



**For Immediate Release**

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**LDF Media**

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## **LDF Releases Statement on St. John the Baptist Parish School Board Vote to Close Fifth Ward Elementary**

On Thursday, the St. John the Baptist Parish School Board voted to close Fifth Ward Elementary School before the 2025-26 school year. In a proposal, the School Board is calling for the children who currently attend the school to be relocated to East St John Preparatory Academy, a middle school, and LaPlace Elementary, another elementary school. The decision came after a federal district court hearing last month on a motion filed by the [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) seeking the school's closure due to its highly hazardous conditions.

Fifth Ward Elementary serves more than 300 children aged four to nine, the majority who are Black and Latinx, and is located only a few hundred feet from a toxic industrial plant that emits a chemical compound known to cause cancer and genetic mutations in young children. The Denka Performance Elastomer Plant is the only industrial facility in the nation that emits chloroprene, a highly toxic substance, and the school is located in the U.S. Census Tract with the highest risk of cancer from air pollution.

“While the St. John the Baptist Parish School Board’s decision to close Fifth Ward Elementary is in the best interests of the children, families, and entire community, we are extremely concerned with its current proposal to wait several months to close the school. The current plan is simply inadequate. Every day that the school remains open, the students at Fifth Ward remain in imminent danger. The safety and health of these children cannot wait,” said **Victor Jones, LDF Senior Counsel**. “The proposal to transfer many of the children to East St. John Preparatory is also wholly unacceptable. Not only is East St. John Prep located within the danger zone, but as a middle school it is unequipped to provide four-to-nine year old children the facilities and resources they need to thrive. Being that LaPlace Elementary has full capacity to accommodate all of Fifth Ward’s students, faculty, and staff, it is completely possible to prevent splitting the school’s community apart. The inadequacies of this proposal, if not addressed, are likely to have a detrimental impact on the very outcomes the Board has said it wants to achieve. Everyone must be transferred to LaPlace Elementary, which has ample space for all the children and teachers at Fifth Ward—and swiftly. LDF will continue its advocacy on behalf of families at Fifth Ward Elementary to ensure they are provided the safe, quality education they deserve.”

LDF represents a class of Black children and their parents in St. John the Baptist Parish Public Schools in an ongoing case to ensure all students, regardless of race, are afforded equal educational opportunities, including the opportunity to be educated in facilities that are healthy and safe. This decades-long federal school desegregation case was originally filed by LDF in March 1963.

St. John the Baptist Parish is [one of the most highly industrialized parishes](#) in Louisiana with some of the highest rates of toxic substance releases and air emission events in the state. In October 2022, the Environmental Protection Agency [submitted a letter](#) to the Louisiana Department of Health and the Department of Environmental Quality recommending that children attending Fifth Ward Elementary be relocated away from Denka due to their significant risk of exposure to chloroprene.

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*Founded in 1940, the [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) is the nation's first civil rights law organization. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the Legal Defense Fund or LDF. Please note that LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights.*