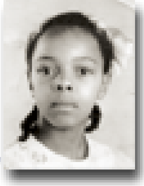
THE Ruling THAT Changed America



BENDING TOWARD JUSTICE
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AMERICAN SCHOOL BOARD JOURNAL

The New Diversity

BY LAWRENCE HARDY

Demographic shifts since *Brown* are changing the face of America's racial and ethnic landscape

Project Village, a preschool program run by the Indian River School District in southern Delaware, offers early learning opportunities for low-income children. Like many rural districts across the country, Indian River has seen a large increase in Hispanic students.

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Legal segregation might be dead, but many metropolitan schools remain overwhelmingly black and poor -- a result of years of white flight from central cities and recent court decisions that have accelerated a return to neighborhood schools. At the same time, the burgeoning Hispanic population is finding itself in increasingly segregated schools across the country, particularly in the West.

How we respond to these trends -- whether we bridge these divides or retreat into balkanized neighborhoods and schools separated by race, class, and wealth -- will in large part determine what type of society we become in the 21st century.

One demographic change in our society is already clear. On June 18, 2003, the Census Bureau marked a milestone in U.S. history: Hispanics had become the largest minority group in this nation of immigrants, surpassing African Americans by some 500,000 people.

At more than 38.8 million, the Hispanic population is growing in states with well-established Hispanic communities -- such as Texas, Arizona, and California -- and in small towns and rural areas in the South and Midwest, where neighborhoods for years had been predominantly Anglo or a mix of Anglo and African American.

"If you consider that the black-white divide has been the basic social construct in American history for 300 years, this marks a change," Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center told the *Washington Post*. "This is the official reminder that we are moving into new territory."

Fifty years after *Brown*, the education of this growing Hispanic population is arguably the biggest challenge -- and the biggest opportunity -- facing the public schools. Like African Americans, Hispanics (who can be of any race) are more likely than Anglos to be poor, to live in substandard housing, or to be unemployed. While studies show that Hispanic parents place a high value on education, their children are three times more likely than non-Hispanic whites to drop out of school. The pressures on some of these students, especially the 40 percent who were born outside the United States, can be tremendous. As their Anglo peers advance academically, many Hispanic students must struggle to learn English and resist the urge to drop out.

"Our Hispanic students, when they reach high school -- it's [hard] getting them to stay," says Lois Hobbs, superintendent of the Indian River School District in Georgetown, Del., where hundreds of Hispanics have moved in recent years to work in the state's poultry industry. "They drop out and go to work and send money home to their families."

'Virtual apartheid'

The surge in the Hispanic population may be the biggest story in minority education in the post-*Brown*

years, but it is by no means the only one. Demographic trends have had a decided impact on African-American students as well, resulting in what many are calling the resegregation of U.S. schools.

After tremendous gains in integration since the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, African Americans' contact with white students has been declining, according to a recent report by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. In the South, for example, peak integration occurred in 1988, when 43.5 percent of black students attended majority white schools. By 2001, that number had dropped to 30.2 percent.

Gary Orfield, founding codirector of the Civil Rights Project, says two Supreme Court rulings in particular have helped reverse the gains made since *Brown*: the decision in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), which struck down a Detroit desegregation plan that involved the city and its largely white suburbs, and the decision in *Dowell v. Oklahoma City* (1991), which allowed courts to declare school districts "unitary" if they were deemed to have eliminated the vestiges of dual, and unequal, systems. This designation has enabled school systems to get out from under their court-ordered desegregation plans and return to neighborhood schools.

"The school desegregation orders were making schools substantially more integrated than the Southern neighborhoods," Orfield says. "Now we're reverting back to the neighborhood pattern. So if we don't do anything about the schools, and we don't do anything about the neighborhoods, we're going to have a substantially higher level of segregation than we had traditionally, or over the last 30 years, in the South.

"In the North, we never really desegregated the schools much," he adds. "So we basically have the neighborhood pattern there."

Absent any kind of desegregation remedy, those neighborhood patterns have resulted in "virtual apartheid" in some parts of the country, Orfield says. In the Northeast, for example, more than half of black students attend schools that are 90 to 100 percent nonwhite. In the South, almost one-third of black students go to these overwhelmingly minority schools.

The reverse is true for white students. "Nationally, the typical white student goes to a school that is 79 percent white," says researcher Chungmei Lee, who coauthored the Civil Rights Project report.

The report also noticed that Hispanics are increasingly segregated, particularly in the West, while Asian-Americans remain the most integrated minority.

Race, poverty, and housing

School integration is important to students living in an increasingly diverse society and a world that has grown smaller though globalization, Orfield says. Studies show, for example, that integrated schools have a positive impact on cross-racial friendships and the educational aspirations of both whites and African Americans.

On a more concrete level, highly racially identifiable schools and poverty go hand in hand for blacks and Hispanics alike. According to the Civil Rights Project report, "Only 15 percent of ... intensely segregated white schools were schools of concentrated poverty, or schools with more than half of the students on free or reduced priced lunch. In contrast, 88 percent of the intensely segregated minority schools (or schools with less than 10 percent white) had concentrated poverty, with more than half of all students getting free lunches."

There is some good news. Because of the strong economy in the 1990s, the number of people living in high-poverty neighborhoods decreased by 24 percent, or 2.5 million, from 1990 to 2000, according to a Brookings Institution report. The number of African Americans living in such neighborhoods dropped from almost a third in 1990 to 19 percent in 2000.

"But the Brookings report clearly shows that the favorable trend of the 1990s may be temporary rather than long-term," Harvard professor William Julius Wilson wrote in the *New York Times*. "Unemployment and individual poverty rates are on the rise again; more than 2.4 million jobs have disappeared in the last two years. And given the continuing increase in the Hispanic population, the number of high-poverty barrios is likely to grow rapidly in a sluggish economy."

Indeed, despite the improved economic status of African Americans -- and that of most Americans -- in the 1990s, housing discrimination persists, says John R. Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research in Albany, N.Y. "Even middle-class African-American families tend to live in very different and much poorer communities than working-class white families," Logan says. "...There is separation based solely on race."

Certainly, choice plays a large part in where African Americans live, he says. But choice doesn't adequately explain these housing patterns. "Among Asians, we believe that choice is a stronger factor" than discrimination in neighborhood location, Logan says. "And among African Americans, it's very much outweighed by discrimination."

White flight and city schools

The 50 years since *Brown* have seen another population dynamic as well -- the tremendous growth of largely white suburbs. ("Inner-ring" suburbs surrounding large cities have grown increasingly segregated, however.) Some observers contend that this trend has marginalized city residents, the vast majority of them minorities, who have less access to good jobs, adequate housing, and quality schools.

"One year after Rosa Parks made her stand against racial segregation in public transportation, the federal government elected to be the primary funder of a 41,000-mile interstate highway system, a system that would promote suburban expansion and contribute to the divestment of central cities," wrote John A. Powell, former executive director of the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School and now in a similar position at Ohio State University.

Powell says that school desegregation plans "had just begun to prove themselves" when the courts began dismantling them, "declaring the power of local governments in metropolitan regions to be more sacred and important than racial justice in education.

"The blows to civil rights efforts of these and other governmental interventions -- in shaping what today are racially and economically imbalanced and inequitable metropolitan regions -- cannot be overstated," he wrote in the *Journal of Urban Ecology*.

As a result of white flight and depopulation, many urban districts are getting smaller, poorer, and more segregated. For example, the percentage of white students in the Chicago City Schools dropped from 37 percent in 1968 to less than 10 percent in 2000, according to Mumford Center statistics. In 1968, the St. Louis schools were 35 percent white; by 2000, the district was just 17 percent white, and overall enrollment had dropped by more than half. Similar transformations have occurred in cities like Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia, to name just a few.

Despite these numbers, some observers are less pessimistic about the results of desegregation than

either Orfield or Powell. While acknowledging the reality of segregation in many cities, Logan notes in a recent report that, on average, schools have desegregated substantially since 1968. For his Lewis Mumford Center analysis, Logan used an Index of Dissimilarity, which tells what share of black or white students would have to switch schools to achieve full racial balance. The index goes from 0 -- totally integrated -- to 100 -- completely segregated.

"By 1990, average within-district segregation had fallen to below 50" on this index, Logan writes. "Desegregation was widespread, and segregation scores dropped even more in districts without court-mandated plans than in those with plans."

But since 1990, the situation has changed. Although Logan disagrees with Orfield's contention that schools are substantially resegregating, he concludes that desegregation "has stopped in its tracks."

The next 50 years

What will the United States look like when we commemorate the 100th anniversary of *Brown*? It is difficult to predict the level of school or neighborhood integration, but demographers have a pretty good idea of what the nation as a whole will resemble. In fact, a model already exists on the border with Mexico.

"I tell people, if you want to see the America your kids or grandkids will live in -- that is, about 2040 to '50 -- all you need to do is look at the demographics of Texas," says Steve Murdock, Texas' state demographer and a sociologist at Texas A&M. "The state of Texas is at about 53 percent non-Hispanic white, and that's what we're projecting for the United States at mid-century." As of the 2000 Census, the nation was 69 percent non-Hispanic white.

For Texas, giving these Hispanic students a sound education is not just important for the children and their families; it is essential to the state's economy as well, Murdock says. As long as Hispanic children are less likely than whites to complete high school or go to college, their earning power will be considerably less. And if lower-income residents are making up an increasingly larger share of the population, state tax revenues will suffer. This trend could be felt earliest, and most severely, in states with large immigrant populations, such as Texas, California, and New York. But eventually, it will affect the entire country, as the United States becomes a "majority minority" nation.

"I think the growth of non-Anglo children is so dominant in many parts of the country that that *is* the issue," Murdock says. "It's not the issue of what happens to these kids compared to other kids who aren't minority. They *are* the kids."

Where does this leave African Americans, the once dominant minority? It may be inevitable that there will be some degree of competition between minority groups for scarce economic -- and educational -- resources, says Jennifer Hochschild, a professor of government at Harvard.

"No group, historically, has moved over cheerfully for another group," Hochschild says.

On the other hand, to the extent that African Americans and Hispanics share similar problems, hopes, and aspirations, they could develop strong coalitions to support the education of all minority children.

Perhaps a more disturbing divide is one that could develop between a younger generation that is majority minority and an elderly one that is wealthier and largely white. In their recent book, *The American Dream and the Public Schools*, Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, director of the undergraduate program at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, call this the "racial generation gap."

Competition for resources will grow as the "dependency ratio" -- the ratio of the dependent young and old to those of working age -- increases, the authors say. According to the U.S. Census, that ratio will rise from 63 dependents per 100 workers in 1992 to 83 per 100 in 2030.

Whether the nation can unite across these racial and generational divides will say a lot about the politics of the 21st century -- about the kind of neighborhoods we choose to live in and the quality of education we offer our children in the public schools.

"Some people think that the demographics we will have in the future are unusual," Murdock says. "It may be that the demographics we have had in the past are unusual. In other words, we'll look a lot more like the world in 2050 than we do today."

Lawrence Hardy is an associate editor of *American School Board Journal*.

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