

# The resegregation of US public schools

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A new study released in June of this year by a Harvard University educational group reveals that since the late 1980s the achievements in the integration of the nation's public schools have steadily regressed, now approaching the levels of the early 1970s when the national policy of busing for integration was initiated.

The Harvard University Graduate School of Education's Civil Rights Project, led by Professors Gary Orfield and John T. Yun, issued the report entitled *Resegregation in American Schools*.

The report shows that important but limited achievements were made in integration during the period between the 60s and 80s are in the process of being reversed. According to the study, three-quarters of the nation's black students, 76.6 percent, were in predominantly minority schools in 1968-69 where educational levels were far lower than those of most white schools. By 1980-81 black students in predominantly minority schools had dropped to 62.9 percent. By 1996-97, the percentage of black students in an integrated environment had regressed to 68.8 percent, below the level established before busing for integration began as a national policy in 1971.

In the South, where segregation was legal before the passage in 1954 of *Brown v Board of Education*—the US Supreme Court decision that ended segregated schools in America—98 percent of black children were still in totally segregated schools 10 years later. By 1970, the measures instituted during the Johnson administration made southern schools the most integrated in the country for both black and white students. In 1988, 43.5 percent of the black students in the South attended schools that were predominantly white, creating more interactions between black and white students than any other part of the country. The year 1988 proved to be the high point of integration in both the South and the nation. By 1996, integration of black students in predominantly white schools fell back to 34.7 percent; the level integration achieved in 1972.

The study finds the causes for resegregation stemming

from a number of social and political factors: a series of court rulings beginning in the late 1980s that reversed many of the desegregation orders, the growing isolation of whites in suburban schools, and the increasing segregation of blacks and Hispanics in suburban schools. However, the study places the main responsibility on the refusal of the Clinton administration to initiate any programs to challenge this reactionary trend.

“The Clinton Administration,” states the report, “has presided over a period of substantial and continuous increase in segregation without any initiatives to offset these trends.” The report goes on to say that every administration up to Reagan took positive steps towards integration. “This is the first Democratic administration in 40 years that has had no program for integration.”

Utilizing information from the US Bureau of Census and the federal government's National Center for Education Statistics, the report documents significant demographic changes that have affected the public school population since the 1960s. Nationally, non-white enrollment in public schools has increased from 11-12 percent in 1960, to 36 percent today, with projections that 58 percent of school enrollment will be non-white by 2050. African American or black enrollment has grown 22 percent. Asian enrollment stands at 4 percent with the projection of reaching 10 percent by the middle of the next century. In contrast, white enrollment has dropped 16 percent due to a lower birth rate.

In contrast to the 1960s, the majority of the nation's large school systems are now predominantly minority, consisting of impoverished black and Hispanic children from families who have been left behind by the economic decline of the past 30 years.

As the economy has changed from one based on manufacturing and located within the major cities, to one based on service located in suburban areas, the most impoverished sections of the population have become isolated within the inner cities.

As a result several large cities, such as Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, have 85 percent or

more minority students with virtually no white middle class families. In many areas black middle class families have also abandoned the inner cities.

Since 1968, the Hispanic student population has more than tripled—a 218 percent increase—making Hispanics the fastest growing minority group in the nation. Little has been said, however, about the fact that Hispanic families are now the most segregated segment of any population in the country, due primarily to the effects of extreme poverty.

The report raises the concern that at a time when the number of white students has dropped, and the numbers of black and Hispanic students have substantially grown, racial polarization has in fact widened—contrary to the expectation there would be more white and minority students interacting in the public schools. According to the authors of the report, there is more isolation of white students, predominantly middle class, than at any time since the 1960s.

The report has value in that it reveals a dangerous pattern that must be opposed. However, the study also has serious limitations, in that the authors are guided by the liberal view that racial divisions primarily determine society's problems, minimizing the more fundamental class divisions.

Nowhere is this truer than in its statistics on poverty's impact in the educational system. While the authors relegate the issue of poverty as subordinate to race—the authors call for the integration of middle class whites with minorities to create better opportunities for the latter—poverty has had a devastating effect on all segments of the population, black, white, Hispanic or otherwise.

In the report the authors state that 18.7 percent of white students were impoverished and receiving free or reduced price lunches, as compared to 42.7 percent of black students, 46 percent of Hispanic students, 29.3 percent of Asian students and 30.9 percent of native American students.

While it is true that a higher percentage of minorities are poor, a careful review of the statistics reveals that in sheer numbers twice as many white students (a total of 5.4 million) were impoverished in the American school system than all of the minority groups combined (a total of 2.26 million).

While there has been a decline in racial integration of the schools in recent years, largely because of the increasing concentration of minority populations in the urban centers, the shift needs to be considered in perspective. In the South in 1960, 99.9 percent of black

students attended majority or all-black schools. In 1964, the year of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, 97.7 percent of black students still attended largely black schools. By 1988, a generation later, only 56.5 percent of black students attended majority-minority schools in the South. Over the past decade that proportion has risen back to 65.3 percent, still a far cry from the Jim Crow period.

Social attitudes overall have changed markedly during the same period resegregation has developed in the schools. According to a *Boston Globe* survey published in September 1997, almost 90 percent of blacks, whites, Latinos and Asians said they have developed friendships that cross racial and ethnic lines. The poll also indicated that 75 percent of Americans believed the country should remain committed fully to integration, with whites and blacks very close in their percentages of approval.

And while questionnaires can be interpreted in different ways, the US Census data on interracial marriages point to concrete changes in social attitudes. Approximately 10 percent of black men who married in the 1980s or 1990s married white women, compared to 2 percent in the 1940s and 1950s. Intermarriage is up among native-born Hispanics (35 percent of both men and women), native-born Asians (45 percent of men and 54 percent of women), and American Indians (60 percent of men and 63 percent of women).

How does one explain these contradictory trends? They reveal the dichotomy between the views of the policy makers and the broad working masses. The *Globe* survey indicates the trend towards resegregation is not an expression of mass public sentiment, but of an indifferent elite who set policies increasingly in opposition to the interest of the working class.



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