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The **Boston Globe**

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SECTION: METRO/REGION; Pg. A1**LENGTH:** 1119 words**HEADLINE:** WHITE STUDENT RATIOS FALLING PATTERN IN BOSTON'S ELEMENTARY **SCHOOLS****BYLINE:** By Cindy Rodriguez, and Megan Tench, GLOBE STAFF**BODY:**

Thousands of white children left Boston public elementary **schools** during the past decade, leaving the student body just 14 percent white, according to a new study that suggests efforts to keep **schools** racially balanced are becoming futile.

Boston's elementary **schools** are now 86 percent nonwhite, compared with 76 percent in 1990, according to figures analyzed by the Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the University at Albany.

Beyond white families leaving the city for the suburbs, these numbers also reflect Boston's middle-class families sending their children to private and parochial **schools** - increasingly making Boston's public **schools** a place for the poor, regardless of race.

"This isn't a case of cause and effect. There is a pattern here. People who can afford to are sending their children to private **school** systems," said Marguerite Clarke, assistant professor of education at Boston College. "It leaves behind children with a lower socioeconomic status whose parents have fewer options." Whether students in the Boston public schools are white, black or Latino, they end up with classmates who are mostly from poor families, the study shows. The average white student attended an elementary school in 2000 where 78 percent of the students received free or reduced lunches, a barometer of poverty. For Asians and blacks, it was 81 percent; for Latinos, 83 percent.

Many say they aren't surprised by the study's findings, which reflects demographic changes that began in 1974 when the city began court-ordered busing for desegregation.

"Unfortunately we live in a society where those who have seek other types of education and those who have not are stuck," said Leonard Alkins, president of the Boston branch of the NAACP. "White students are not attending schools in the public system because of the quality of the schools. They turn to other types of schools because they can afford to."

As white students leave in greater numbers, it is redefining what constitutes racial balance.

The racial and ethnic breakdown of students in Boston elementary schools is 14 percent white, 48 percent black, 30 percent Latino, and 8 percent Asian. Demographers and educators agree that the balance in schools should mirror the citywide percentages of each racial and ethnic group. Yet a cursory look at the most current data available on the Boston public schools Web site shows some elementary schools off the mark.

Agassiz Elementary School in Jamaica Plain, for example, was 72 percent Latino, 23 percent black, and 5

percent white in 2000. Channing Elementary School, though, was 76 percent black, 11 percent white, 2 percent Asian, and 11 percent Latino.

While some people question why racial diversity is a goal in a city where whites represent such a small number, others say it's still important to keep racial and ethnic balance.

"The average white child in America is in a school that is about 77 percent white. The average black child was in a school that was 59 percent black and the average Hispanic child was in a school that was 58 percent Hispanic," said John R. Logan, director of the Mumford Center and author of the study.

Logan studied statistics of 36,000 schools in 7,000 school districts across the country. He found that throughout the country, self-segregation was on the rise.

In Boston the rate is much lower than in many other cities, notably Detroit and Gary, Ind., which have the highest segregation rates in America.

The national black-white "dissimilarity index" or segregation rate in 1990 was 65, which means 65 percent of black or white children would have to be reassigned to another school to achieve balance. In 2000, the national rate increased to 67.

While Boston's rate is lower than the national average, it has increased substantially. In 1990, 32.7 percent of Boston's black and white elementary school children would have had to be reassigned to achieve balance. In 2000, it went up to 45 percent.

"If you look at the level of residential segregation, however, what you find is that children are much more segregated in their neighborhoods than in their schools," Logan said. "It shows that whatever plan the school district had in 1990 clearly had an impact of improving racial balance."

Statistics show that the number of white students in Boston elementary schools declined dramatically, from 7,551 in 1990 to 4,431 in 2000, and now accounts for 13.6 percent of the elementary student body. The black student population increased slightly, from 14,813 to 15,702, and now makes up 48 percent of the student body.

Latinos increased from 6,521 children to 9,651, and now represent 29.7 percent of the student body. Asians increased slightly from 2,473 to 2,583, accounting for 7.9 percent in 2000.

The results of the study, education advocates say, is a reflection of what Boston's public school system was like for white students, particularly during the latter years of a tumultuous race-based desegregation program.

Parents of white students, however, have long been in conflict with the School Department about how to distribute their dwindling numbers.

In June 1999, an organization called Boston's Children First filed a lawsuit against the Boston schools charging discrimination against four white children who were denied their choice of schools. Among the plaintiffs was a kindergartner who applied to six schools and ended up on a race-based waiting list, said Ann Walsh, president of the organization.

"In the end, it was the white children who were barred from getting into schools and in some kind of tortured way they were also being blamed," Walsh said. "This is one of the reasons there is less white participation in Boston public schools."

A month after the suit was filed, the Boston School Committee voted to end race-based school assignments though it did not concede that the 25-year-old desegregation policy was unconstitutional. The lawsuit is still pending, said Walsh, who wants an end to all forms of race-based assignments.

Under Boston's new student assignment plan, implemented in September 2000, 50 percent of the seats in each school are reserved for students who live within walking distance. The rest go to siblings and those who picked it as their first choice, said Boston schools spokesman John Dorsey.

In popular schools, if there aren't enough seats, students are sent to the school their parents chose second. And if those are full, they get in to their third choice.

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