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Desegregation of MPS retreated in '90s

Schools became more segregated, especially for blacks, in the past decade, university study says

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The court-ordered desegregation of Milwaukee Public Schools unraveled during the 1990s, as the district largely stopped fighting hyper-segregated housing patterns in the region where its students live, a new study shows.

MPS officials largely blame an exodus of white children. But the schools fail to reflect even the little diversity that remains, both the study and the district's own records suggest.

School segregation also rose for the metropolitan area as a whole during the past decade, according to the study by researchers at the State University of



New York at Albany. The four-county Milwaukee area had the nation's eighth most segregated elementary schools for black students in 1999-2000, up from 16th in 1989-'90, the study says.

The area's increase in school segregation was the third-fastest in the nation over that period, behind only Cleveland and Columbus, Ohio.

"We can never go along with segregated schools because we know that there's no such thing as separate but equal," said Jerry Ann Hamilton, president of the Milwaukee chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "I think to have segregated schools is a travesty. It cheats young people and their parents of the opportunity to grow as individuals and as races."

White and black parents alike were complicit in the increasing school segregation, Hamilton said.

"Unless the parents are willing, there's not much the NAACP or anybody else can do," she said. "Black parents feel that they were shafted in the integration efforts. White parents seem to feel that they need to shelter their children from people of different races."

Aquine Jackson, director of MPS' Office of Neighborhood Schools and for a dozen years the man in charge of assigning students to classrooms, said system officials think it's more important to pay for quality schools throughout the city than for desegregation efforts that seemed futile when few whites remained.

"My job and the district's job is to try to make the attendance-area school as attractive as possible so the parents will want to pick it," he said. "We don't want to revert to mandatory forced busing."

As whites left MPS, Jackson said, the system abandoned race-based school assignment rules and gave parents more control.

National trend

The changes follow a nationwide pattern among districts where courts required integration, said John Logan, director of the Albany university's Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, which released the study.

"The typical scenario is efforts by school officials to relax the restrictions that were placed on them by the court order, to introduce more choice by parents in where their students would go to school, (and) get more leeway in the degree of racial balance that the court would expect," he said.

MPS has set goals since the 1970s for the percentage of students attending racially integrated schools. But the targets, initially required by court order and now a matter of School Board policy, became mathematically impossible to meet as the district's demographics changed, Jackson said.

MPS' desegregation policy currently affects only a handful of schools - such as citywide specialty programs in the arts - that have waiting lists for admission. A student's chance of getting into one of those schools depends partly on race.

In 1976, when court-ordered desegregation began, 57% of MPS students were white and 36% were black, Jackson said.

By 1990, the proportions had flipped: 30.8% white, 55.1% black. And in the 2000-'01 school year, the latest data available, just 16.7% of the district's students were white, while 60.8% were black and most of the rest were Hispanic. Educators count as black or white only those students who do not identify themselves as Hispanic.

MPS schools don't even match the city's new, less-diverse racial makeup, the study says.

The study adjusts for demographic changes, Logan said, so the increase in school segregation "wouldn't be accounted for by a change in racial

composition overall in the city."

"Some schools that were more mixed racially have moved toward either more white or more black," he said.

Consider these figures from last school year, the latest reported by MPS: At German Immersion School, 65% of students were white, while 29% were black. At Clarke Street Elementary, 99% were black. At Allen-Field Elementary, 83% were Hispanic and 11% were black.

The desegregation rules, all but dead in practice, could be buried officially within the year, Jackson said. District officials are considering setting new diversity goals based on non-racial factors, such as poverty. The goals could be in place for the 2003-'04 school year, he said.

Civil rights advocates worry about MPS' growing emphasis on neighborhood schools because the city's housing pattern is extremely segregated.

Demographers measure segregation by comparing the racial makeup of each neighborhood with the racial makeup of the city as a whole. Then, they count how many people would have to move to give each neighborhood an identical makeup.

About 70% of black children - a very high level, but typical for central cities - would have to move to integrate Milwaukee's neighborhoods, Logan said. When MPS and the state Legislature adopted a \$98 million neighborhood schools plan, critics argued that it could cause schools to mirror that residential segregation.

Supporters of neighborhood schools responded that the burdens of desegregation fell largely on black children, who had to travel long distances to school even as many white children remained in their neighborhoods. The neighborhood schools plan makes sense, they contend, because it will put money into education that would otherwise have been wasted on busing.

The Albany study measures school segregation in the same way as neighborhood segregation. Researchers calculated an "index of dissimilarity," or segregation rate, that tells the percentage of students who would have to shift from one public elementary school to another for every school to have the same racial makeup as the system as a whole.

The study used federal education statistics to calculate separate numbers for each possible pair of racial groups, such as blacks and whites, or Hispanics and Asian-Americans.

In MPS, the index for whites and blacks rose from 35.7 in 1990 to 58.3 in 2000 - the ninth-largest increase among big school districts, behind places such as Cleveland, Columbus and Minneapolis and just ahead of Seattle.

Cleveland, which had the largest increase, went from a 22.8 index in 1990 to a 74.4 index in 2000.

Logan said indexes in the 20s and 30s show that a central-city school district has largely counteracted residential segregation. Indexes in the 70s show that schools are about as segregated as typical city neighborhoods.

The national average index for black-white school segregation in 2000 was 67, the study says, up from 65 two years earlier.

In central cities, the average was about 70, Logan said. Milwaukee's index in 2000 was the 32nd-highest among large school districts. The figures don't include private schools or high schools.

Other minorities fare better

The trends in Milwaukee were better for Hispanics and Asian-Americans. For Hispanics and whites, the segregation index fell from 61.3 in 1990 to

60.3 in 2000. And comparing Asian-Americans and whites, the index dropped from 60.6 in 1990 to 51 in 2000.

In Milwaukee, Waukesha, Washington and Ozaukee counties as a whole, school segregation soared in the 1990s while it remained relatively stable in many other parts of the country, the Albany study found.

The region's black-white school segregation rate was 78.5 in 2000, up from 69.6 in 1990, the study found. Milwaukee was eighth on the list in 2000, the study says. Detroit ranked highest in both 1990 and 2000.

The area's residential segregation index was 85.9 in 2000, indicating that nearly 86% of children would have to move to a different census tract to integrate all of the region's neighborhoods. That index was the second-highest in the country in 2000, behind only Detroit.

State Rep. Spencer Coggs (D-Milwaukee) said the city needs to do a better job integrating people of all backgrounds.

"If we remain segregated from a housing standpoint and a schooling standpoint, that's going to cause problems in the future."