

EDUCATION

60 years after Brown v. Board of education, intense segregation returns



Marchers carry signs and chant slogans Saturday during a "Unity Parade" to the Milwaukee High School of the Arts, marking 60 years since the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to desegregate public schools. Credit: Gary Porter

By *Erin Richards and Lydia Mulvany* of the *Journal Sentinel*

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Lloyd Barbee, the activist lawyer and assemblyman who brought a federal lawsuit against Milwaukee Public Schools in 1965 to end racial segregation, would not be satisfied with the school that bears his name today.

In 1976, federal Judge John Reynolds ruled in the case that MPS needed to desegregate its school system so that all children had equal

educational opportunities.

Today, enrollment at [Lloyd Barbee Montessori School](#), 4456 W. Teutonia Ave., is 92% black — what researchers call an intensely segregated school. Not a single Barbee student who took the state achievement test this school year could read proficiently, according to results of the fall 2013 exams. Just one student passed the reading exam in 2012.

Barbee is not alone — it's one of an increasing number of Milwaukee Public Schools that are intensely segregated, according to a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel analysis of enrollment trends in MPS and the four-county metro area's public schools over the past 20 years.

That trend is happening nationally, as well, and is the main topic of conversation at commemorative activities around the country this weekend marking the 60th anniversary of the Supreme Court's [Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka decision](#).

That unanimous Brown ruling on May 17, 1954, was the landmark opinion that separate schools "are inherently unequal." It set the stage for the civil rights movement, as well as court rulings that would drive school desegregation efforts around the country.

Today, the Milwaukee area is a prime example of the boomerang trend toward resegregation.

Court rulings or settlement agreements stemming from litigation prompted efforts that made schools in the Milwaukee area some of the most integrated places in the country in the 1980s and 1990s, said [Marc Levine](#), a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

But today, the percentage of black children in the Milwaukee area attending intensely segregated schools is about the same as it was in the mid-1960s, said Levine, who will be releasing a report in a few weeks on the impact of racial segregation on a variety of social and economic factors in Milwaukee.

"Now we're right at the top of the list," Levine said. "Milwaukee and Chicago are tied for having the highest percentage of black students attending intensely segregated schools."

Consider these highlights from the Journal Sentinel's analysis of enrollment data over 20 years:

- One in three MPS students today attends a school that is intensely segregated, defined as any school with an enrollment that is at least 90% one race. Nearly 20 years ago, that number was far smaller: less than one in 8 students.
- In MPS, 46% of black students attend an intensely segregated black school, up from 20% two decades ago.
- Nearly one in five Hispanic students in MPS attends an intensely segregated Hispanic school.
- In MPS, Asian enrollment has increased to about 6% of the population this year, up from 3.5% in 1995. In terms of segregation, the biggest change for that minority subgroup was the arrival of the [Hmong American Peace Academy](#), where Asians make up more than 97% of the enrollment.
- School districts in Waukesha, Washington and Ozaukee counties have all become more diverse in their enrollment in the past 20 years. But none of those counties, on average, educates a population that is less than 82% white.
- In Milwaukee County suburban districts, and Waukesha, Ozaukee and Washington counties, the percentage of students attending intensely segregated white schools has gone down over the past 20 years. The Milwaukee County suburban districts no longer have any intensely segregated schools.

Some schools are far more diverse than the district average. Victory School, located west of Mitchell International Airport near W. Ramsey

Ave. and S. 27th St., is one of the district's greatest melting pots. Just about every class has white, black and brown faces. The school has an English as a Second Language program, so it's a draw for immigrants.

Second-grade teacher Amrit Kaur said many parents value the mixing of cultures and backgrounds. In her 12 years at the school, Kaur said, she had seen parents from nearby suburbs send their children to Victory, which also has an Italian language immersion program, because they valued the diversity inside the building.

Race And Poverty

The importance of integrated schools goes beyond philosophical arguments.

Many traditional public schools in Milwaukee lack the same kinds of resources that exist at higher-income, mostly white schools: full-time library media specialists, a full entree of art, music and physical education for all students on a regular basis, enough guidance counselor resources for all students who need them.

At a recent MPS budget hearing, teacher Cathy Jester Sansone said those were all things her middle-school students at Lincoln Center for the Arts don't have access to every day.

"When non-MPS public school students actually have all of these things but MPS students don't, it's racism," she told the board. "To say our students deserve these things and still deny them is the biggest form of institutional racism in the country."

Milwaukee School Board member Meagan Holman said that achieving racial diversity in MPS is a "delicate dance." That's because the district offers families the opportunity to pick the top three schools they want to attend every year, with transportation provided as long as children stay within a certain radius. Stepping in to direct them to different schools with a goal of achieving racial diversity could mean reining in choice for parents.

Nevertheless, national studies show that desegregated education has benefits not only for student achievement, but also for students' life outcomes after school. Racial separation in schools tends to lead to unequal opportunity in life.

"Segregation is typically segregation by both race and poverty," says a new report from the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles. "Black and Latino students tend to be in schools with a substantial majority of poor children, but white and Asian students are typically in middle-class schools."

The UCLA [report](#) shows that nationally, Latinos are the most segregated students in public schools and black students are most segregated in the Northeast. Interestingly, public schools in the South — where so much of the civil rights movement was focused — actually remain the most desegregated for blacks. The boomerang trend is just beginning to reach Southern schools.

Busing, Magnet Schools

In Milwaukee, the racial composition of area schools was shaped by significant demographic shifts — notably white flight from the city to the suburbs — over the years, and because Milwaukee is, by many measures, one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the country.

Busing and magnet schools were developed as avenues to promote desegregation. And the state Legislature enacted the Chapter 220 racial integration program in suburban schools.

The program, which went into effect in the 1976-'77 school year, allowed for the transfer of minority students to certain suburban school districts, and white suburban students to Milwaukee Public Schools, with free transportation for families.

"We did a lot better than a lot of metro areas in the '80s and '90s at reducing school segregation," Levine said. "Milwaukee's percentage of

black students attending schools with 90% or more minority enrollment was lower than a lot of other big cities and metro areas."

It didn't last.

Over the years, the district reduced busing and tried neighborhood schools as an education reform concept, despite the city's racially segregated housing patterns. The rise of charter and voucher schools was also a contributing factor. Levine's research shows that non-district charter schools and private voucher schools have slightly higher rates of segregation for black students than MPS.

As for the [Chapter 220 program](#), only about 1,600 students transfer from the city to the suburbs today, down from about 5,000 city-to-suburb school transfers at the program's peak.

Many suburban districts now prefer to take students through [the state's open enrollment program](#), which can be a better financial deal. But there is no racial criteria for that program, so many open enrollment transfers to the suburbs now are white students living in Milwaukee.

Also, districts can no longer participate in [Chapter 220](#) once their minority enrollment

reaches 30%. Some districts have met that threshold not because of greater black and Hispanic student enrollment, but because more middle-class Asian families have moved to the suburbs.

William Lynch, a retired lawyer who serves as the education policy adviser to the Milwaukee NAACP, thinks that arbitrary cap set by the Legislature in the 1970s should be revised.

"That 30% made a lot of sense in 1976 and 1977, and it's telling that it's never been revised," Lynch said. "If you were truly interested in pursuing integration, you would think the Legislature in this many decades would have modified that percentage threshold."

Demographic Shift

For MPS, current enrollment is 55% black, 24% Hispanic, 14% white and about 6% Asian. Two decades ago, there were about the same percentage of black students — 60%. But there were only 12% Hispanic students, and 24% white students.

Levine's research shows that the rate of Latino students attending intensely segregated schools in the Milwaukee metro area has doubled in the past 20 years. In MPS 20 years ago, just one school had an enrollment that was 90% Hispanic: [Hayes Bilingual School](#). Today, nearly one in five Hispanic students in MPS attends an intensely segregated Hispanic school.

It's worth noting that some intensely segregated minority schools post strong academic results. [ALBA](#), an elementary charter school in MPS, is intensely segregated Hispanic. Student growth is strong, family connections are deep, and the school has received [national attention](#) for its work.

The [Milwaukee College Prep](#) network of charter schools enrolls predominantly black students. MCP is one of the highest-performing schools in the city.

MCP leader Robb Rauh said he'd love to wave a magic wand and make the city less segregated. "What's key is making sure everyone has educational opportunities, no matter what their ZIP code," he said, adding that MCP has deliberately placed its schools in high-needs ZIP codes.

The Hmong American Peace Academy is the only intensely segregated Asian school in the Milwaukee metro area. But the school posts better-than-average academic growth and better-than-average achievement gap closure for students compared with K-8 schools statewide.

It's also notable that while the number of intensely segregated black and Hispanic MPS schools has risen, the number of intensely segregated white suburban schools has gone down.

In Washington County, just about every child attended an intensely segregated white school about two decades ago. Today, less than half of them do.

Ozaukee County saw its percentage of students attending intensely segregated white schools drop from 70% to about 36% during that time.

Waukesha County's percentage of students in intensely segregated white schools

dropped from almost 81% to 34% this year.

Despite continually changing demographics, James Hall, lawyer and president of the Milwaukee NAACP, said he thinks the underlying premise of the Brown decision is that educating children in a segregated environment is unhealthy. And that in its most common form, it creates a feeling of inferiority in black students unlikely ever to be undone.

"In our pluralistic society, if blacks and other students are graduating largely from one-race schools...it's not consistent with the world we live in," Hall said



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