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Decades of effort fail to close gap in student achievement

By Sanjay Bhatt
Seattle Times staff reporter

Garfield High School senior Maria Harris climbs the stairs to the second floor to attend her Advanced Placement language-arts class. Most of the white kids hang out there, but she spends most of her free time on the first floor, where black kids congregate.

Why the segregation? Students prefer to chat with their classmates, she said. Many white students, but few black students, are in the honors-course AP classes.

Harris, 17, calls herself "the token mixed girl." With a black father and white mother, she exists because of integration. And she despairs of Garfield's de facto segregation.

Perhaps in no other Seattle school have parents and teachers struggled for so long to achieve integration's promise of racial equality — and been so stymied.

Fifty years ago this month, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that segregating children by race was unconstitutional, creating in the minority children a "sense of inferiority (that) affects the motivation of the child to learn." In 1977, Seattle carried out the legacy of Brown in becoming the first major city to adopt a comprehensive desegregation busing plan without a court order.

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Some say it was a devil's bargain: Desegregation focused attention on the achievement gap between minority and white students, while raising fears among some white parents that schools would lower academic standards.

During the desegregation era, school districts suffered from backlash by white parents and failed to appreciate the cultural needs of nonwhite students. Decades after the Brown ruling, the dismal achievement of minority students in Seattle and elsewhere also raises serious doubts about how much schools alone can accomplish.

The federal "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001 requires achievement data to be tracked so that performance gains of all racial groups can be measured. Mindful of the act's penalties for failure, school districts are trying to address the achievement gap, some for the first time.

Research shows that factors such as a student's family income, amount of time spent watching TV, and parents' education level and school participation are key factors in achievement. So are the quality of teaching and the rigor of the curriculum.

Many schools are working hard to raise student performance: They are adding after-school help, rearranging the school day, emphasizing reading and reaching out to parents. It is hard to find a strategy that hasn't been tried already somewhere, harder yet to find one that has been consistently followed

"I don't understand why it is the way that it is after all these people worked so hard to make a difference," Harris said.

Paper integration

Though enrollment at Garfield appears integrated on paper, there is a polarization within its walls. Many students choose to segregate themselves along racial lines, Harris said: "They don't care to make a difference. They don't want to make it cool to hang out with people who are totally different from you. It's not fair."

Garfield regularly produces among the highest number of National Merit semifinalists in the state, most of them white or Asian, while many of its black students often struggle. For three consecutive years, black students at the school, on average, have posted a cumulative GPA of only 2.6, compared with 3.5 for whites and Asians.

Events marking anniversary of Brown v. Board

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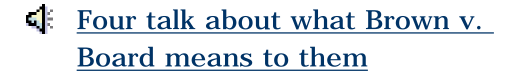
Four talk about what Brown v. Board means to them

The search for an equal education

On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court said segregating schoolchildren by race was unconstitutional. But 50 years after Brown v. Board of Education, the focus has shifted from integration to improving academic performance, especially among children of color. This year, The Seattle Times will look at the struggles that teachers, students and families face as they try to close the achievement gap.

Still, Garfield's black students, as a group, lead their black peers in the district.

These are among the findings of a new report Garfield Principal Susan Dersé developed with the district staff to gauge where the school's black students stand. Since her arrival in 2001 to a school in disarray, black students' attendance has risen from 86 percent to 90.5 percent last year. The percentage of black students passing the state writing test has risen from 20 percent to 28 percent.

"We will not have arrived until there is no specific predictability by race of grades earned, of attendance, of GPA," Dersé said. "... That's what we're moving toward."

Seeking solutions

It was hoped busing would reverse the effects on education of Jim Crow laws in the South and housing discrimination elsewhere. In Seattle, minorities lived mostly in the Central Area, blocked from white neighborhoods by property covenants and biased realty practices.

In 1961, a committee of Central Area principals, chaired by Garfield's Frank Hanawalt, urged the district "to recognize that schools serving areas with a high degree of population mobility and poverty required additional resources and services in order to meet the educational needs of their students."

The committee made a lengthy list of recommendations: Recruit diverse, well-qualified teachers; reduce class sizes; add more counseling services and multicultural curriculum and teaching; encourage greater parent participation. "Closing the gap" task forces would repeat these mantras in subsequent years.

Over the next decade, the district tried to balance the moral imperative of desegregating schools against the political risk of families fleeing to private or suburban schools. The district hired home-school aides, provided free transportation to students willing to transfer and strengthened academic programs at certain schools to create "magnet" schools.

What the court ruled in Brown

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the doctrine of "separate but equal," ruling in five cases collectively known as Brown v. Board of Education that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Before Brown, blacks and whites who fought to integrate public facilities had the burden to prove that separate facilities were unequal. The Brown cases, brought by the NAACP, were filed between 1949 and 1951.

After Brown, the Justice Department ordered the desegregation of public schools, as per the court's ruling, with "all deliberate speed." Many believe the decision ignited the broader civil-rights movement.

Many black students, including current School Board members Mary Bass and Darlene Flynn, signed up for busing voluntarily.

Flynn was one of about 25 minorities at Eckstein Middle School.

"People had a lot of questions about me, things that now would be considered rude," Flynn said. "Like, 'How do you get your hair like that?' "

Angry reaction

But not enough white families volunteered to send their kids to schools with disproportionately high numbers of minorities. The district began mandatory busing at the middle-school level in 1972.

Anger was palpable. In 1975, voters rejected school levies twice, forcing the district to lay off hundreds of staff members.

"A lot of people couldn't divorce the levy from that," said Ellen Roe, a white member of the Seattle School Board from 1975 to 1999.

In 1977, the board adopted a comprehensive desegregation plan and worked to avert possible confrontations. When school opened in the fall of 1978, busing began with trepidation, but no violence.

Roe cast the lone vote against what came to be known as "the Seattle Plan."

"They figure you've got to be a racist if you voted against the plan, and that didn't really have anything to do with it," Roe said recently. "I just thought it was a bad plan and a bad thing for the city."

By the late 1980s, the nation's will for forced busing was faltering. Seattle began giving students a choice of schools and assigning students closer to their homes.

Has progress stalled?

When the desegregation plan went into effect in 1978, Seattle Public Schools was 63 percent white. It is now about 40 percent white. More than half of white, school-age kids living in Seattle attend private and parochial schools.

The plan helped make schools less segregated, and the disparities between racial groups' performance on standardized tests

narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s. The district also made strides in hiring black principals — their representation rose from 19 percent in 1977 to 27 percent now.

But some worry that progress has stalled. The district's teacher corps has the same share of blacks that it did in 1977 — 9 percent.

Between two-thirds and three-quarters of Seattle's black students graduated on time or earlier in the 1980s. Now, fewer than half of black students graduate on time. Garfield's Dersé said that 75 black students who had poor grades were tested two years ago and found to be reading at a second-grade level, suggesting they were promoted in earlier years when they weren't academically ready.

"Obviously, busing didn't do it," Flynn said. "It did not improve systematically ... academic outcomes for children of color."

The city's neighborhoods are more diverse than they were in 1954. Waves of immigration have broadened the definition of diversity, and Latinos are now the fastest-growing ethnic group in Seattle schools. Now, African-American families are leaving the city for suburban districts — the district's black enrollment has fallen for the first time — and some white students have returned to public schools.

A search for solidarity

Meanwhile, some black parents say that more important to them than integration is quality: a rigorous curriculum, timely advice on foundational courses and proportionate, fair discipline. What once was considered separate is now seen as cultural solidarity.

Seattle's African American Academy, which began in 1991, offers a black-centered curriculum. Blacks account for more than 85 percent of its students. Roe didn't support it, and neither do some retired black educators.

Roe said, "I thought, 'Wait a minute, now! Who were the people that were pushing this whole deseg thing, and now you want your own school?' "

William Huelett, a retired African-American teacher, doesn't agree with the school's premise, either.

"We're here in America. Where else are we going to go?" said Huelett, 79. "You have to live with everybody else. No point in segregating yourself. There isn't any need to do that. That's what I was surrounded by. I don't think I learned any better."

Mary Wideman-Williams, chairwoman of Parents for African-American Student Excellence (PAASE) at Garfield High, counters that the district's administrators and teachers aren't doing enough to understand and value African-American learning styles.

The district's curriculum comes from "a Eurocentric model that values time and structure," she said. African-American culture, which is more expressive and communal, she said, doesn't mesh well with the Eurocentric model. "It's not just about teachers knowing how to teach our kids, it's also about making sure there's something in the curriculum that they connect to and that's going to resonate with kids."

Retired teacher Pat Cygan, who was the district's former social-studies director, believes the failures of desegregation "are because we didn't stick consistently to anything. We were changing programs every year. And the staff wasn't entirely committed to making changes, and parents weren't, and students weren't."

A new federal stick

The "No Child Left Behind" Act holds out the threat of loss of federal aid to schools unable to show achievement gains — the same kind of stick used in the '60s and '70s to push school districts to desegregate.

U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige recently wrote that the act "is the logical next step after Brown v. Board of Education ended segregation. If this country is firmly committed to a future in which racism is eradicated, then we must recognize that Brown itself was just a start and that affirmative action is only transitional. At some point, we must eliminate disparities directly."

Today, Seattle has "a new kind of separate but unequal," said Phyllis Beaumonte, a retired Rainier Beach High teacher and chairwoman of the Washington NAACP's Education Committee.

"It is unequal access to resources," she said, such as sustained support from alumni foundations and core-subject teachers with the same cultural background as students.

Beaumonte will fly to Topeka, Kan., next week to join other civil-rights leaders gathering to mark the 50th anniversary of the Brown decision in the city where the case originated. They will reflect on where we've been and where we're going. At times, it will sound dishearteningly familiar.

"Schools segregated in fact teach only subject matter and fail to fulfill one of the traditional goals of public education; they fail to prepare youth to function in a multiracial society as participating citizens."

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights made that observation — in 1963.

Sanjay Bhatt: 206-464-3103 or sbhatt@seattletimes.com

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