U.S. school segregation on the rise: report

By [**Matthew Bigg**](http://blogs.reuters.com/search/journalist.php?edition=us&n=matthew.bigg&)

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ATLANTA (Reuters) - Black and Latino students are educated in U.S. schools that are increasingly segregated, said a report Wednesday that undercuts optimism about race in America surrounding the presidency of Barack Obama.

Blacks and Hispanics are more separate from white students than at any time since the civil rights movement and many of the schools they attend are struggling, said the report by the Civil Rights Project at the University of California.

A 2007 Supreme Court decision on voluntary desegregation is likely to intensify the trend because it reduces pressure on local authorities to promote school desegregation, said the report, which called on Obama to address the issue.

Obama, who will take the oath of office Tuesday, will be the county's first black president.

"It would be a tragedy if the country assumed from the Obama election that the problems of race have been solved, when many inequalities are actually deepening," said Gary Orfield, co-director of the Civil Rights Project.

Orfield said these trends were "the result of a systematic neglect of civil rights policy and related educational and community reforms for decades."

Part of the reason is demographic. As the percentage of white students shrinks -- they now make up 56 percent of the school population -- they are more integrated with students who are nonwhite.

Another factor is that residential segregation, on the rise in many parts of the country, increasingly determines the racial composition in schools in the absence of measures by education authorities to create and maintain integrated schools, Orfield said.

At the same time, Orfield said little had been done in recent years to prosecute violations of the Fair Housing Act, which forbids discrimination in the allocation of housing and was set up to foster equality in the housing market.

As a result of the trend, 39 percent of black students and 40 percent of students from the fast-growing Latino minority are increasingly isolated in schools in which there is little racial mixing, the report said.

Evidence that U.S. schools are becoming less racially integrated is politically charged because school integration was a basic goal of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King in the 1950s and 1960s.

That movement was in part triggered by a landmark Supreme Court decision in 1954 that decreed school segregation in the South was inherently unequal, did irreversible harm to black students and violated the constitution.

The report also found that the average black and Latino student is now in a school that has nearly 60 percent of students from families who are near or below the poverty line.

Schools marked by racial segregation and poverty tend to have weaker teaching forces, more student instability and a higher percentage of students from homes where English is not spoken -- factors that militate against academic achievement.

TEACHING TOLERANCE

**Unmaking Brown**

Spring 2010

[Tim Lockette](http://www.tolerance.org/author/tim-lockette)

America’s schools are more segregated now than they were in the late 1960s. More than 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, we need to radically rethink the meaning of “school choice.”

So much depends on a yellow bus, winding its way across the North Carolina landscape.

For decades, this was how Wake County integrated its schools. Buses would pick up public school students in largely minority communities along the Raleigh Beltline; in affluent Cary, a Raleigh suburb; in dozens of small towns and unincorporated communities around this fast growing state capital.

Most of the students would travel to schools not far from home. But every year, a few would cross the county to a new school, in a neighborhood very different from their own.

The system won Wake County praise from many integration advocates — but locally, people were less enchanted. In late 2008, a wave of anti-busing sentiment swept in new school board members who promised to support neighborhood schools and keep kids closer to home.

Cathy Truitt worries about what will happen next.

“If we end busing abruptly, we’ll be taking a rapid step back to resegregation,” said Truitt, a retired teacher who was defeated in her bid for a school board seat.

While Truitt worries about the effects of an end to busing, she says voters were exasperated with a system that seemed to randomly reassign their children to schools far from home.

“A child could be reassigned for three out of four years, while another family would go untouched, “ Truitt said. “While people embraced diversity, they were absolutely tired of losing their choices.”

**The New Segregation**  
Stories like that are bound to get a reaction from Amy Stuart Wells.

A professor at Teachers College at Columbia University, Wells has spent much of her career studying the resegregation of American schools — writing the history of the steady march back to separateness that has left our educational system more racially segregated now than it was in 1968.

“We don’t have to accept this juxtaposition that puts school choice on one side and a civil rights approach to integration on the other,” Wells said. “Our approaches to school choice over the past 20 years have been pretty unimaginative — and children are paying for our lack of imagination.”

For Wells and other experts on school integration, the Wake County school board election is just another phase in a long-term, city-by-city struggle over how to integrate our schools. It’s a struggle that the entire country has been losing for the better part of two decades.

Today, one-third of black students attend school in places where the black population is more than 90 percent. A little less than half of white students attend schools that are more than 90 percent white. One-third of all black and Latino students attend high-poverty schools (where more than 75 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch); only 4 percent of white children do.

Things have been better, and not so long ago. In 1990 more than 40 percent of black students in the South were attending majority-white schools. Today, fewer than 30 percent of students do — roughly the same percentage as in the late 1960s, when many districts were still refusing to implement 1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education*.

That trend isn’t limited just to the South, according to Gary Orfield, director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. According to Orfield, some of the deepest racial divisions in America today are in the Midwest, where old patterns of “white flight” have shaped the suburban landscape, and a new generation of immigrants is settling into communities that were never under orders to desegregate.

Most of the decades-old obstacles to integration still remain. Wake County’s debate over active integration measures is a rarity these days: Most busing programs were killed by white backlash in the 1970s. Our schools are still governed by a hodgepodge of districts, some giant and some tiny, many of which were created as enclaves of white privilege. And Americans still are choosing — or being steered toward — home ownership in communities where everyone looks like them.

And there are new challenges. In 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court effectively gutted *Brown* by declaring that school districts can’t consider racial diversity as a factor in school assignments. (Where busing still exists, it’s done on the basis of family income.) And as the suburbs have spread, we’ve seen residential segregation on steroids.“The old paradigm of black cities and white suburbs is no longer true,” said Orfield. “Black and Latino communities are expanding into the suburbs — but they’re concentrated in specific areas. We’re seeing a suburbia that is divided by ethnicity.”

**Separate is Still Unequal**  
Depending on where you stand, the drift back to segregation may be obvious, or it may be entirely invisible. “Many white students attend schools that are overwhelmingly white, and those schools are actually seeing an increase in diversity,” Orfield said. “We have the irony that white students can feel that their educational experience is more integrated, when in fact the level of segregation nationwide has increased.”

In the mid-1960s, 80 percent of American students were white. Today, due to immigration and other factors, children of color make up almost 40 percent of the student body. While the student body as a whole has grown more much more diverse, many majority-white schools have seen only a slight bump in their minority enrollment.

Meanwhile, growing numbers of black, Latino and Asian American students are finding themselves in what Orfield calls “intensely segregated” schools — schools where students of color make up more than 90 percent of the student body. Typically these schools have high concentrations of students in poverty — what Orfield calls “double segregation.” And increasingly there is “triple segregation” as English language learners in poverty find themselves concentrated in certain schools.

“These schools are just fundamentally different from other schools,” said Erica Frankenberg, a scholar on the Civil Rights Project. “In terms of AP classes available, number of veteran teachers, graduation rates — on almost every measure you see an indication of a school in severe stress.”

Students in these intensely segregated environments are far less likely to graduate, or to go on to college. It’s a problem that is well known to many people of color. Frankenberg says its time for the entire country to realize that this is a crisis for each of us.

“If we don’t start educating black and Latino students better than we are doing now, we are going to see an intergenerational decline in the percentage of high school graduates in the adult population for the first time ever,” she noted.

There’s strong evidence that integration could help us eliminate the “achievement gap.” Frankenberg and Orfield both note that the gap was lowest during the late 1980s and early 1990s — the period in history when our schools were at their most integrated.

“We have never been able to implement Plessy v. Ferguson,” Frankenberg said. “Separate schools have never been equal. Yet we keep trying to make a segregated system work.”

**A Hidden History of Choice**  
How do we reverse a 40-year trend, one that is embedded in our residential landscape? And how do we integrate schools when the Supreme Court has ruled that race and diversity can’t be a factors in school assignments?

The solution might be as simple as changing the way we think — particularly the way we think about school choice.

“We need to rethink what choice means, and we need to realize that it isn’t inimical to the ‘civil rights’ approach to integration,” Wells said.

Experts such as Wells and Orfield point out that many fundamentals of school segregation haven’t changed all that much since 1990. There was residential segregation then, and many racially homogenous districts date back to the 1970s.

What did change was a paradigm shift. Court rulings weakened local integration plans, and Americans increasingly began looking for solutions that appealed to their free-market instincts. Charter schools and vouchers began to look like the best way to liberate students from intensely segregated schools — and the best way to create innovative, effective schools.

By and large, it hasn’t worked, Orfield contends.

“Charter schools are the most segregated segment of the school system,” he said. “They often appear in highly segregated areas, and they tend to increase segregation.”

Again, so much depends on a yellow bus. By not providing transportation and other services commonly found in traditional public schools, charters were limiting their student body to kids who lived nearby — and to parents who had the right social networks.

“With charters, recruitment is largely word-of-mouth, and, as a result, these schools aren’t as accessible as they could be,” Wells said.

Orfield notes that charters aren’t bound by civil rights mandates, the way magnet schools are. But even magnet schools — with their implied mission of providing alternatives — don’t have enough capacity to provide parents with a true choice. With waiting lists at every magnet, it’s the schools that are doing the selecting.

“The laissez-faire, market-based approaches of the past 20 years have done a really good job of providing schools with a choice of students,” Wells said. “But they haven’t done a good job of providing students with a choice of schools.”

It didn’t have to be that way, Wells said.

“The problem is that there’s a whole history of school choice that has been hidden and forgotten,” she said. Wells recently co-authored a major study on school systems that still have voluntary busing. Eight major cities — including Indianapolis, St. Louis, Palo Alto and others — still have voluntary busing systems that allow students from intensely segregated schools to choose to attend other schools — even across district lines.

“These programs aren’t thriving — in fact, they’re struggling, politically, to survive — but they’re hanging on in large part because of support from parents,” Wells said.

That includes parents in white, affluent suburbs who want students from other districts to be brought into their schools.

“A lot of white parents in the suburbs bemoan the fact that they’re raising kids in an all-white, privileged context,” Wells said. “Even the kids realize they’re in this bubble.”

For Wells, the voluntary busing programs represent an approach to school choice that once was well known — one most parents have forgotten, or believe to be a failure. And that’s a shame, she said, because for students in these programs, the achievement gap has shrunk.

“Not only do these programs provide meaningful choices, they provide the intangibles — high expectations, higher academic aspirations, exposure to more ways of seeing the world,” she said.

**Rethinking Districts**  
Wells is quick to point out that these are programs that bus students from one district to another. School district boundaries, she says, are “the new Jim Crow,” separating poverty from wealth and white from black and brown.

Frankenberg agrees. She notes that the most segregated states today are the ones with the greatest profusion of districts — a legacy of a post-Brown movement to establish white and affluent enclaves in the shadow of major cities.

Frankenberg, who grew up in Mobile, uses her home state as an example. Alabama has 67 counties and 167 school districts. Neighboring Florida also has 67 counties — and 69 districts (one for each county and two special districts for university laboratory schools.) According to Frankenberg, Alabama is the most segregated state in the South — the only Southern state that consistently shows up in the top 10 of most segregated states.

Consolidating districts in highly segregated areas might be a difficult political battle, but complete consolidation isn’t the only option.

“We need to rethink our attitude toward districts,” Wells says. “The boundaries can be more permeable than they are now.”

In an age of economic hardship, that approach may be more welcome than ever before. Well points to Long Island, New York, which has 125 individual school districts.

“People are starting to understand that this system is wasteful,” she said. “Districts are starting to talk about saving money by consolidating back-office operations. There’s even talk about consolidating certain employment functions, though I’m not sure the union will approve of that.

“If districts can share these services, why can’t we find ways to allow students to attend school across district lines?” she said. “Why can’t we create interdistrict magnet programs?”

**A Paradigm Shift**  
Wells, Orfield and Frankenberg all say they’re hopeful things will change now that America has its first black president. So far, though, the signals from the Obama Administration have been mixed.

Wells says she hopes a new generation of research on the benefits of a diverse education will help “put integration and civil rights back on the public radar.” She cites the work of Scott E. Page, a mathematician who has used computer models to show that diverse groups of thinkers come up with better solutions than homogenous groups.

But the testimony of teachers and parents is just as important. If debates like the one in Wake County reach an unhappy ending, it may be because we’re losing sight of the perspectives that only educators can provide.

“We need to be politically active in seeking a change,” she said. “And teachers need to be prepared share what they know — to explain why diversity is important.”

**What Educators Can Do**  
**Teach the history of resegregation.** Encourage students to research what factors have led to resegregation. Have them ask adults about their memories of school (keeping in mind that schools were at their least segregated 20 years ago). Have them ask parents how they decided where to live.

**Know how to respond to bias incidents.** When bias incidents — or rumors of them — go unacknowledged and unaddressed, they can grow into ugly controversies that brand a school as an unsafe place. Fear of racial tension is a factor in driving parents away from diverse school, Orfield says. “In the early days of integration, everyone knew you had to address this,” he said. “We seem to have forgotten the importance of in-school race relations.”

**Testify.** The educational benefits of a diverse learning environment are well-documented, but the public often doesn’t see diversity as a “must have” in a school. Share your own classroom experiences with the public, and help shift the paradigm.

**Mississippi school district ordered to end racial segregation**

**A federal judge gave a school district in Mississippi 30 days to halt the 'clustering' of white students into certain schools and classes, saying it amounted to segregation.**

By [Warren Richey](http://www.csmonitor.com/About/Contact/Staff-Writers/Warren-Richey), *Staff writer* / April 13, 2010

A federal judge on Tuesday ordered a [Mississippi](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Mississippi) school district to halt local policies that had allowed some of the district’s schools and classes to become racially segregated.

US [District Judge Tom Lee](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Tom+Lee) gave the [Walthall County School District](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Walthall+County+School+District) 30 days to amend its student transfer policy and ordered an immediate halt to the alleged “clustering” of white students into certain classes in [Tylertown](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Tylertown), Miss., elementary schools.

“The district shall cease using race in the assignment of students to classrooms in a manner that results in the racial segregation of students,” Judge Lee said in his eight-page order.

“The district shall randomly assign students to classrooms at the Tylertown Elementary Schools through the use of a student management software program,” the judge said.

**Desegregation order dates back 40 years**

The action stems from a federal desegregation order issued in August 1970 – nearly 40 years ago. The case was closed for lack of activity in 2001.

In 2007, lawyers with the [Justice Department](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/U.S.+Department+of+Justice)’s [Civil Rights Division](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2009/1008/p25s02-usgn.html) contacted the Mississippi school district to monitor its compliance with the 1970 desegregation order. The action revealed two alleged violations.

The district was allowing more than 300 students – most of them white – to transfer from their assigned schools to a predominately white school, the [Salem Attendance Center](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Salem+Attendance+Center), outside their residential zone, according to court documents.

The second alleged violation involved grouping white students into a few designated classes at three other schools in Tylertown. The action created a significant number of all-black classrooms at each elementary grade level, documents say.

“It is unacceptable for school districts to act in a way that encourages or tolerates the [resegregation of public schools](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2008/0125/p01s01-ussc.html),” said [Thomas Perez](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Thomas+Perez), who heads the Civil Rights Division.

**'Vestiges of separate black and white schools'**

“We will take action so that school districts subject to federal desegregation orders comply with their obligation to eliminate vestiges of separate black and white schools,” Mr. Perez said in a written statement.

After identifying the alleged violations, government lawyers asked that the case be reopened. The Walthall County School District was joined by 12 other Mississippi districts that intervened as defendants in the lawsuit.

Last week, a lawyer for the Walthall County School District announced that the district “does not intend to file a response” to the government’s complaint.

In his order, Judge Lee said that in the future only students facing “extreme hardship or emergency” would qualify for transfer outside the random class assignment system.

Among examples of hardships that might qualify, the judge listed: incarceration of a parent, terminal illness or death of a parent, natural disaster, or domestic abuse or neglect affecting the student.

The judge also noted that “if students with a history of inappropriate interaction [with members of a different race] are assigned to the same classroom, the district may reassign the minimum students necessary to ensure reasonable classroom harmony.”

Judge Lee ordered the district to take all necessary steps prior to the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year to “accommodate the shifting enrollment patterns in the district expected to result” from the judicial ruling.

The judge instructed the school district to assign sufficient faculty members and administrators to each district “to ensure the effective delivery of educational services to all students at the school for which they are residentially zoned.”

He also instructed the school district to “ensure that the physical condition of each school facility is adequate to satisfactorily accommodate the anticipated enrollment for respective school.”