

Minnesota ahead of curve on integration

The state had already abandoned diversity efforts based on race, but a court ruling will affect the future.

By [Jean Hopfensperger](#), Star Tribune

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Since Minneapolis and St. Paul abandoned busing students as a way to integrate schools a decade ago, black children are more likely to attend racially segregated schools than they were in 1970, a University of Minnesota study showed.

That segregation points to one of the dilemmas of the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing race-based assignment policies at public schools, said Myron Orfield, who heads the University of Minnesota's Institute on Race and Poverty.

"The good news is that the courts gave the green light to continue the kinds of voluntary integration programs that Minnesota is doing, which are good," said Orfield, whose institute released the study of metro area school segregation last year.

"The bad news is we have very little conclusive data that Minnesota's programs are working," said Orfield. "And only a very small percentage of kids are involved in them."

The Supreme Court's 5-4 ruling struck down aggressive school desegregation programs in Seattle and Louisville, which considered race as a factor when assigning students to their public schools. The decision has been called the most significant public education case since the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, which declared school segregation unconstitutional.

The ruling won't require Minnesota to overhaul its desegregation formula, which is based on voluntary programs such as magnet schools and school choice and doesn't consider race in school assignments, say Minnesota educators and minority leaders.

But for school districts wary of creating school integration programs, or parents considering suing school districts over such integration plans, the ruling may provide new ammunition, they say.

"If you've got a school district administration and a board that feels strongly that its student population should be diversified, they'll continue to move in that direction," said Charlie Kyte, executive director of the Minnesota Association of School Administrators.

"But if you don't, their hands are strengthened by this decision," he said.

Minneapolis and St. Paul began busing to desegregate schools in the 1970s. By mid-1999, as minorities were becoming the majorities in the urban systems, the busing and racial quota system were replaced by voluntary desegregation efforts.

Minneapolis moved toward creating magnet schools and participating in "integration school districts" -- clusters of suburban and urban schools districts offering open enrollment for all district students. St. Paul relied on magnet schools and open enrollment.

Suburban school districts drew school attendance boundaries either to include diverse groups -- or to separate them, Orfield said.

School districts can continue to use all those tools under the Supreme Court decision. But they need to keep race out of the equation. Districts can still make decisions based on income, language and school performance, educators said.

The Minneapolis chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sued the Minneapolis school district twice -- the first over racial segregation in 1971 and again in 1995 over unequal educational opportunities.

Duane Reed, the chapter's current president, said today the fight is for equality in education, rather than integration for its own sake, he said.

"We're more interested in equity in education, rather than just integration as a tool," said Reed. "The primary thing is that people have access to the same resources and the same educational opportunities."

Marcia Moore is the superintendent of the Northwest Suburban Integrated School District, one of the suburban-urban school districts created under Minnesota's Desegregation Rule of 1999.

Although school enrollment is not based on race, the district came into existence because of the Minnesota Desegregation Rule, said Moore, who wondered if the Supreme Court decision would jeopardize that.

"I'm waiting to see if the Department of Education or the Legislature will look at that," she said."

Minneapolis School District Superintendent Bill Green said it's still too early to know how the landmark decision will affect Minnesota, but that's nothing new.

"When the Supreme Court ruled on Brown vs. Board of Education, there wasn't much response in Minnesota, at least according to newspaper accounts," said Green. "But [like Brown], this decision will affect us."

Neither the widespread race-based busing nor the smaller, voluntary school choice plans have bridged the overall achievement gap between whites and minority students in Minnesota. About 93 percent of white Minnesotans graduated from high school in 2004, compared to 63 percent of African-Americans, 64 percent of American Indians, and 55 percent of Hispanic students, according to a 2006 study by the St. Paul-based Minnesota Minority Education Partnership.

The gap is smaller for Asian students, who had an 86 percent graduation rate.

For African-American educators such as Green and Yusef Mgeni, director of educational equity at St. Paul Public Schools, the Supreme Court decision doesn't take into account the inherent value of having children of different races learning side-by-side.

"Some people will view it as a blow against race mixing or 'social engineering' " said Mgeni. "I think it's a detriment to a more constructive conversation. It focuses more on what we can't do, instead of what we ought to be doing. And it lowers it [integration] as a priority on the national stage."

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