

## NEWS

# Brown at 50: King's Dream or Plessy's Nightmare?

POSTED January 18, 2004

BY News editor

## 50 Years after Brown, Desegregation Has Succeeded in Many Places but is Being Abandoned, New Research from Harvard Civil Rights Project Finds

Today, on the eve of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, nearly 50 years since the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in which the Supreme Court found that "separate-but-equal schools" for white and black students were unfair and unconstitutional, the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (CRP) announces a new study on national resegregation trends in American public schools. The report finds that in the past decade there has been backward movement for desegregation in U.S. schools, especially for Latino and African-American students, and particularly in the South; and that Asian students are the most integrated and most successful students by far.

"*Brown at 50: King's Dream or the Plessy Nightmare*," by Professor Gary Orfield and research associate Chungmei Lee, considers changes in the country and in the districts directly affected by *Brown*. It also examines a decade of resegregation from the Supreme Court's *Dowell v. Oklahoma City* (1991) decision, which authorized a return to segregated neighborhood schools, through the 2001-2002 school year and provides new information on the changes in schools where desegregation plans have ended. The data analyzed covers the vast majority of American schools

Gary Orfield, Professor of Education and Social Policy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Co-Director of CRP, commented on the significance of releasing this work at a time set aside to honor Dr. King: "Martin Luther King's dream is being celebrated in theory and dishonored in practice with the decisions and methods that our re-segregating our schools. Dr. King spoke of his

nightmare, that the country would renege on its promises of racial justice days before his death, but he could hardly have imagined a Supreme Court that would push Southern schools back toward segregation."

## Key Findings

Overall, in many districts where court-ordered mandate halted desegregation efforts in the past decade, there has been a major increase in segregation. The pattern is quite clear in a number of the districts from which the most important Supreme Court decisions arose. The movement that began with the *Brown* decision has had an enduring impact, but has experienced backward movement, especially in the South, where the civil rights laws had produced the most integrated schools for three decades.

- **There has been a substantial slippage toward segregation in most of the states that were highly desegregated in 1991; and there is great variation among states.**
  - The most integrated state for African Americans in 2001 is Kentucky.
  - The most desegregated states for Latinos are in the Northwest.
- **Asians are the most integrated and most successful group of students and, by far, the most likely to attend multiracial schools with a significant presence of three or more racial groups.**
- Although American public schools are now only 60 percent white nationwide and nearly one fourth of U.S. students are in states with a majority of nonwhite students, **most white students have little contact with minority students except in the South and Southwest.**
- **The vast majority of intensely segregated minority schools face conditions of concentrated poverty**, which are powerfully related to unequal educational opportunity. Students in segregated minority schools can expect to face conditions that students in the very large number of segregated white schools seldom experience.
- Latinos confront very serious levels of segregation by race and poverty and, non-English speaking Latinos tend to be segregated in schools with each other. **The data shows no substantial gains against segregated education for Latinos even during the civil rights era.** The increase in Latino segregation is particularly notable in the West.
- There has been a **massive demographic transformation of the West, which has become the nation's first predominantly minority area in terms of total public school enrollment.**
- In some **states with very low black populations, school segregation is soaring as desegregation efforts are abandoned.**

## Early Identification Intervention is Key to Success

The study's findings provide support for a model of early identification and intervention for all children at-risk for reading failure; the classroom teachers and school resource teachers provided intervention three to four times a week for 20 minutes. The impact of intervention is evident when examining basic reading and spelling skills, as well as reading comprehension. Early identification and intervention for children at-risk for reading failure is effective for children who enter kindergarten with little or no experience with English. Intervention includes, but is not limited to, explicit phonological awareness instruction. In a school district committed to balanced early literacy instruction, bilingualism was clearly not an impediment to the acquisition of literacy skills in a second language.

**About the Report** This report examines a decade of resegregation from the time of the Supreme Court's 1991 *Dowell* decision, which allowed school districts to declare themselves unitary, end their desegregation plans, and to return to neighborhood school plans that produce intense segregation and inequality clearly visible in educational opportunities and outcomes. It also reviews the broad sweep of changes since the *Brown* decision and demonstrates that the movement that began with the Supreme Court decision has had an enduring impact but that we are experiencing the largest backward movement in the South, where the civil rights laws had produced the most integrated schools for three decades.

The report includes comparisons between the earliest available data and the present and between the high point of desegregation and the most recent data. The most recent data available from the federal government is for the 2001-2002 school year, from the Common Core of Data of the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. The data covers the vast majority of American schools.

In this report, the term white means non-Hispanic white and the term Latino or Hispanic means children of Latino origin, whatever their race or multiracial background may be. Although the Census instituted multiracial categories in 2000 school statistics to this point use mutually exclusive categories as reported from the school level.

Regional breakdown: The South refers to the eleven states of the Old Confederacy, from Virginia through Texas and the Border states refer to the other six states bordering the South that had legally mandated segregation until the *Brown* decision. The Northeast goes from Maine through Pennsylvania, while the Midwest stretches from Ohio to Kansas. The West includes the states of the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain West. Hawaii and Alaska, which have very distinctive populations, are treated separately and the District of Columbia is treated as a city rather than a state.

This study explores the changing nature of enrollment in U.S. schools, the changes in patterns of segregation and desegregation of various groups, regions and community types. It examines both the changes over the last decade as well as those over a much longer period. It explores the relationship between racial and economic segregation, and discusses the implications of these trends and the possible policy alternatives. The numbers are computed directly from the data reported by the states and assembled by the federal government.

## About the Authors

Professor Gary Orfield is Professor of Education and Social Policy and founding Co-Director of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University is the author of many books and articles on school desegregation and other civil rights issues and his work was cited by the Supreme Court in its recent decision on affirmative action.

Chungmei Lee is a research associate at the Civil Rights Project. She received her masters in Administration, Planning, and Social Policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Prior to joining the Project, she worked with Harvard's Programs for Professional Education (PPE) and helped train education leaders around the world in Education Management Information System (EMIS). At PPE, she also worked on issues relating to the professional development of teachers. As an independent consultant for the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), she examined issues such as the financing of higher education and its impact on middle-income and low-income students' access to higher education. She holds a B.A. in history from Dartmouth College. Ms. Lee co-authored, "A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream" (2003), and "Race in American Public Schools: Rapidly Resegregating School Districts" (2002), both published by the Civil Rights Project.

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