



Press Release

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ACLU Wins Wolf Point Voting Rights Suit

New voting districts give Native American voters equitable representation on school board

WOLF POINT, MT — Native American voters in Wolf Point will have equitable representation on the Wolf Point High School District Board thanks to the ACLU's victory in a case challenging illegal and discriminatory voting districts.

The Wolf Point School District Board of Trustees and the County Superintendent of Schools conceded in the case *Jackson v. Wolf Point School District* that the voting districts used to elect the trustees were malapportioned in violation of one person, one vote. The plan also gave residents in the predominantly white voting district more voting power than those in the majority Native American voting district. A settlement agreement fixes the problem by reducing the number of trustees for the Wolf Point High School Board of Trustees, and implementing a redistricting plan.

"Native American voters in Wolf Point will now have the representation they are due under the federal Voting Rights Act," said Jon Ellingson, attorney for the ACLU of Montana. "The old districts clearly violated the principle of one person, one vote by creating a school board where the political power of the Native American community was diluted by the unconstitutional imbalance of the voting districts. Now every person's vote will count equally."

"The Voting Rights Act is clear. Every person has a right to equal representation," said Laughlin McDonald, with the ACLU National Voting Rights Project and one of the attorneys for the plaintiffs. "Montana has a history of discriminatory voting practices against Native Americans. The ACLU will continue to work to make sure such discrimination does not continue."

The settlement calls for electing one board member from each of five voting districts to serve on the high school and elementary school boards and one member elected at-large district-wide to serve only on the high school board. Each of the new single-member districts will have populations that vary no more than 1.54 percent.

This is a significant change from the existing system in which members of the majority white voting district have been electing one board member for every 143 residents and those in the majority Native American district have been electing one board member for every 841 residents. The settlement will be implemented over two years.

Plaintiffs in the case – Ronald Jackson, Ruth Jackson, Robert Manning, Patricia McGeshick, Lawrence Wetsit, Bill Whitehead and Lanette M. Clark – are all Native Americans.

In addition to this case, the ACLU of Montana and the ACLU Voting Rights Project filed an amicus brief in the Native American voting rights case, *Wandering Medicine v. McCulloch*, supporting members of three Montana tribes seeking satellite offices on three reservations for late voter registration and in-person absentee voting.

More information about these cases can be found at www.aclumontana.org.