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School study finds deep racial divide

Boston, other communities reflect impact of white flight

The Boston Globe

By Yvonne Abraham and Francie Latour, Globe Staff, 9/2/2003

Almost three decades after Boston's bruising school desegregation battles, nearly half of the white children in the city attend private schools and most minority children remain walled off from suburban school advantages, according to a report released yesterday.

ADVERTISEMENT The report, by the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the State University of New York at Albany, depicts a region with stark divisions between school districts. Students in Boston public schools are mostly black and Hispanic. Hispanic children are concentrated in schools in the blue-collar, satellite cities such as Lowell and Lawrence. And suburban schools are predominantly white.

"White children have almost entirely escaped the city of Boston, and those who remain in the city live in increasingly advantaged city neighborhoods; half of them attend private schools," it reads. "The vast majority of them live in the suburbs, and in the suburbs they grow up in neighborhoods and attend schools that are typically 90 percent white and remarkably affluent."

The report, sponsored by The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, is part of a yearlong effort called the Metro Boston Equity Initiative, a study of segregation and inequality in the region. Researchers unveiled the findings as part of a weekend-long Harvard conference on race relations.

Speaking before the gathering yesterday afternoon, Harvard's president, Lawrence H. Summers, said that while many of the conference reports might seem abstract, they paint a picture of undeniable inequity, even as they point the way for change.

"I am here to tell you that after eight years in Washington, this kind of knowledge changes our consciousness, and changes our nation," said Summers, who served as US Treasury secretary under President Clinton.

While he did not address the study on Boston's schools specifically, Summers said the conference raised critical questions for educational leaders nationwide. "Where will the children who are born into this country now be a quarter-century from now?" he asked. "Will we find the ways to make sure that gaps in educational achievement are substantially narrowed?"

The study, which is based on census figures from 1990 and 2000 and on information

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from public elementary schools, divides the 5 million residents of the Boston region into three areas: the city of Boston, with a population of 600,000; the 17 satellite cities around Boston, such as Lynn, Lowell, Brockton, and Gloucester, home to 1.4 million; and the residential suburbs, with a population of 3 million.

The region's under-18 population is 75 percent white, 10 percent Hispanic, 8.1 percent black, and 5.2 percent Asian.

According to the study, the white flight that followed busing in the 1970s continued through the 1990s. In 1990, 36.7 percent of Boston's children were white, but only 23.5 percent of the students enrolled in the public elementary schools were white. In 2000, 25.4 percent of the city's children were white, and they made up only 13.6 percent of Boston elementary school enrollments.

The white children who remain in Boston -- 30,000, or 3.2 percent of the entire region's population of white children -- live in neighborhoods where 85 percent of the children are white. Fully 44 percent of white children in Boston attend private schools.

By contrast, 46.8 percent of the region's black children live in Boston, and 22.5 percent of Hispanic children call the city home.

The picture in the suburbs is equally lopsided: 80 percent of the white under-18 population lives in the suburbs; only 21.4 percent of blacks in that age group and 24.1 percent of Hispanic youths and children live in the suburbs. Nationwide, by comparison, 40 percent of the black and Hispanic under-18 population lives in the suburbs, according to the report. The reasons for that are not just economic, said John R. Logan, an author of the study and director of the Mumford Center. Even when minority families become affluent, they tend to stay in neighborhoods with lower incomes and education levels, he said.

"Income is not the primary driver of the system here," he said. "There is very good evidence of discrimination in the housing market, and there is the historic legacy of a color line people hesitate to cross. It's asking a lot of a black family to be the only black family in a community."

But Mayor Thomas M. Menino took umbrage at the report: Seeing the Boston schools through a demographic lens does them an injustice, he said. The study says nothing about the quality of Boston's schools, which has improved enormously in recent years, he said.

"We can't continue to talk about black and white," he said. "Let's talk about achievement. The answer is to have quality schools, and when you have quality schools, there's no color. All parents want quality schools and that's what we have today in Boston."

Logan said it is not the racial disparities between school districts that allow for educational inequities but the economic differences that attend them.

In Boston schools, children are far more likely to come from poor families, with 78.3 percent of children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches; in the satellite cities (home to 53.4 percent of the region's Hispanic children), 52.7 percent are eligible;

but in the suburbs, the portion of poor children drops to just 13.9 percent. In the region overall, less than 20 percent of the average white child's classmates are poor, whereas 60 percent of the average black or Hispanic child's classmates are poor, according to the report.

"I wouldn't make the blanket statement that urban schools are of a lower quality than suburban schools, but . . . poverty in schools creates obstacles for administrators and teachers," Logan said. "It is quite difficult to overcome the disadvantages of concentrated poverty in public schools . . . [they] actually need considerably more resources to do the same job that can be done in affluent schools."

The authors noted that city of Boston schools had made strides toward desegregation, but said segregation exists between city and suburban schools.

The way to reduce those inequalities, Logan writes, is to focus desegregation efforts beyond regional boundaries. (One such effort, the Metco program, which buses several thousand minority children from the city into suburban districts, has a waiting list of more than 10,000 students.)

"The achievements of Boston, or Lynn, or Cambridge, or any community that has managed to limit inequalities within its boundaries are countermanded when the most affluent school systems where most white children go to school are largely off-limits to minority children," the report reads. "The only way that desegregation plans could substantially reduce the separate and unequal character of public education is if they were applied region-wide."

But Boston's school superintendent, Thomas W. Payzant, said shifting students between districts to desegregate education across the region should not be the goal of school systems. Better to shift money around than students, he said, to pour extra resources -- rather than white children -- into schools in poor neighborhoods.

"For me, the issue is providing a quality education for all students, wherever they live, and urban school districts can do that," he said. "Poor neighborhood doesn't have to mean poor school. We've had some real success in improving our schools; we need to improve them more, but we can't wring our hands and say, 'If the racial mix were different, the schools would somehow be better.' Because that sends a message to many that somehow if you happen to be poor or a person of color, you don't deserve, and can't get, good schools in the community you live in."

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