

State's schools rank second in racial change

The Pew Center found a shift away from almost exclusively white schools, along with more schools with nearly all minority students.

By [David Peterson](#), Star Tribune

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Minnesota is in the midst of the second biggest shift in the nation away from almost exclusively white schools and toward racial and ethnic integration, a leading research institute reported Thursday.

As recently as the mid-1990s, more than half of all public school students in this state attended schools that were all white, or nearly so. Today that figure is about one-quarter.

Nearly half the students starting school this fall are entering schools that are anywhere from 10 to 50 percent minority.

"I don't see it as a negative at all," said Dave Jennings, who grew up in nearly-all-white Truman, Minn., and now is superintendent of schools in the rapidly diversifying Chaska district. "In today's global society, it's that kid in Martin County, or wherever it might be, who goes to a school that is 97 percent white, who's living in racial isolation."

At the same time, however, the Washington D.C.-based Pew Hispanic Center reported that Minnesota is among the leaders in a parallel trend: a tendency for more minority kids to find themselves in nearly all-minority schools.

In the 1993-94 school year, the center reported, no black kids in Minnesota attended schools that were 95- to 100-percent minority. But by the 2005-06 school year, 12 percent did. That jump ranks Minnesota sixth nationally, trailing Wisconsin, which rose from 17 to 32 percent.

"We went from nine schools in the metro area being mostly minority in 1992, to more than 100 ten years later," said University of Minnesota expert Myron Orfield, speaking on a flight home from an American Political Science Association convention in Chicago at which he spoke on this very point.

"The state's segregation rules were substantially weakened in the late '90s," said Orfield, who directs the university's Institute on Race and Poverty. "We used to be one of the very best places in the country on this issue, and now we're average."

Nor is that just about central-city schools, he added. "Bloomington made boundary decisions leading to more isolation, and Osseo, and it has happened throughout the state. Districts stopped worrying about this."

That's a problem, he said, because schools reach a tipping point where whites start leaving, and a cycle can begin in which poor minority kids are only in school with other poor minority kids.

While the parallel trend of a lot fewer predominantly white schools is a good thing, he said, it has more to do with a national shift in the demographics of young people toward Latino, Asian and other immigrant groups.

In Minnesota, for example, between the two school years the Pew Center uses -- 1993-94 and 2005-06 -- the number of white students dropped from about 720,000 statewide to about 657,000 as children of the baby boom grew up and left school.

Their place was taken by a mixture of mainly immigrant groups: The number of Hispanics in the state's schools, for instance, rose from about 13,000 to about 45,000. In Chaska the number of Latinos rose gradually from 35 in 1980 to double that in 1990 -- but shot to about 1,000 in the year 2000 as part of a national wave of Latin immigration during that decade.

"The beneficiaries of that over the long haul are the whites," said Theartrice (T) Williams, a school board member in Minneapolis. "The descendants of Norwegian and Swedish immigrants meet Somalis and Latinos, and learn something about the majority of the people in the world."

Nationally the states seeing the biggest shifts away from predominantly white schools -- defined as 95 percent or more -- are like those in Utah, which saw the biggest shift of all, that have been almost entirely white in the past. Not far behind Minnesota are its neighboring states, all ranking in the top 10.

The states seeing the fastest rise in blacks attending nearly all-minority schools are spread more widely, with Ohio being the leader, followed by Wisconsin, Massachusetts and Missouri.

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