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Schools Resegregate, Study Finds

By GREG WINTER

CHARLOTTE, N.C., Jan. 20 — Sanetra Jant still wonders where all the white kids went. Only last spring, they made up a quarter of her class, not to mention her friends. And then, poof, they were gone.

"I don't know why they left," said Sanetra, a fourth grader at Reid Park Elementary School.

Last year, before a federal appeals court ended three decades of judicial-supervised desegregation by the district, Sanetra's school was 68 percent black. Now it is almost entirely black, and the many white pupils who once rode in on yellow buses number one in a hundred.

"Maybe they didn't like it here," Sanetra said, knitting her brow in thought.

If there is any one place to witness the changing racial composition of the nation's public schools, perhaps it is here, in the city for which the Supreme Court first endorsed the use of busing to desegregate.

Dozens of Charlotte schools have basically changed color in the months since the appeals court lifted the desegregation order, and though few other places have seen swings so rapid, the city offers a time-lapse view of the steady transformation of the nation's schools.

According to a new study by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, black and Latino students are now more isolated from their white counterparts than they were three decades ago, before many of the overhauls from the civil rights movement had even begun to take hold.

Nationally, the shift is a result of several

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Erik J. Perel for The New York Times

With a federal court's lifting of a desegregation order for Charlotte, N.C., the student population of Reid Park Elementary School, previously 68 percent black, became almost entirely black virtually overnight.

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factors: big increases in enrollment by black, Latino and Asian students; continuing white flight from the nation's urban centers; and the persistence of housing patterns that isolate racial and ethnic groups. But another big factor, the Harvard study found, has been the termination of dozens of court-ordered desegregation plans.

Spurred by Supreme Court decisions at the start of the 1990's, lower courts have lifted desegregation orders in at least three dozen school districts in the last 10 years. Little Rock, San Diego, Denver and Miami have all come out from under court supervision, and next month a federal judge will reconsider the integration plan in Chicago, the nation's third-largest school district.

A chief principle in the voiding of these orders is one established by the Supreme Court a decade ago: that school districts can be considered successfully desegregated even if student racial imbalances due entirely to demographic factors, like where children live, continue to exist.

Largely as a result, black students now typically go to schools where fewer than 31 percent of their classmates are white, the new Harvard study found. That is less contact than in 1970, a year before the Supreme Court authorized the busing that became a primary way of integrating schools.

Latino students, who have rarely been a focus of desegregation efforts, now attend schools where whites account for only 29 percent of all students, compared with 45 percent three decades ago, according to the study, which draws on Education Department data through the 2000-1 school year.

And while white children increasingly come into contact with minority students, mainly because of the tremendous population growth among races that had only marginal representation decades ago, they are still America's most segregated group, the study found. On average, white students, who make up about 61 percent of the nation's public-school population, go to schools where 80 percent of their classmates are white.

The consequence is a nation in which every racial group that is big enough to be described as segregated generally is: Blacks, though only

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Photo: CORE demonstration in Manhattan, 1965.



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17 percent of public-school children, typically attend schools where they are in a majority. The same is true of Latinos, who are about 16 percent of the student population. Even American Indians, a mere 1 percent of public-school children, go to schools where nearly a third of all students are Native American.

Asians, the study says, are the most integrated group, attending schools where the races are somewhat more commensurate with their national representation. But they, too, are disproportionately grouped together, for though they are only about 4 percent of public-school children, they typically go to schools that are 22 percent Asian.

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