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BROWN VS BOARD OF EDUCATION: 50 YEARS LATER

Celebrating diversity, but still seeking unity

Despite Evanston High's efforts, integration faces obstacles

By Jodi S. Cohen

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On paper, Evanston Township High School looks like a model of integration, with a racial mix that society has strived to achieve for decades.

But inside the classrooms and lunchrooms of the North Shore school, it becomes clear that getting diverse races in the same building is only a first step toward unity and uniformly high achievement.

Despite concerted efforts by Evanston school officials, students of different races find themselves in different classes. They gravitate toward separate sports teams and clubs. They attend rival dances and even use different doors as they stream out of school for lunch.

"We all go to the same school, but that is pretty much it," said sophomore Paul Schroeder, who plays on the school's majority-white water polo team.

Fifty years after the U.S. Supreme Court forbade government-sanctioned school segregation, racially diverse schools like Evanston--48 percent white, 39 percent African-American and 9 percent Latino this year--still are rare. These schools are in the vanguard of a new battle: Getting students of different races to interact more, and working to understand and address why minorities tend to lag behind their white peers.

There are powerful social and cultural forces undermining efforts to integrate. Teenagers, trying to fit in at

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the 3,100-student school, are drawn to students who look and sound the same. Growing up in distinct cultures, they have different academic expectations and separate interests outside of class.

Evanston students have thought hard about race, and they openly and honestly regret that the school does not live up to ideal visions of integration.

They also are quick to point to their school's diversity as a leg up when comparing themselves to nearly all-white rival New Trier Township High School in Winnetka, an experience that experts agree gives them an advantage.

"In any comparative sense, you will be better off going to Evanston," said education and social policy professor Gary Orfield, co-director of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. "You don't have to be best friends [with people of other races], but your horizons get broadened, you get new ideas, you learn how to act in different settings."

Most of the settings at Evanston remain divided, however, including the classrooms.

Advanced Placement and honors classes are overwhelmingly white, while remedial classes--for freshmen and sophomores reading and writing below grade level--are disproportionately African-American and Latino.

About 15 percent of the classes that black students took last year were AP and honors, compared with 51 percent of the classes for white students.

"You can look in a room and know if it is an honors or regular class by the color of the students' skin," said senior Nicole Summers, who is white and said there are five minority students in her four AP classes. "It's great that we are in a diverse school, but when you are in class, you don't feel it."

Some experts say that may not be a bad thing. It's more important, they say, to place students in classes where they can succeed, and then work to raise their achievement. Others say minority students would perform better if the classes were not divided by ability.

Test scores and placement

There are several factors behind the classroom gap, including differences in test scores when students get to high school. On a national test they took last school year, this year's white freshmen scored, on average, 19.5 out of 25, while Latino students scored 14.7 and African-American students scored 13.3.

Students are put in classes based on these scores and teacher recommendations. Parents can request that their children be moved to another level, but most parents who do that are white, Supt. Allan Alson

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said.

Teacher Venessa Woods said that although "people don't want to hear it," cultural and educational differences mean that some minority parents aren't as involved in their children's education or don't know how to work the bureaucracy to request the best teachers or top classes.

Eighty-nine percent of white students at Evanston have at least one parent with four or more years of college education, compared with 45 percent of black students and 24 percent of Latino students, according to a Harvard University survey.

"In some of our students-of-color homes, they don't have the homework table, they don't see degrees on the wall from mom and dad," said Woods, who runs a program to get more African-American and Latino students in high-level classes. "We need to change the way they think about themselves as students. They need to see themselves as learners."

The Harvard survey also found that a smaller percentage of black students said their teachers demand they work hard.

"It's true that teachers don't expect as much from black kids as white kids," said Harvard lecturer Ronald Ferguson, who studies the achievement gap at multiracial suburban schools. He thinks Evanston's black and Latino students are likely enrolled in appropriate classes because they are not as well prepared for the harder courses.

Fear of failure and not fitting in also drives some minority students to choose lower-level classes.

"Many minorities can be in honors classes, but they choose not to be. We are trying to figure that out because they can do the work," said senior Patrice Miller, 18, a member of the school's Minority Student Achievement Network. "They don't have anybody pushing them or motivating them to take the classes-- not their parents or their counselors or other teachers."

That doesn't mean students like the situation. In teacher Sheila Skweres' remedial biology class, all 17 students are African-American or Latino.

"The kids, point-blank, have asked me where the white kids are. The kids notice it and that's a problem," Skweres said.

Little mixing at lunch

Without the classroom contact, students say they are less likely to socialize together.

In the school's junior/senior cafeteria--one of four lunchrooms in the school--black students generally sit on one side, white students on the other.

Among those who leave campus, black students often go out the front doors and walk along Dodge Avenue to fast-food restaurants or their homes. White students overwhelmingly leave through the back doors to the parking lot and drive to lunch.

Athletics and extra-curricular activities are divided by race, too. The cheerleading squad and boys' basketball teams are nearly all African-American, for example, while the swim teams are almost all white. Nearly all music, theater and visual arts are dominated by white students.

There are exceptions: student council, the boys football and wrestling teams, the girls basketball and softball teams, and both track teams are diverse.

The racial divide also is evident at two non-school-sponsored dances--Cotillion and Ebony Ball. Cotillion is a long-standing tradition, in which 20 upper-classmen paid about \$500 this year to sit on the Cotillion board, a privilege that allows them to invite other students to a winter dance. Historically, the dance was open only to white students, but board members have worked to make it more diverse in recent years.

In 1991, in response to that dance, black students started Ebony Ball. The school's African-American students receive invitations, and other students can ask to attend. Non-black students can go if they are invited as a date, though even that has been controversial, said Matthew Hunter, a member of the Ebony Ball board who invited a white girl this year.

"I got a lot of flak," he said, referring to comments made at a salon while he got his hair braided for the dance.

Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" said students start separating themselves in middle school as they think about their identity and become more interested in the opposite sex.

"Parents and teachers may start to give signals about who is appropriate to hang out with," said Tatum, president of Spelman College in Atlanta.

Students generally dismiss the segregation in the cafeterias, saying they simply are more comfortable hanging out with peers of the same race who may have similar interests.

"Because high school is so big, it is hard to find a group right away," said sophomore Maya Odim, who sat with all African-American girls last year and now sits at a mixed-race table. "Since you can't see personalities when you look at people, race is the first thing you can see."

Sylvia Garduno has a simpler reason for her lunch table choice.

"I sit with Hispanics because they know how to speak Spanish and can understand me," said Garduno, a junior who sits at a table where conversation sometimes slips into Spanish.

There are pockets of integration. At one table, two white girls joined eight African-American girls whom they know from the basketball team.

But the African-American girls at that table agreed there were pressures to sit with students of the same race. Anika Trujillo, whose mother is black and father is Latino, wondered aloud about the reaction she would get if she sat at a table with white students.

"You'll get labeled as one of the black-girls-who-sits-with-a-white-girl reputation," Trujillo said.

Students said interracial dating is relatively rare, and when it does occur, it is nearly always a white girl dating a black boy.

"We get upset when it is a black man doing well, with good looks, smart and a good reputation and he chooses to date a white girl," said senior Samantha Feteau.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of all these divisions is that Evanston has been a nationwide leader in trying to overcome such distinctions.

Striving for achievement

In 1999, Alson started the Minority Student Achievement Network, a group of 21 racially diverse suburban school districts across the country working to close the achievement gap.

At Evanston Township High School, one week in March was dedicated to minority achievement, with speakers addressing a schoolwide assembly. A world map was placed at the school entrance, and students were encouraged to put a pin in their country of origin to "show our strength in diversity," according to a school memo.

Homerooms and non-academic classes such as gym and health are intentionally integrated, and some English, history and biology teachers are mixing honors and regular students with the aim of getting more minority students in upper-level courses.

Also, two academic support programs have helped minority students get into tougher classes.

There have been some gains in recent years. About 11 percent of students in AP classes last year were African-American, compared with 7 percent in 2000-01. About 4 percent of AP students were Latino, compared with 2 percent a few years ago. The percentage of minority students in honors classes has stayed constant.

"I truly believe we have made significant progress," Alson said. But, he said, "the school has to do a better job with earlier, faster, more pinpointed interventions for kids who are struggling and for kids who are languishing in the middle, who need a fire lit and believe they can do it."

Woods, who has taught at Evanston for 19 years, said that "for some strange reason, students are clinging tightly to stereotypical beliefs of their abilities."

"Now the problem seems to be more of a societal one," she said. "The school is trying to make a difference, but it's hard to change beliefs."

Even students performing in the musical "Ragtime"--which follows white, black and immigrant families as they learn to adjust to an increasingly diverse society in the early 20th Century--found it is hard to change social norms. It was one of the school's most diverse casts ever, yet when they stopped to eat pizza for lunch, the black students sat at some tables and the white students at others. The teens looked at each other, realized the irony and switched tables. They gradually got to know each other. By the end of their performances, they ate lunch together on the school lawn and went to cast parties at each other's homes.

"At the beginning, we were all separate. By the end, we were all working together," said Latrice Gibson, an African-American lead cast member. "I compare [the situation at Evanston] to 'Ragtime.' We are working on it and hopefully we can all come together. We are not there yet."

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