

# The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of the School-Age Population in the U.S.

Jennifer Van Hook, Alain Bélanger, Patrick Sabourin and Nicolas Patoine Hamel

## Executive Summary

The racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population is rapidly changing in response to decades of sustained large-scale immigration. In 1950, non-Hispanic Whites made up the vast majority of the population (90%). As of 2020, non-Hispanic Whites made up 58 percent of the nation's population, and the Census Bureau projects that they will compose only half by 2044 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). These trends are occurring even more quickly for children and young adults. As early as 2018, non-Hispanic Whites made up less than half (49.9%) of the nation's population under age 15.

What should schools and educators anticipate over the next three decades? How is the school-aged population (ages 5-17) likely to change with respect to its racial and ethnic composition, generational status, home language, and educational attainment? Employing an innovative microsimulation model, we project *both* growing diversity for most places in the country, and reductions in the sociocultural distances between racial and ethnic groups. We project:

**A majority-minority patchwork among American school-age youth.** By 2050, non-Hispanic White children are projected to compose 42% of the population age 5-17, Hispanics 29%, Blacks 17%, Asians and Pacific Islanders 7%, and children with multiracial or other identities 4%.

**Geographic spread of racial and ethnic heterogeneity.** Racial and ethnic heterogeneity is projected to increase the most in areas with lower levels of heterogeneity in 2020, such as areas in the New England and the Midwest and cities like Boston, St. Louis, and Minneapolis. Conversely,

racial and ethnic heterogeneity is projected to plateau in areas that already have high levels of heterogeneity in 2020, such as Florida, California, and the West Coast regions and cities like San Francisco and Washington, DC. This means that these states and cities have greater diversity within their overall population, but not that the neighborhoods, schools or school districts are actually integrated. School segregation of Blacks and Hispanics from White, Asian, and middle-class students is very high and has been intensifying since 1990 (Orfield and Pflieger, forthcoming 2023).

**Reductions in the number and share of children of immigrants.** The number of first- or second-generation school-age children (i.e., foreign-born children and children of immigrant mothers) is projected to decline between 2020 and 2050, dropping from 16.8 million to 11.4 million, and the share of children of immigrant mothers would decline from 29% to 20%. The proportion of children of immigrants among Hispanics is projected to decrease from about 59% in 2020 to 24% in 2050. Among Asians, this proportion could decrease from 92% to 71%.

**Declines in non-English Home Language Use.** We project substantial declines in the share of children speaking a non-English language at home, particularly among Hispanics (a 14 percentage-point drop from 58% to 44%) and Asian/PI children (a 7 percentage-point drop from 58% to 51%).

**Gains in Educational Attainment for Hispanics.** Even in the absence of any improvements in educational opportunities, Hispanic children are projected to experience gains in educational attainment. The percentage of Hispanics with a college degree or more is projected to increase by more than 7 percentage points from 2020 to 2050 (from 30 to 37%). Conversely, the percentage of Hispanics projected to drop out of high school is projected to decline by nearly 3 percentage points (from 14% to 11%). However, these projected improvements are largely confined to Hispanics, and are attributable to the projected declines in the share of Hispanic children who have immigrant

parents, who tend to have lower educational attainments. Hispanic children's attainment are projected to remain well below the white level and Asians are projected to remain the highest.

**An Enduring Attainment Gap for Blacks.** Black students' attainment currently remains substantially lower than the other groups. If the existing trends continue there will be very little increase in college attainment for Black youth.

**Reducing Immigration in the Future Will Not Change These Trends.** If the number of immigrants admitted to the country were to decrease substantially starting today under current policy frameworks, this would have little impact on the racial and ethnic composition of the child population. The major reason is that the U.S.-born children and young adults are already very heterogeneous, and changing future immigration levels will not alter that fact.

**Changes in Ethnic Identity Could Reduce Racial and ethnic Heterogeneity.** About one-third of Asians and Hispanics are married to a person of a different race or ethnicity, most often White, and their children may not self-identify as Asian or Hispanic. If all or most children with at least one non-Hispanic White parent identified as non-Hispanic White, this would dramatically change the projected racial and ethnic composition of the school-aged population. Rather than a majority-minority patchwork, non-Hispanic Whites would continue to make up the majority of the population (although many of them would have Asian and Hispanic parents and grandparents). The complex nature of growing multiracialism is the subject of another paper in this series.

Overall, the number and share of children with Latin American and Asian roots will increase in the future. At the same time, the share of Hispanic and Asian children with U.S.-born parents will increase. Under social conditions in which groups are treated equitably, these compositional changes are likely to be accompanied by reduced sociocultural distances between groups, especially with regard to English language usage at home, educational attainment, and ethnic identity.