

## Segregated schools leave children behind



Written by

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Since the days of "separate but equal," public officials and parents alike have put their faith in the core mission of America's public school system: a quality education for all, regardless of race or economic status.

But testing data made public because of No Child Left Behind, the federal education law written to reinforce educational equality, paints a picture of school diversity in Monroe County that is starkly black and white.

The law requires schools to track test scores in various racial categories and improve annually. However most Monroe County schools are so homogenous that they do not have to account for the test scores of African-American and other minority students. The situation not only appears to fly in the face of what No Child aimed to do, but underscores a larger issue that has dogged school systems for decades: the segregation of students.

Schools nationwide are more segregated than ever before after generations of white families fled urban areas in droves for the suburbs, and a *Democrat and Chronicle* analysis of publicly available testing data shows that trend is being felt acutely in and around Rochester.

"The world is more diverse than it's ever been, but yet our schools are even more segregated," said Malik Evans, chairman of the Rochester school board. "How is it that in 2011 almost every school in the city is almost entirely minority? Here's the bottom line: It doesn't bode well for the future of black kids."

Because race and economic status often run parallel, the movement has resulted in a high concentration of poor students in urban systems such as the Rochester School District, which with 85 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch last year has the highest poverty rate of New York state's largest districts and one of the highest in the country.

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"I think what we have seen is that schools are becoming more segregated because parents have a choice to move where they want to go and where they think the school system is better," said Anna Rowan, a policy analyst with the education advocacy group EdTrust. "Often times when a school is all black or all poor, overall it's not going to do as well. This is a population that really needs all of the supports to be working well in a school. But sometimes you find these students being ignored or given less support because either they don't have to be counted or there's so few of them."

Meanwhile, research reinforces the negative effect of poverty on how students learn, leaving city educators with challenges beyond their control and driving vast achievement gaps between white and minority students.

State data reveals that three out of every five suburban schools have so few black students — less than 30 — that they did not have to count their test scores, something that meant 1,100 African-American children's results were not factored into their schools' No Child report cards. The number was even higher for Hispanic students, with 95 out of 118 suburban schools not including this category. That included all of the schools in Honeoye Falls-Lima and Pittsford, two of only four local districts deemed in full compliance with the law.

The reverse was true in the city, where roughly two-thirds of schools did not have enough white students to track their

performance.

The situation is not unique to Monroe County. School systems across the country have grappled with how to better integrate their classrooms, especially in an era when federal pressure to make sure all students succeed has cast a spotlight on the struggles of urban school systems.

In an effort to diversify their schools, voters in Memphis recently decided to merge the city district with the county system.

In Raleigh, school leaders are pushing a new plan that would place students at schools based on their test performance.

But change doesn't come easily, and local efforts to better integrate the county's schools have been marred by controversy and politics.

"That question is the political kiss of death in Monroe County, but it's part of the solution," said Dan Drmacich, a former city school principal and vocal education

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advocate. "One of the only ways we're going to have to deal with this is a massive desegregation, no matter how unpopular it is."

Perhaps the greatest hurdle lies in the court of public opinion, in a county where the trend of white flight to the suburbs has been prevalent for decades.

"It's hard," said parent Mary Sue Dehn, whose children attend school in Pittsford, where last year just 4 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and 5 percent were black or Hispanic.

"We are blessed in Pittsford to have dedicated teachers and committed parents that make the Pittsford school system as good as it is. Do you level the playing field? That's a very difficult question. Am I saying that because I live in Pittsford and I'm happy with what we've got? Maybe."

**Problems on both sides**

Educators on both sides of the racial divide acknowledge that school segregation has an adverse effect on all students, regardless of whether they live in the city or suburbs. In the city schools, the high concentration of poverty means that many students come to school with such baggage as hunger, instability at home and inadequate health care — all factors that affect their ability to learn and can make it more difficult to teach them. And research shows that those factors can drive poor academic results, leading to statistics such as 25 percent of city students reading at a

level appropriate for their age and just 5 percent deemed ready for college.

"While poverty does not prevent a student from learning, it does certainly make it more challenging," said city schools Superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard.

Suburban school leaders say the lack of diversity puts their students at a disadvantage as well, all but cutting off their exposure to people from diverse backgrounds, people they will encounter in college and the real world. Some area districts have to hire consultants to conduct diversity workshops to teach students about different races and cultures.

"Our concern is about our students feeling like they were in a very limited setting," said Renee Williams, an assistant superintendent in the Honeoye Falls-Lima school district, where last year 97 percent of students were white and 11 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. "For us, instructionally it becomes more important to offer those experiences."

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Advocates pushing the issue say the problem is not just one of equity, but also economics.

Well-educated students lead to a stronger workforce and more self-sufficient population.

Research has shown that students who do not finish high school are more likely to end up on welfare or in jail.

A 2007 study by the Alliance for Excellent Education calculates that high school dropouts will cost the country \$3 trillion in the next decade, largely through lost tax revenue.

"We can either help our schools get better or deal with the fallout later," said Gene Mancuso, an assistant superintendent in Penfield. "But people aren't always willing to have a dialogue. Everyone struggles for themselves. We often don't feel the cost of a dropout until it's your son or daughter."

There have been some efforts to better integrate Monroe County's schools over the years, but results have been mixed.

City school leaders are working to offer more prestigious academic programs, such as College Board and International Baccalaureate, hoping those models will not only help students already in the city schools but also keep more affluent white families from leaving the city.

The district is also working with suburban school districts to offer spots in its premier

programs to their students.

One of the oldest and most noted efforts is the county's urban suburban program, which allows city students to attend class in the suburbs.

But the program has not had the impact some advocates hoped for when it started in the 1960s. Just about half of the county's suburban school districts participate in the urban suburban program, which serves about 500 students.

"I think that's a testament to where many of the suburban districts sit on this issue," said Bill Cala, a former superintendent in the Rochester and Fairport school districts. "Try to get suburban school boards to say we're going to bring some city kids in. They say there's no space, that it's a money issue. But that argument just doesn't fly. So then what is it? You can draw your own conclusions."

### Looking for answers

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Some advocates say the solution may lie in school systems that draw students from all over the county, as opposed to smaller municipal areas that are shaped by housing patterns and taxes.

Cala has been working for several years to create what would be the state's first regional school that would draw students from both the city and the suburbs and limit the number of students who qualify for free or reduced priced lunch. In order to do that, however, Cala needs lawmakers to pass a special bill that would authorize the agreement between districts and establish a stream for funding.

"If you asked me a year ago, I thought we would have it off the ground right now," Cala said. "There's a lot of political wrangling. If we could get through all the politics of this thing and get it going we'd be on to something."

The effort reflects some being seen in other parts of the country as educators look for ways to better integrate their school systems. Many states have countywide school systems, and even some districts here are looking to the model.

For decades, the district in Raleigh, North Carolina has been considered a national leader for its integration programs, which started in the 1970s when the city school system merged with suburban ones to form the Wake County district. School leaders took their efforts a step forward in 2000 by capping the number of students who qualify for free or reduced priced lunch at

each of its schools, something that advocates say helped break up the high concentrations of poor students.

"Using the premise that overwhelming a school with predominantly low-income students is not good for anyone's achievement, that gave you some balance, both socioeconomically and racially," said Wake County spokesperson Greg Thomas.

Supporters of the plan say the diversity has led to better academic outcomes, with students of all races in Wake County outperforming their peers across the state and country when it comes to SAT and standardized test scores.

Despite what seem like positive results, Raleigh's effort has not come without resistance.

The initial 1970s change to a countywide school system failed in two public referendums before school leaders had to seek changes to state law to make the system integrated.

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More recently, a newly elected school board voted to do away with the cap on children who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches, answering to criticism from parents in suburban areas who did not want their children bused to schools in the city.

The elimination of the policy prompted the superintendent of schools to resign, saying that he could not work with a board that did not support the district's diversity initiatives. The school board is now trying to come up with a new plan that could involve placing students based on test scores.

The Memphis school system ran into similar opposition when it pitched the plan to merge with the suburban Shelby County school systems. Although 67 percent of voters approved the merger at the polls, school leaders and experts expect the transition will be subject to lawsuits.

**What this means**

Local education leaders and advocates say that kind of pushback would be likely if Monroe County tried to seriously push integration efforts.

And some say solving the problem of segregated classrooms should not fall solely on the school system. Things like affordable housing and taxes drive housing patterns, and in turn school enrollment.

Others say there are problems outside the school system that need to be addressed in order that poor students succeed, and

that uprooting children from their neighborhoods for school can further disrupt their learning.

"Until we address the socioeconomic problems in our city and the majority of children are at or below the poverty level, we will keep going around in this vicious cycle," said the Rev. Marlowe Washington of Rochester.

For some parents, the question becomes whether integration attempts hurt higher-performing students.

Parent Marilyn Buckley's children attended the city's School 46, where she was happy until shortly after the district started offering a program that allowed students from all over the city to attend class in the Browncroft neighborhood.

Since the 2004 change, the number of students at the school on free or reduced-price lunch increased from 55 percent to 70 percent.

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Buckley said that the environment at the school changed dramatically and that she felt academic programs took a backseat to character education and disciplinary problems. Parents of students from outside the neighborhood were not as involved with the school, and many families started leaving the neighborhood. Buckley and her family were not far behind them. Her children now attend school in Webster.

"I didn't feel that my children were getting the best education that they could be," Buckley said. "The impact of that choice by the school board was one of the reasons I choose to leave the district. It's actually very sad that ... if you can afford to send your kid to a private school or move to another district, your children will have an advantage."

For some parents, the decision to enroll their children in a less diverse school isn't without some guilt.

But resolution is never easy.

"I don't want to come off sounding like the suburban white mother who doesn't think about these issues, because I do," said Dehn, the Pittsford parent. "It's three miles away, but it's a whole different life. The kids in the city do not have the same opportunities.

"In the suburbs you have more safety nets that hopefully will catch them when they fall. And there's far fewer of them. But you wonder what about these kids who are left behind, who are just going through the system. I can isolate myself here in

Pittsford, but clearly this is something that has an impact on the whole area."

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## By the numbers

- 85 Percent of Rochester students who received free or reduced-price lunch
  - 4 Percent of students who received free or reduced-price lunch in Pittsford
  - 90 Percent of minority students in the RCSD
  - 97 Percent of white students in Honeoye Falls
  - 118 Number of suburban schools in Monroe County
  - 81 Number of those 118 that did not have to count black students under No Child Left Behind
  - 95 Number that did not have to count Hispanic students
  - 64 Number of city schools (including charters)
  - 46 Number of those that did not have to count white students
- Numbers based on 2009-2010 school year report cards.

## No Child Left Behind

The federal No Child Left Behind Act aims to have all students proficient in reading and math by 2014. Each year, schools are graded based on their

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students' performance on standardized tests. Schools are supposed to meet certain testing goals both overall and in different subgroups in which they have at least 30 students. In New York, those categories are black, white, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, multiracial, students with disabilities, students learning English and economically disadvantaged.

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