

# Researchers: School Segregation Rising in South

By Alan Richard — September 11, 2002 ⌚ 5 min read

*Chapel Hill, N.C. -*

Hundreds of researchers and civil rights advocates converged here recently to focus on what they say is the most pressing problem in education in the South: the “resegregation” of public schools.

The academic conference was the largest of its kind “in the whole history of the South,” said Gary Orfield, a co-director of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. His institute planned the conference along with the University of North Carolina’s Center for Civil Rights.

Professors and researchers here compared evidence showing that students in the South have grown more segregated by race than at any time since the days of separate schools for blacks and whites.

The reasons for this resegregation of public schools are complex, many experts here said. Among them are influxes of Hispanics and court decisions that outlaw race as a main factor in student assignment. Also, in many Southern communities, residential segregation persists, and many school district policies allow some degree of segregation.

But many people at the Aug. 30 conference—almost all of whom seemed to share the belief that integration is right both politically and socially—expressed fear that residents of the South and other parts of the country may have forgotten the educational value of a diverse community.

“We do better when we are working and learning together,” said Julius Chambers, the

1 Free Article Left

[Get free newsletters](#) or subscribe for unlimited access.

SUBSCRIBE

They heard researchers say that public schools in many parts of the South are growing more segregated by race—across states, between school districts and within them, and even within school buildings.

Academic attention to resegregation has risen even as parents in some cities are challenging desegregation plans that aim to create racial balance, sometimes indirectly.

For instance, the 101,000-student Wake County, N.C., schools, based in Raleigh, have begun integrating schools based on the income of students' families. It's a plan that local school leaders say has helped build one of the nation's best urban school districts. Nonetheless, some parents have protested and demanded changes to the plan. ("[Broad Effort to Mix Students by Wealth Under Fire in N.C.](#)," May 22, 2002.) Ann Majestic, the lawyer for Wake County schools, said here that the public may be less concerned about racial integration than it once was. "We are not educating the children of the children of the 1960s," she said. "There is no clear constituency for continuing to integrate."

## The Numbers Are In

Schools grew more segregated by race in the 1990s, even while residential communities in the South have become more integrated, said Sean F. Reardon, a professor at Pennsylvania State University, who presented a paper with Harvard researcher John T. Yun.

White and black students are more segregated now than in 1990, while Latino segregation dropped but remained higher than black-and-white levels, Mr. Reardon said. Integration rates also dropped in majority-black school districts in larger metropolitan areas in the 1990s, he said.

Other studies presented during the conference concluded that:

- Private schools in the South may be contributing to racial segregation more strongly

1 Free Article Left

[Get free newsletters](#) or subscribe for unlimited access.

- Teachers are flocking to more segregated schools as well, said Georgia State University professor Benjamin Scafidi. He and two other researchers showed that one-third of white teachers leave majority-black schools in the Atlanta area each year, but found no evidence of black teachers leaving the same schools in large numbers.

“We find that it’s race, not class,” that determines where teachers choose to work, Mr. Scafidi said. “White teachers are outta there.”

## Rekindling a Movement?

Segregation appears to be on the rise in some Southern cities, researchers showed.

In Nashville, Tenn., the percentage of black students who attend schools that have at least 80 percent minority enrollment has climbed from 13 percent in 1980 to more than 22 percent today, said Ellen B. Goldring, a professor at Vanderbilt University. Magnet schools for gifted students in Nashville have seen their enrollments grow more white in the past three years, Ms. Goldring added.

And segregation may be a growing problem in Charlotte, a city people here at the conference know as the subject of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1971, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Board of Education*, that first allowed busing and magnet schools as a means toward integration.

Projected numbers for the school year that just began under Charlotte’s new neighborhood-school-style assignment plan show that 11 percent fewer elementary schools and 12.5 percent fewer high schools are as racially balanced as in 2001-02, said Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

The views of the researchers here don’t dovetail with those of everyone who follows integration and demographics. Joel Garreau, a senior fellow in public policy at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., who is an author and a writer for *The Washington Post*, said in an interview that class may be more important to the public now than race.

1 Free Article Left

[Get free newsletters](#) or subscribe for unlimited access.

Meanwhile, presenters at the conference wondered how they might convince voters and school leaders across the South to demand that the integration movement be rekindled in some way.

“The courts are not going to lead us to a new era of justice and civil rights,” said University of Minnesota law professor John A. Powell. “What is the goal? Unless we can answer this question ... then we don’t have a clear thing to fight for.”

---

**Alan Richard**

### **Reprints, Photocopies and Licensing of Content**

All content on Education Week's websites is protected by copyright. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source. For additional print copies, or for permission for other uses of the content, visit [www.edweek.org/help/reprints-photocopies-and-licensing-of-content](http://www.edweek.org/help/reprints-photocopies-and-licensing-of-content) or email [reprints@educationweek.org](mailto:reprints@educationweek.org) and include information on how you would like to use the content. Want to seamlessly share more EdWeek content with your colleagues? Contact us today at [pages.edweek.org/ew-for-districts-learn-more.html](http://pages.edweek.org/ew-for-districts-learn-more.html) to learn about how group online subscriptions can complement professional learning in your district or organization.

Copyright © 2026 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved.

1 Free Article Left

[Get free newsletters](#) or subscribe for unlimited access.