

Myron Orfield: Segregation is back, and our future is on the line

Swift changes in the Twin Cities area hurt students and have a ripple effect.

By Myron Orfield

Last update: December 6, 2007 - 7:07 PM

Minnesota's schools are rapidly resegregating along racial and economic lines.

This trend hurts all of the state's students, along with their families, their neighborhoods, and the region's present and future workforce.

In 1992, only nine schools in the Twin Cities metro area were attended predominantly by black, Latino/Hispanic, Asian or Native American students. By 2006, that number had jumped to 248. (Many of these schools are very segregated; some are technically integrated but are in transition.) The average poverty rate in these schools is four times higher than in predominantly white schools. Perhaps nowhere in the United States has a community shifted more quickly from integrated schools to racially and economically segregated schools.

This does not have to happen, and it can be reversed.

Racially and economically segregated schools hurt children. Students who attend them are dramatically less likely to graduate from high school, to go on to college and to have middle-class jobs. They lack not only exposure to the white middle or upper classes, but also access to the same powerful social, educational and economic networks that are at the foundation of future academic and career choices.

When public schools fail to integrate, they cut off options for these students, usually with devastating results. Many children who fail high school end up in jail or prison, on the streets, or caught up in gang violence. There is good evidence that all children benefit from well-balanced, integrated schools, no matter their racial or economic status.

It is possible to create stable, integrated schools on a metrowide basis. It has been done in 15 metropolitan areas of the nation for at least two decades.

In 2000, Wake County, N.C., part of the fast-growing and economically powerful Raleigh metropolitan area, decided to integrate schools on a regional level -- not just one suburb or one city at a time. The targets of the integration program were students who scored low in their achievement tests and those who were eligible for free and reduced-price lunches. The program resulted in greater achievement for these children and better prepared them for a multiracial society. As a result, Wake County has integrated its neighborhoods, has stabilized central-city

and older suburban neighborhoods, and has prepared itself for the global economy.

Students there have performed better on standardized tests than did their peers in other North Carolina districts. The district has maintained SAT scores well above the state and national averages and, in 2004, was named the No. 3 public-school system in the country by Forbes magazine. Integration has fostered academic excellence for all of the students in Wake County public schools.

We now face challenges much like those North Carolina faced in 2000. In 2006, predominantly white schools in the Twin Cities had a poverty rate of 18 percent, compared with 71 percent in schools that were predominantly black, Latino/Hispanic, Asian or Native American. Enormous gaps among racial and economic groups in achievement scores, graduation rates and other important performance measures show just how damaging segregated schools are to all children. The question is what will we do to reverse this trend.

Our city and suburban school districts need to cooperate more, and there must be better rules and incentives to assure a more integrated future. One critical resource designed to assist school districts' efforts to integrate is desegregation revenue. The Department of Education allocates millions of dollars (\$79 million in 2005) to participating school districts to implement integration programs. The Legislative Auditor Office's evaluation of the School District Integration Revenue program shows that the purpose of the program is unclear, that the results have not been accessed adequately and, most disappointingly, that racial concentration has increased in some schools that participate in the program. This program needs reform.

Deciding when and how to desegregate is not easy for school districts or communities. But integration is vital to a healthy and stable economy, now and in the future. Our children are counting on us to provide them with the equal opportunities they deserve. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that those opportunities are available.

Minnesota was once a leader on civil rights. It is in our self-interest to renew that leadership.

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