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BROWN VS. BOARD OF EDUCATION: 50 YEARS LATER

Still separate, unequal

Most of Illinois' black students remain in segregated, inferior schools

By Diane Rado, Darnell Little and Grace Aduroja

Tribune staff reporters

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Fifty years after a landmark court decision brought the promise of better schooling for black students, most of Illinois' black children are still relegated to segregated and inferior schools, a Tribune study has found.

A black child is about 40 times more likely than a white child to attend one of Illinois' worst-of-the-worst "academic watch" schools. A child at a majority black school is about six times more likely to be taught by teachers without full certification than at a white school.

And majority black grade schools have larger class sizes and larger enrollments on average, though research has shown the benefits of small and nurturing learning environments, particularly for disadvantaged children.

The inequities stretch from Chicago to the suburbs to communities across the state, creating conditions for black children that many white parents couldn't imagine.

At the dimly lit Coolidge Middle School in south suburban Phoenix, the library is spacious but it has just eight bookshelves, some half-empty. Administrators at the cash-strapped school haven't been able to buy more library materials for their students, most of them black.

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Poor black children file into classrooms where as many as 32 pupils are taught at Price Elementary in Chicago, because too few teachers want to work at a failing school. Less qualified teachers working without full credentials help beef up the staff.

In East St. Louis, bars cover windows and metal cages cover air-conditioning units to protect against theft at the deteriorated, all-black Lincoln Middle School. The school's library has become a refuge, with the staff providing teddy bears that troubled children can hug.

The Tribune's findings spurred calls for statewide change from educators, political leaders and civil rights activists.

"I think we have a system of educational apartheid in Illinois," said G. Alfred Hess Jr., an education and social policy professor at Northwestern University.

The Brown vs. Board of Education decision, announced in May 1954, promised to usher in a new era when the U.S. Supreme Court declared that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Court cases around the nation soon were launched to desegregate public schools.

Today, many of those measures have been curtailed, and segregation in communities around the country is on the rise, according to a recent study by The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.

The Tribune found that 68 percent of black students in Illinois attended majority black schools during the last school year--an improvement over 1979, when the figure was 77 percent. Yet the Harvard study ranked Illinois among the top four segregated states in the nation for black students.

For many black parents, however, integration is no longer as important as the opportunity to provide their children with an education equal to that received by white students--the hope inspired by the Brown case 50 years ago.

"Quality of education is most important to me," said Rose Williams, who has a 1st and 2nd grader at the 96 percent black Jefferson School in Riverdale. "Diversity is important because when they go out into the world it's not just going to be people like them. But No. 1 is quality of education."

In many cases, that wish is not being granted. A Tribune analysis of test scores, student demographics and teaching and learning data at some 4,000 schools in Illinois shows that today's black students consistently endure classroom conditions that can encourage failure.

Nearly 40 percent of black children attend one of the state's 335 schools on academic watch, where

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students have failed state tests and other standards four years in a row. Less than 1 percent of white children attend those schools.

"At best the '54 decision gained us a measure of legal freedom, but never equality," said Rev. Jesse Jackson. "No commitment to repair damage done. No commitment to offset the legacy of being locked out. The sons and daughters of inheritance and privilege were not affected. The sons and daughters of disenfranchisement and deprivation were on the same track."

Experts say segregated housing patterns and tightly drawn neighborhood school boundaries have helped keep schools from integrating. And the current legal climate makes it difficult to challenge inequities in majority black schools without proof of intentional discrimination.

"We all have to realize the limitations of what a court case like Brown can do," said Brian Jones, general counsel for the U.S. Department of Education and co-chairman of a national commission formed to commemorate the anniversary.

"It was critically important, a watershed moment in terms of the American legal landscape, but it has its limits," Jones said. "It's one thing to say you can't segregate your schools by law. But the Supreme Court can't mandate where people choose to live."

ZIP code matters

Complicating matters in Illinois is a school finance system that creates stunning inequities between affluent areas that can afford to pour money into local schools and impoverished districts that can't. The state relies on local communities to pump up school spending because only a limited share of state funds is devoted to public education.

"Unfortunately, the quality of education still is largely dependent on your ZIP code," said Illinois State Supt. of Education Robert Schiller.

Statewide, majority black school districts spend about \$900 more per student than white districts, mainly because of an infusion of federal and state funds designed to help poorer communities.

But in Cook County--where 70 percent of the state's black students attend school--the extraordinary differences in local property wealth from district to district reverse that trend. Infusions of local tax money in wealthy white districts boost spending to dramatic levels.

For example, Northbrook School District 27, which is 85.5 percent white, is able to spend \$13,446 per student, according to the most recent state finance data available. Sunset Ridge District 29 in Northfield, which is 93 percent white, spends \$12,589.

In contrast, the impoverished and nearly all-black Dolton School District 149 spends \$6,977 per student, and Chicago Public Schools spends \$8,482.

It is the more disadvantaged districts that need the greater investment of funds, researchers say, because poverty is so inextricably linked to low achievement. Three of every four black students in Illinois attend schools where most children are poor, and black students as a group come in dead last on state tests in every grade and every subject. White students score more than 30 percentage points higher.

"When you get large concentrations of low income kids in the same place, it depresses the achievement for everybody," said Hess, of Northwestern.

The lack of resources plays out in schools at many levels. For example, officials in black districts and schools say attracting and retaining quality teachers is a constant battle. As a result, those students are more likely to be taught by teachers who are not fully certified in Illinois.

Under state rules, teachers can work with so-called emergency or provisional teaching certificates, generally good for two to six years, while they complete state coursework and testing requirements. At 87 of the state's 592 majority black schools, at least 10 percent of the staff has such certificates, five times the state average of 2 percent.

"We lose teachers every summer; June and July they'll resign because they obtained a higher paying position," said Dorothea Fitzgerald, superintendent of Dolton School District 148 in south Cook County.

Carl L. Lawson Sr., principal at Chicago's Price Elementary, said he has seen teachers leave two months after arriving at his South Side school, where nearly every child is black and poor. The school is on the state's academic watch list, and 20.7 percent of its teachers have provisional or emergency certificates.

Some teachers leave because they are overwhelmed by children with rage and discipline problems, Lawson said. "I don't want to blame the parents or the neighborhood," he said. "It's a whole society's problem."

Teacher shortages compound other common problems in majority black schools--high enrollments and crowded buildings.

At Jefferson, the school's gymnasium, computer laboratory, kitchen and several teacher office areas are in the building's foyer. It was the only place in the crowded six-classroom school where officials could find spare space.

There is no lunchroom. Students eat at their desks.

Teachers note that smaller-size classes--preferably 22 or fewer--are easier to manage and teach. The average class size in Illinois for 1st grade, when children are learning to read, is about 21 students, according to state data. But nearly 60 percent of majority black grade schools exceed that average, compared with 37 percent of majority white schools. Statewide, 117 black schools have average 1st-grade class sizes of 25 children or more.

The exception is at Illinois high schools, where class sizes are lower in majority black schools.

At Price, Lawson uses all his available staff--from the gym teacher to the librarian--to shrink classes to 18 or fewer students for certain subjects, such as reading. But in other classes, the numbers shoot up, such as the 32 students in his 8th grade class.

Chicago Public Schools chief Arne Duncan said improvements are coming in the areas of teacher qualification and class size. At the end of the school year, he said, the district will fire more than 400 substitute teachers who still don't have full certification. The district also plans to start a pilot program this fall to place extra teachers in chronically failing schools to reduce class sizes in kindergarten to 3rd grade.

But he and other leaders acknowledge that far more dramatic reform is needed to address the disparities.

'Time we act'

"It's time that we act," said Illinois Senate President Emil Jones Jr. when told of the Tribune's findings.

Long a supporter of increased funding for disadvantaged schools, Jones said Illinois' governor and legislature must take the next, controversial step: Raise the state income tax and reduce reliance on local property taxes to fund schools. "We shouldn't have these disparities," said Jones, a Chicago Democrat.

Duncan also called for a dramatic overhaul, calling the current school funding system "morally bankrupt."

"It is staggering to me in this day and age, that there can be such tremendous inequities in funding in a state where we claim that education is our first priority," Duncan said.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who has pushed for funding for preschool programs, reading specialists and other initiatives to help needy children, said in a written statement that he thinks "the state should do a better job of funding education so students in communities that lack local resources aren't penalized."

At the same time, he is opposed to raising the state income tax, saying reforms are needed first.

"I do not believe that we have earned the trust of the people to ask them to pay more in taxes,"

Blagojevich said. "Our system needs reform. It needs accountability. We need to be able to show how we're saving money and reinvesting it in the classroom."

Of course, not all majority black schools are failing in their mission, and many individual educators work tirelessly to demonstrate to students that they can transcend their environment through learning.

Former Illinois Supt. Glenn "Max" McGee recently published a study on 59 high-performing, high-poverty schools in Illinois. He found that strong leadership, high expectations and more instructional time were factors in their success.

Other problems

Still, researchers say less tangible and more insidious problems often lie beneath the surface at minority schools, such as a failure to place a priority on academic success.

Thornwood High School in South Holland, which is about 88 percent black, is a school where the majority of juniors didn't pass the state's standardized exams last year.

Yet Principal Gary Lester acknowledged that he got more calls about recently approved cuts in the school's vaunted athletics programs than in its academic problems.

During a recent visit to an advanced placement English class at the school, a boisterous group of mostly black students told the Tribune of their concerns. Junior LaToya Rochon, 17, said the focus on athletics sends a message "that achievements on the field are more important than academic successes."

Others said some teachers at the school have low expectations of students.

"A lot of students don't care because certain teachers don't care," said Aviana Shaw, 16. "They just come to school to get paid."

State Rep. Mary Flowers, a Chicago Democrat and vice chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee for Public Schools, recalled having some of those same feelings about low expectations in the 1960s. Attending the Chicago school then known as Simeon Vocational High School, which was all black, Flowers said she was viewed as a black girl who was "going to have a house full of babies."

Many students might have given in, but she had the opposite reaction: a defiance that even got her suspended from school. "I had an attitude problem," Flowers said. "You say I'm going to be nothing, I'm going to defy you."

At some majority black schools the Tribune visited, the atmosphere seemed unusually focused on

discipline and control--a phenomenon black educators and politicians also acknowledged and criticized in interviews.

When the 1st through 3rd graders at Jefferson get up to sharpen a pencil, use the bathroom or go for snacks, they hold a finger to their lips as a reminder to be quiet. When sitting at their desks, 1st graders in navy and white uniforms clasp their hands as a sign they are ready and attentive.

In a recent class at Price Elementary, 4th graders were excited about interviewing two fellow students about their school experiences in Senegal. As they clamored to ask questions, they were repeatedly told not to "blurt out," and the lights in the classroom were shut off at one point as a signal for the students to quiet down.

The principal, Lawson, said the teacher probably wanted to make sure the children were absorbing the lesson but that the students' behavior may not have warranted such a strict approach.

Researchers say an environment so heavily focused on control is usually not seen at schools that succeed academically despite a disadvantaged population.

"Kids learn by exploring and doing and questioning," said McGee, now superintendent in Wilmette District 39.

At Wilmette Junior High School, the Tribune found students in one classroom chatting in poetry discussion groups. In another, they moved about freely, looking at posted artwork.

Ninety percent of the students are white at the school on the affluent North Shore, where middle-schoolers are preparing for top-rated New Trier High School and then elite colleges and universities.

Aware of the school's racial isolation, the junior high makes an effort to expose students to other communities. Many 8th-graders volunteer in Chicago on Saturday mornings, helping tutor disadvantaged children. Students produce documentaries on urban issues and study black literature and poetry.

The Tribune also found that not all schools fit a segregated mold.

Racially mixed Chicago suburban communities, such as Oak Park and Evanston, have long been known for integrated schools. Evanston/Skokie Elementary School District 65 has a goal that no school have more than 60 percent of students of one race, and it draws meandering school boundaries to ensure a racial and economic mix. "It's very much a commitment of the community," said Lynn McCarthy, an assistant superintendent.

Last month, the National Education Association's president, Reg Weaver, visited Einstein Elementary

School, in a diverse neighborhood in northwest Cook County's Hanover Park, and was greeted by black, white, Asian and Hispanic children, and a black principal. "This is wonderful," exclaimed Weaver, who told children he once attended a segregated grade school in Danville.

As in Wilmette, Einstein Principal Sonya Whitaker said the school sets up activities, such as a cultural fair, to make sure children understand and celebrate diversity. "I am intentionally creating a culture where my students have a worldly view," she said.

In East St. Louis, though, segregation still prevails in one of the most historically troubled districts in the state. Several schools are still 100 percent black.

Hope is alive

But local officials are intent on making improvements, and hope is alive--even in a dark hallway in deteriorated Lincoln Middle School, where a poem titled "I am the Black Child" is painted on the wall.

"I am strong; obstacles cannot stop me," it reads. "I hold my pace, continuing forward through adversity. ... I am confident that I can achieve my every goal. I am becoming all that I can be."

The district has a new early childhood center for preschoolers, it has rewritten its curriculum to ensure state standards are taught, and it is continuing construction that has begun to change the face of its schools.

Students at Lincoln will transfer in the fall to a new building just blocks from their current location, which is flanked by two of East St. Louis' toughest housing developments.

Until then, the middle schoolers can still seek sanctuary in Lincoln's quaint, tidy library, where the soft teddy bears strewn about help them escape the realities outside.

"Sometimes they come in with pent-up anger," said librarian Erma Luster. "They just like to hold them."

COMING MONDAY

In Illinois, rapid growth in the Hispanic population has sent a flood of Latino students into a school system ill-equipped to deal with their needs.

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