep classes; minorities — even some who scored in the 99th percentile in testing — were mostly consigned to the slow-learner sections.

Now the school district stands accused by a federal magistrate of operating for decades a massive shell game rather than a desegregation program, and of consistently undermining educational opportunities for minority students.

For the first time, a federal court has exposed how one such system worked, explaining how code words and special programs added up to a pattern of one educational order for whites and another, inferior experience for blacks, Hispanics and Asians.

The Rockford School District "has committed such open acts of discrimination as to be cruel," wrote Magistrate Judge P. Michael Mahoney in a report released last week, "and committed others with such subtlety as to raise discrimination to an art form."

Those harsh words hurt, School Su-

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Rockford, Ill., Facing Moves On Integration

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perintendent William Bowen said in an interview, but he acknowledged their truth. Bowen, who plans to retire next year, ticked off reasons for the district's isolating tactics: pressure from white parents, officials who didn't realize the cumulative effects, even incompetence. He didn't mention racism. But soon he paused. "None of it," he said, "sounds defensible."

Soon — perhaps by January — U.S. District Judge Stanley J. Roszkowski is expected to impose sweeping changes designed to make integration real for the 27,000 students here. Both the report and the anticipated remedies stem from a six-week trial held last spring in a class action suit filed by a community group in 1989.

"Nobody will be doing anything out of the goodness of their heart," said Beulah Tripplett, a black parent who is a plaintiff in the suit. "I do know that we will have to be constantly watching."

Under court prodding, some corrective steps were taken as the district sought unsuccessfully to avoid the trial. If reaction to those measures is any indication, Rockford schools are in for an explosive year or two.

In the past year, 600 students have withdrawn from the district. All of the departed are whites.

The only white adult plaintiff in the lawsuit has picked up the telephone to hear someone hissing epithets on the other end. She has answered the door to find a man who demanded to talk to her because "this is costing us too much money."

Bowen, too, endures constant, if sometimes sheepish, complaining from white parents about the expense of upgrading equipment for minority-neighborhood schools. "I suppose you could say it's polarizing the community," he said.

And yet, he said, minorities still are not ensured fair access to college preparatory and honors classes or to extracurricular activities.

Minority students still are the only ones who face mandatory busing, with long hours of commuting added to the school day. Whites still are bused only if they choose certain magnet-school programs.

"Educational deficiencies in the Bilingual Program . . . remain today," Mahoney wrote in his report.