

The Resurgence of School Segregation

A study from The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University has found that African American, Latino, and white students are becoming more isolated from one another in U.S. schools. What has caused this resegregation of schools?

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Nearly half a century ago, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) initiated decades of progress in the struggle to desegregate public schools. But now that progress has been reversed: Segregation has been increasing almost everywhere for a decade.

Traditionally, public schools have created a common preparation for citizenship. The fact that more students now attend separate and unequal schools portends serious consequences for our country's multiethnic future. Because elected officials and the courts have provided almost no leadership in addressing this issue since the 1970s, the responsibility for leadership is now falling on educators. As education leaders explore ways to reverse the growing separation of ethnic groups in



Integration pioneer Ruby Bridges, then a 6-year-old 1st grader, broke the color line at William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1960.

U.S. schools, they need to understand the current ethnic composition of the school-age population, the status of resegregation, and the reasons for these trends.

The Public School Population Today

The United States has seen a rapid transformation in the racial composition of its public schools. In 1968, four of every five students were white, but since that time the student population

has been growing consistently more diverse. In just a little more than 30 years, the Latino share of public school enrollment has almost tripled, reaching 7 million students, or 16.3 percent. During the same period, the African American proportion of total enrollment grew more modestly and now stands at about 8 million students, or 17.1 percent. As the second-fastest-growing minority group, Asians now number almost 2 million students and make up 4.1 percent of the total



Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, now has a majority African American student population. In 1957, the school was the scene of harsh confrontations when its first nine African American students enrolled.

student population. The smallest racial group, Native Americans, number a little more than one-half million students and make up just over 1 percent of public school enrollment (The Civil Rights Project, 2002).

Until recently, the rapid growth in minority populations has been heavily concentrated in the South and West, two regions that together now enroll more than one-half of all students and have the largest concentrations of African American and Latino students, respectively. In the South, only 54 percent of all students are white, and in the West, only 51 percent. One-third of all students in the West are Latino, and they are a growing presence in a number of states in other regions. As both Latino and African American enrollments outpace the growth of white enrollment, every region is becoming more heavily minority (The Civil Rights Project, 2002).

Changing Levels of Segregation

Our recent study for The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (Franken-

berg & Lee, 2002) provides a portrait of the changing levels of segregation for African American and Latino students. We analyzed enrollment data collected by the U.S. Department of Education in the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data from school year 2000–2001, examining school districts with enrollments greater than 25,000.

Despite the growing diversity of the school-age population, our research indicates an overwhelming trend toward school district resegregation. African American and Latino students became more racially segregated from whites in their schools from 1986 to 2000 in virtually every one of the 185 districts in our sample of public school districts with enrollment greater than 25,000.

In the United States, the average white student attends a school that is almost four-fifths white. Only 14 percent of white students attend schools where at least three races comprise 10 percent or more of the total student population.

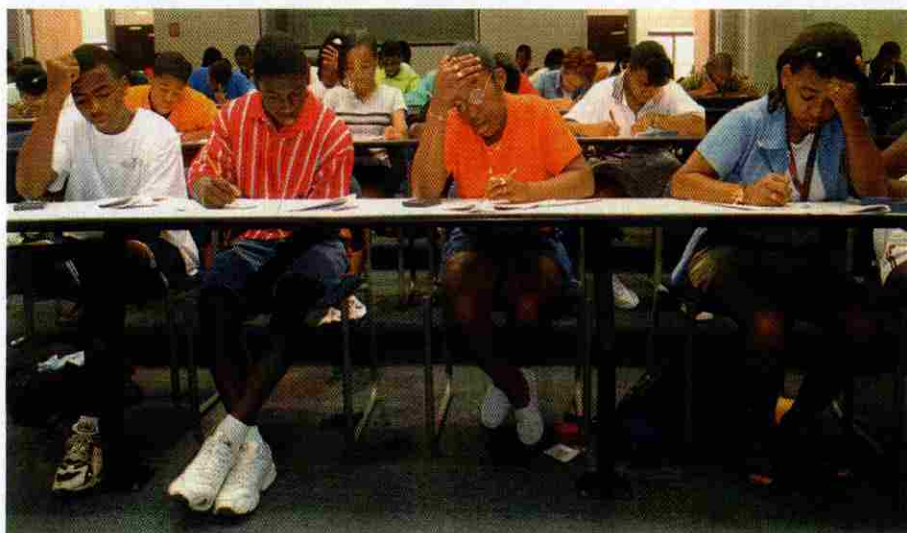
African American students are twice

as likely as white students to attend multiracial schools. The average African American student, however, attends schools that are less than one-third white.

The most segregated minority group by race and income (and, increasingly, by language) are Latino students. The average Latino student attends a school where less than half of the students are non-Latinos. More than three-fourths of Latino students are in predominantly minority schools, and three-eighths are in 90–100 percent minority schools. The isolation is even more extreme for the typical Latino English-language learner, who attends a school that is almost two-thirds Latino. Learning a second language is difficult enough; lack of opportunities to interact with native English-speaking peers makes this task even harder (Horn, 2002).

Why Do We See These Trends?

Some believe that minority exposure to whites is dropping just because the white student population is declining. Despite the continued decline of white students in the past 35 years, however,



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integration increased from the beginning of the 1960s until the late 1980s. Only in the past decade have we seen an unraveling of almost 25 years of increasing integration and a return toward segregation in our schools. What factors, then, have led to these trends?

Residential Patterns

The 2000 U.S. Census showed a pattern of increasing residential segregation for Latinos in most parts of the United States. For African Americans, however, most metropolitan areas in the United States are becoming more integrated. Most of the declines in residential segregation resulted from the increased movement of African Americans into areas that were formerly overwhelmingly white. According to the Census, the suburbs, which have a long history of being largely white, are increasing in size and diversity. In fact, the suburbs are now over one-fourth minority, and their growth was fueled primarily by

minorities during the past decade (Frey, 2001). Because we see an increase in African American school segregation at the same time that residential segregation is decreasing, residential patterns are clearly not responsible for the school trends.

School Choice

The data also suggest that private school choice does not play a large role in the trend toward increased public school segregation. In 2000, the vast majority of white students attended public schools, and the white share of overall private school enrollment was actually lower than half a century ago. Data from a recent private school study (Reardon & Yun, 2002) show that white enrollment in private schools fell after an initial rise during the post-*Brown* period; thus, the white private school enrollment rate in 2000 was comparable to that in 1968 (about 13 percent).

In some of the largest districts with high proportions of minority students, however, one-third or more of the white student population attends private schools, substantially affecting the racial composition of the public schools. Private schools in many city neighborhoods have long enrolled large numbers of white students; these schools may offer white parents a means to ensure that their children avoid attending public schools where

they will be in the racial minority.

Public school choice also affects the overall segregation of students. More than 1.6 million students, or 3.5 percent of all public school students, attend either magnet or charter schools. Although a larger proportion of white students attend private schools, they are using public choice to a lesser extent: Whites are under-enrolled in both magnet and charter schools compared with their proportion of the general school population (The Civil Rights Project, 2002).

Magnet schools arose as a method to aid in desegregating schools. School systems hoped to attract white students by offering enhanced programs in inner-city areas. The success of magnet schools in achieving this goal varies from district to district, but evidence suggests that magnet schools may not have achieved their objectives in the largest districts. In almost half of school systems with enrollments greater than 60,000, the magnet schools have lower percentages of white students than the school system overall. For example, in Guilford County, North Carolina, the system's enrollment is almost half white, yet the magnet school enrollment is only 31 percent white (The Civil Rights Project, 2002).

Court Actions

An increasingly conservative judiciary, which has issued a series of rulings reversing earlier progress, has played a major role in the resegregation of U.S. schools. To understand this role, we must look at the history of public school desegregation in the past half-century.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawed the practice of legal segregation in public schools for African American and white students. Before this ruling was made, 17 states and the District of Columbia mandated separate schools. Desegregation evolved very slowly until the late 1960s, when both the federal court system and the executive branch worked to forcibly implement desegregation in Southern school

districts (Orfield, Eaton, & The Harvard Project on School Desegregation, 1996).

In 1968, the Supreme Court ruled in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* that “freedom of choice” desegregation plans, which placed the onus of integration on African American students, did not go far enough in eradicating the dual system of segregated schools. By 1970, one-third of all African American students in the South attended predominantly white schools. One of the Court’s strongest decisions regarding school desegregation was *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* in 1971, which mandated such remedies as busing to fully integrate schools.

ruling in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) restricted the use of inter-district desegregation remedies—that is, combining several school districts into one desegregation plan—unless the segregative practices of one system had an impact on another. The effect of this decision, combined with the continued expansion of urban minority communities, further diminished the actual desegregation that could occur in central city districts each year and meant that whites wishing to escape desegregation could simply move to the suburbs.

By the late 1980s, a solid conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court rolled back desegregation policies. Three Court decisions in the early

(1992) and *Missouri v. Jenkins* (1995), the Court further constricted the extent and duration of desegregation remedies.

The district courts have responded to the U.S. Supreme Court’s rulings by dismissing desegregation plans for districts seeking to end oversight by the courts. In fact, some school districts that want to maintain their desegregation plans have had to fight in court to keep policies that earlier courts had imposed on them.

For a long time, educators could look to the courts and federal agencies to assume the burden of doing something about segregation. Now the courts, reconstructed in a 35-year period in which Democrats appointed only two Supreme Court justices, are dismantling desegregation orders. Segregation is spreading across the land.

Why Should Educators Care?

Resegregation would not matter so much if racial segregation were not linked to unequal education. Nine-tenths of intensely segregated schools for African Americans and Latinos have high concentrations of poverty (The Civil Rights Project, 2002).

The racial and poverty composition of schools is strongly linked to test scores, graduation rates, the ability to attract and retain talented and experienced teachers, the range of course offerings, student health, parental involvement, and many other factors that influence educational opportunity. After more than 60 years of trying to implement the 1896 mandate of “separate but equal,” followed by a third of a century of Title I programs trying to improve high-poverty schools, both race and poverty remain powerfully linked to educational inequality. Schools faced with both high minority enrollments and high poverty rates rarely excel.

Segregated schools produce lower student achievement, controlling for other influences (Oakes, 1990). Some of the negative effects of segregation can be partially addressed, of course, by placing better teachers in such schools,



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But the tide of desegregation enforcement had begun to shift. The composition of the federal courts was transformed through the appointment of more conservative judges, and executive enforcement of desegregation became weaker.

In the early 1970s, the U.S. Supreme Court issued key decisions that blocked effective desegregation efforts outside the South. For example, the Court’s

1990s dramatically relaxed the judicial desegregation standards required for school systems.

In 1991, the Court’s ruling in *Board of Education of Oklahoma v. Dowell* created standards for dismissing long-running desegregation orders and allowing a return to neighborhood schools even if doing so meant returning to segregated schools. In two subsequent decisions, *Freeman v. Pitts*

enriching the curriculum, making the schools safer, and implementing other changes. Such schools rarely compete successfully for the best teachers and other scarce resources, however. In fact, good, experienced teachers tend to move away from segregated schools (Freeman, Scafidi, & Sjoquist, 2002).

Thus, educators find themselves in a bind. As the system becomes increasingly segregated, the No Child Left Behind Act will hold schools responsible for achieving equal results. If educators talk about segregation, they may be criticized. If they do not and the segregated schools fail, they will be blamed.

Some school district officials may believe that being released from a court order (by being declared "unitary") means that the district gains freedom to do what it wants. In fact, if the district wants to maintain integrated schools, a court order gives it the freedom to take conscious action, such as implementing desegregation goals for magnet schools. After the school system has been declared unitary and released from a court order, it may be forbidden to consider race in student assignment. In that case, the only good way to maintain diverse schools may be the kind of income desegregation now being explored in areas as diverse as Raleigh, North Carolina; Cambridge, Massachusetts; and La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Where Do We Go from Here?

In many places for long periods of time, African American students experienced substantial integration. (Latino students have largely been ignored in this struggle.) But today, U.S. public schools are more segregated than they were in the early 1970s, before the U.S. Supreme Court ordered busing for desegregation.

All the gains of desegregation have not been lost. Interracial exposure in schools remains high in many areas, despite the current judicial trends. In Kentucky, for example, the average African American student attends a

school that is two-thirds white.

Although the South has experienced the biggest increases in African American-white segregation in the past decade, because of the region's tremendous earlier progress it still has the lowest percentage of African American students in segregated schools (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002).

The issues today are different from those during the Civil Rights era. The problems are not in the small towns of the South, and they are not just about African Americans and whites. They are multiracial and metropolitan. Many of the immediate challenges are suburban.

In spite of its importance, desegregation is neither a cure-all nor feasible everywhere. But we should be concerned about the intensifying segregation and think about possible approaches to expand the number of successful interracial schools. We must replace the old model of integrating one minority group into a largely white school with a multiracial vision of school integration that fits our rapidly changing society. Education leaders need to preserve and expand integration where possible, and they need to invest strong leadership in making segregated schools less unequal. Both are urgent priorities. ■

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