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Nation

Posted 4/28/2004 12:53 AM Updated 4/28/2004 1:43 AM

Integrated schools still a dream 50 years later

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

DUNWOODY, Ga. — Wherever they turn, families in the Vanderlyn Elementary School district can see their good fortune. A nearby billboard advertises "custom homes from the low $700s," and subdivisions shout their pedigrees: Wyntergate, Shadow Glen, North Wellington.

Bryan Booth-Henderson, 11, takes an hour-long bus ride to Vanderlyn Elementary, a mostly white school where he studies math.
By Michael A. Schwarz, USA TODAY

This year at Vanderlyn, in a quiet DeKalb County suburb northeast of Atlanta, the PTA raised an eye-popping $133,166 and is lavishing it on the kids: $12,000 for the library, $12,500 for the gym, $4,000 for landscaping, $2,250 for "student incentives."

Twenty miles south, families at Toney Elementary School also can celebrate their good fortune. Tucked behind an aging Piggly Wiggly grocery in Decatur, Toney boasts a successful "Treasure Chest" program that rewards kids and parents who read books. Read a book, take home a prize: toothbrushes, soap, deodorant, blankets, canned goods. "Everything that they may be too proud to ask for," says principal Leola Orr.

It may come as no surprise that Toney, with 94% of families living in poverty, has some of the county's lowest test scores. And that Vanderlyn, with no poor students, has the highest. Toney's student body is made up of all African-Americans; Vanderlyn's has virtually

none.

The U.S. Supreme Court 50 years ago did its best to do away with just this sort of thing. On May 17, 1954, in its landmark decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka*, the high court outlawed segregated schools for black and white students, calling the decades-old doctrine of "separate but equal" as enshrined in the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson case*, inherently unequal.

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Activists successfully have challenged how schools are funded in nearly half of the states, but as the *Brown* anniversary nears, many children still attend racially separate, unequal schools. They're not segregated by law —*Brown* stopped that. But black and white children are now separated largely by how much their parents earn and where they can afford to live.

Across the USA, the result is practically the same: In 2000, 71% of minority students attended schools where they were in the majority. Minorities accounted for nearly 4 in 10 public school students; yet 43.4% of white students went to schools in which fewer than 1 in 10 was a minority.

The current form of segregation has a direct connection to kids' lives, resulting in a wide skills gap. Recent federal figures show that the average black or Hispanic 12th-grader's skills are on par with those of white eighth-graders.

Shifting positions

In 1955, the high court ordered schools to desegregate "with all deliberate speed," setting the stage for a generation of integration battles. But in 2004, in Georgia as elsewhere, the mainstream education debate has swung nearly 180 degrees away from integration.

"Most of the conversation appears to have shifted to improving the quality of instruction, no matter where the kids are," says Michael Casserly of the Washington D.C.-based Council of the Great City Schools, an advocacy group for urban school districts.

Since the 1970s, courts have released school districts from desegregation orders nationwide. Decades of expensive, polarizing busing programs and white resistance to integration in many areas have made politicians gun-shy. Neither President Bush nor most members of Congress dare touch the issue. Education Secretary Rod Paige, a black man who grew up in the segregated South, says integration "would be a good thing." But he adds, "Our focus is on every child, wherever they are, having a great educational possibility."

The *Brown* decision, sometimes called the "Big Bang of the Civil Rights movement," still carries enormous symbolic importance, says Paige: "The force of the government cannot be applied to separate you."

He often speaks of Bush's No Child Left Behind law as a civil rights effort, and many advocates agree. It focuses almost exclusively on shoring up the basic skills of low-income and minority students but with little thought to where they attend school or with whom.

In fact, over the past few decades, mainstream school reformers — even among minority communities — have soured on integration, pouring their energy into neighborhood and charter schools and standards-based reforms such as No Child Left Behind, supporting what amounts to separate but equal schools.

The retreat from integration troubles some scholars, who say efforts such as No Child Left Behind will fall flat unless society addresses pressing issues in poor children's lives such as hunger, crime and substandard housing. Anything less, they say, will leave children in worse shape than before *Brown* because the close-knit minority communities of the 1950s — including a large, stable pool of black teachers — don't exist anymore.

"We are implementing Plessy, and we are slipping back to Dred Scott," says Vanessa Siddle Walker of Emory University, author of *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*.

The 1857 Dred Scott case denied basic rights to blacks.

But others say improving inner-city schools will help neighborhoods by attracting families of all races and economic groups.

In the half-century since Brown, the nation has grown more diverse, but research shows that most children can still look around their classrooms and see that they belong to the dominant racial or ethnic group — if not its only one.

Experts say the effects of poverty fall squarely on minority students. John Logan, a demographic researcher at State University of New York-Albany, has found that the average black or Hispanic student attends an elementary school in which about two-thirds of classmates are poor; for whites, fewer than a third of classmates are poor.

Even middle-class minority students aren't exempt: The average black family with an income of more than $60,000 lives in a neighborhood with a higher poverty rate than the average white family earning less than $30,000, he says.

"Americans don't seem to be interested anymore in segregation, and they think it's an issue from the past that must have been resolved by now," Logan says.

Recent research also shows that poor students, who are least likely to find help at home, are least likely to find it at school. Poorly prepared, uncertified teachers are concentrated in urban and rural school districts, says Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University. "It all adds up," she says.

In elementary schools serving California's poorest students, for instance, 21.7% of teachers aren't fully certified. In the wealthiest, only 2% lack certification.

Even when they're in integrated schools, poor and minority students often find themselves in less-challenging classes. Wealthy students are more than twice as likely as poor students to be on a "college preparatory" track in high school, while black students have much higher enrollment rates in special education classes. According to the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, they are more likely to be labeled "mentally retarded" the higher the socioeconomic status of their school.

'Second-class citizenship'

"We are still educating children for second-class citizenship," says Cheryl Brown Henderson, 53, a daughter of the Rev. Oliver Brown, one of the original 13 *Brown* plaintiffs. In 1950, Henderson's father tried unsuccessfully to enroll her older sister, Linda, in the neighborhood elementary school in Topeka, as did 12 other parents.

What's more, children in many areas attend schools that are more segregated than the ones their parents attended. Since the early 1990s, courts have ended integration programs in DeKalb and dozens of other school districts. At Vanderlyn, the last vestiges of a voluntary integration program will end this spring, when three black students ride a school bus there for the last time.

Fifth-grader Bryan Booth-Henderson says he's glad he and his sisters took the hour-plus bus ride each morning instead of attending his neighborhood school in south DeKalb. Had he gone to his neighborhood school, "I'd probably ace every class. Here it's kind of hard."

Though Vanderlyn's lack of diversity may seem extraordinary, it's typical of many suburban schools.

According to the Civil Rights Project, integration is now at a lower level than in the mid-1970s when busing programs hit their stride.

"We're becoming a much more diverse society ... and yet our schools are more segregated than they were 20 or 30 years ago," says Amy Stuart Wells, a professor of the sociology of education at Columbia University's

Teachers College. Wells is the lead author of a study in which members of the graduating high school class of 1980 recounted their experiences in racially diverse schools. She found "a silent majority" of fortysomethings who say it made them more tolerant of other races.

Benefits of sharing

For all of its financial advantages, perhaps Vanderlyn's most important asset is its parents, 100% of whom belong to the PTA. On a recent afternoon, moms in jogging suits filed through the main office in a steady parade, many arriving or leaving with stacks of papers.

"It would be easy for me to just step back and let the parents run the school," says Charlene Burger, Vanderlyn's soft-spoken principal, who pleads with parents not to arrange so many field trips.

Orr, on the other hand, has a devil of a time getting parents interested in school. At a parents' night last January, only three showed up. It's clear that this is her biggest problem. More than half of Toney students are from single-parent families, and Orr says 40% of her kids are being raised by someone other than a parent.

"I've got pre-K kids who've got to get up and take care of themselves," she says. "Because they're so focused on survival, reading and math is not on their minds."

Both she and Burger remain fiercely proud of their schools, showing off their well-mannered students, brightly painted corridors and orderly classrooms.

"When I leave church on Sundays, I come here," Orr says.

It's paying off. Toney's test scores are up, and it has managed to stay off a federal "needs improvement list." But Orr says none of her students qualified for a gifted program the district runs.

Fifth-grade teacher Anthony Lanier says he could see sending a few kids to a place like Vanderlyn.

"If they're in school all day with one another and then they go home to their neighborhoods, when do they interact with other races?" he asks.

Lanier, 32, grew up in a Miami housing project but never attended the neighborhood school. His mother used an aunt's address to get him into a better one across town. Lanier hopped a city bus at 6:30 each morning. "It was worth it. Sometimes you need to get away from your buddies."

He'd recommend the same for his students. "If that's going to make them better and give them different experiences, there's no reason we shouldn't," he says. "This is America. There's no reason we should be separated."

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