

A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream?

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January 2003

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Catherine Horn, Michal Kurlaender, John Yun, Jacinta Ma, and Carolyn Peelle for their insightful suggestions and dedicated support in completing this project. In addition, we would like to thank the staff at The Civil Rights Project for their wonderful technical assistance.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, American public schools are now twelve years into the process of continuous resegregation. The desegregation of black students, which increased continuously from the 1950s to the late 1980s, has now receded to levels not seen in three decades. Although the South remains the nation's most integrated region for both blacks and whites, it is the region that is most rapidly going backwards as the courts terminate many major and successful desegregation orders.

This report describes patterns of racial enrollment and segregation in American public schools at the national, regional, state, and district levels for students of all racial groups. Our analysis of the status of school desegregation in 2000 uses the NCES Common Core of Data for 2000-01, which contains data submitted by virtually all U.S. schools to the Department of Education. Additionally, this report examines trends in desegregation and, now, resegregation over the last one-third century.

Key findings of the study include:

- The statistics from the 2000-2001 school year show that whites are the most segregated group in the nation's public schools; they attend schools, on average, where eighty percent of the student body is white. The two regions where white students are more likely to attend substantially interracial schools are the South and West. Whites attending private schools are even more segregated than their public school counterparts.
- Our schools are becoming steadily more nonwhite, as the minority student enrollment approaches 40% of all U.S. public school students, nearly twice the share of minority school students during the 1960s. In the West and the South, almost half of all public school students are nonwhite.
- The most dramatic growth is seen in the increase of Latino and Asian students. Latino students are the most segregated minority group, with steadily rising segregation since federal data were first collected a third of a century ago. Latinos are segregated both by race and poverty, and a pattern of linguistic segregation is also developing. Latinos have by far the highest high school dropout rates.
- Conversely, at the aggregate level, Asians live in the nation's most integrated communities, are the most integrated in schools, and experience less linguistic segregation than Latinos.¹ Asians are the nation's most highly educated racial group; the rate of college graduation for Asians is almost double the national average and four times larger than Latinos.

¹ Due to data limitations, it is impossible to separate subgroups of Asians based on national origin, which masks important differences among these groups.

- The data show the emergence of a substantial group of American schools that are virtually all non-white, which we call apartheid schools. These schools educate one-sixth of the nation's black students and one-fourth of black students in the Northeast and Midwest. These are often schools where enormous poverty, limited resources, and social and health problems of many types are concentrated. One ninth of Latino students attend schools where 99-100% of the student body is composed of minority students.
- Paralleling housing patterns from the 2000 Census, this study shows a very rapid increase in the number of multiracial schools where at least one tenth of the students are from three different racial groups. Three-fourths of Asian students attend multiracial schools, but only 14% of white students do.
- The nation's largest city school systems account for a shrinking share of the total enrollment and are, almost without exception, overwhelmingly nonwhite and increasingly segregated internally. These twenty-seven largest urban systems have lost the vast majority of their white enrollment whether or not they ever had significant desegregation plans, and today serve almost one-quarter of our black and Latino student population.
- The balkanization of school districts and the difficulty of creating desegregated schools within these cities show the huge consequences of the Supreme Court's 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* decision blocking city-suburban desegregation in metropolitan Detroit.² According to one recent study, metropolitan Detroit schools were extremely segregated in 1994 and had the highest level of between-district segregation of all metro areas in the country.³
- In 1967 the nation's largest suburban systems were virtually all white. Despite a huge increase in minority students in suburban school districts, serious patterns of segregation have emerged in some sectors of suburbia as this transition takes place. Many of the most rapidly resegregating school systems since the mid-1980s are suburban. Clearly, segregation and desegregation are no longer merely urban concerns but wider metropolitan issues.
- The largest countywide school districts that contain both city and suburban schools are mostly concentrated in Southern states. These districts, with about half the enrollment of the big cities, had far more extensive and long-lasting desegregation and far more opportunity for minority students to cross both race and class barriers for their education.
- Many of the nation's decisions in the courts have changed from being on the leading edge of desegregation activity to being its greatest obstacle. Since the Supreme Court changed desegregation law in three major decisions between 1991

² *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974).

³ Clotfelter, C. (1998). "Public School Segregation in Metropolitan Areas." NBER Working Paper 6779.

and 1995,⁴ the momentum of desegregation for black students has clearly reversed in the South, where the movement had by far its greatest success.

- During the 1990s, the proportion of black students in majority white schools has decreased by 13 percentage points, to a level lower than any year since 1968.

Desegregation has been a substantial accomplishment and is linked to important gains for both minority and white students. As more and more convincing evidence of those gains is accumulating, school systems are actually being ordered to end successful desegregation plans they would prefer to continue. This is not driven by public opinion, which has become more supportive of desegregated schools (most of which have been achieved through choice mechanisms in the past two decades). The persisting high levels of residential segregation for blacks and increasing levels for Latinos, as reported in the 2000 Census indicate that desegregated education will not happen without plans to make it happen. We recommend a set of policies that would slow and eventually reverse the trends reported here.

Race matters strongly and segregation is a failed educational policy. Any policy framework must explicitly recognize the importance of integrated education not only as a basic education goal but also as a compelling social interest. Specific policies to address this include:

- Continuing desegregation plans;
- Amending transfer policies in the federal No Child Left Behind Act to give students a real choice of better integrated schools;
- Designing educational choice plans that diminish segregation;
- Linking housing mobility programs with educational counseling; and
- Increasing city-suburban transfer options in metropolitan areas.

A great deal of long-lasting progress was achieved when this issue was last seriously addressed, a third of a century ago. If we are not to lose those gains and if we are to be ready for a profoundly multiracial society with no racial majority, we must begin to face the trends documented here and devise solutions that will work.

⁴ *Board of Education of Oklahoma v. Dowell*, 498 U.S. 237(1991); *Freeman v. Pitts*, 503 U.S. 467 (1992); and *Missouri v. Jenkins*, 115 S. Ct. 2038 (1995).