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Education

Segregated schools hurt students' bid for success

Lack of diversity breeds suspicions, creates cultural quagmire, experts say

By Jodi Upton / The Detroit News

Almost 70 percent of students in Metro Detroit go to schools where nearly all of the students are like them -- either 90-percent white or 90-percent black -- indicating widespread segregation in area schools.

It's an issue that creates a difference in resources and opportunities and may be hurting kids' chances of success in a multicultural world.

"When you go to a school where everyone is like you, you miss the cultural capital that different kids bring to class," said Christopher Dunbar, a Michigan State University assistant professor who has worked with Detroit charter schools and taught in inner-city Los Angeles.

"That not only reinforces stereotypes, but years later ... these are the people who may be eyeing each other suspiciously across the office."

That's assuming they end



Donna Terek / The Detroit News

David Johnstone, left, a senior at L'Anse Creuse High School in Chesterfield Township, and Eric King, a sophomore at Detroit's Southeastern High School, discovered differences in their education during a cultural exchange: Johnstone had not read "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," and King had not read anything by Mark Twain.

Education costs

Experts say that both white and black students pay for highly segregated schools, but while the cost to white students tends to be social blacks nav

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up in the same office. The biggest problem with racially segregated schools, experts say, is that there is a wide disparity between resources and expectations, and thus the education and jobs students ultimately get.

Nationally, the schism between black and white schools has gotten more pronounced, leading to a near-epidemic of black students not ready for college and white students ill-prepared for the workforce, among other social problems, said Gary Orfield, an education and social policy professor at Harvard University.

"Research continually shows that segregated schools are usually isolated by race and poverty, and offer vastly unequal educational opportunities," Orfield said in a recent report about the problem.

Two systems created

In Metro Detroit, schools have long been segregated, a reality made worse by white flight into the suburbs and away from Detroit. That has isolated many students whose parents can't afford to move to better districts.

In some cases, inner-city teachers are so busy taking care of everything from discipline to kids who come to school hungry that standards may drop, experts say.

Educational problems may become even worse: Kids don't see school as a path to prosperity, they care less about class, standards drop further and they may never earn the income to get their own kids to better schools.

"We have created two different educational systems," said Anna Ortiz, who works with Dunbar in MSU's Department of Education. "Kids don't often get to choose where they live but they are left with the consequences."

Students tend to be social, students pay financially and socially:

* Students in black urban schools typically have fewer resources, less opportunity and money than white suburban schools.

* Differences in educational opportunities may lead to some students being unprepared for college and careers.

* Both black and white students who attend racially isolated schools tend to have more problems in the work place -- both socially and in career advancement -- if they distrust coworkers of another race.



Donna Terek / The Detroit News

The African American Awareness Club helps black students at West Bloomfield High School feel more comfortable.

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Urban schools tend to be predominantly minority, have higher dropout and poverty rates and score lower on standardized tests than suburban schools. The conclusion many parents make: white schools are better.

For example, Gibraltar schools are about 1 percent black, but dropout and poverty rates are lower and fourth-grade scores are all higher than in Oak Park schools, which are about 86 percent black.

In a Detroit News/WDIV poll in August, whites were twice as likely as blacks to say a fear of low-quality schools was a reason to live in segregated neighborhoods. Thirty-two percent of whites said it was a reason for segregation compared to 20 percent of blacks.

School quality counts

ACT, the college-entrance testing company, says its studies show school quality makes the difference in test scores, not race, poverty or other factors.

In a study that included Detroit schools, ACT found that when students of color in inner-city schools had the same rigorous requirements as many suburban schools, the urban students performed better.

In fact, having tough classes such as advanced English and math explained 60 percent of the difference in scores between urban and suburban students. Race and gender explained only 2 percent of the difference, said ACT spokesman Ed Colby.

"Essentially, they found that most of the difference is explained by the high school they attended," Colby said.

Some educators argue, though, that you can't blame it all on the schools. Teachers are busy curing social problems that the students bring to school, and extra federal money for high-poverty districts goes to remedial programs -- not ninth-grade calculus.

Parents who can afford to send their children to suburban schools-of-choice often will. In other cases, parents may send children to stay with relatives to attend the suburban district.

'How lucky we were'

But some parents choose segregated schools.

Among Detroit area charter schools, intended as a state-funded alternative to the local public schools and where kids can come from any district, 62 percent are at least 90-percent black. Eleven percent are at least 90-percent white.

Others argue even that deliberate segregation is a matter of convenience.

"Most of the parents chose us because they live in the community and they like the education we're offering," said Cherise Strode, development director at Chandler Park Schools in Detroit and Great Lakes Academy in Pontiac. The schools are 99.8-percent black, according to state records.

"It's not racial; I don't think it's intentional. But people are happy in their comfort zone."

Even Strode admits that lessons on multiculturalism in a one-race

school are likely to be lessons about Arabs and Asians, not the other-race neighborhood across town.

David Johnstone and Eric King discovered the differences during a cultural exchange between L'Anse Creuse High School in Chesterfield Township and Detroit Southeastern High School.

Johnstone, who is white, has never read *The Autobiography of Malcom X* while King, who is black, has never read anything written by Mark Twain.

King was stunned by the relative opulence of the suburban school. "Everything was different," King said. "They had more stuff. They had a digital clock in the middle of the hallway. There were three restaurants in their cafeteria, a pizza place, a taco place, a sub place, and they get to leave (school during lunch) if they want. Our cafeteria is french fries and pizza almost every day."

Students in integrated schools often grow thankful for the experience.

At Ferndale High School, Craig Gearing always appreciated the way black and white students hung out together, but it wasn't until this fall at Western Michigan University that he realized how unusual that was.

"I met one guy who had never gone to school with a black kid," Gearing said. "You could see that (kids like that) were a little hesitant to just go in a room and hang out until someone else helped them make the connection.

"It made me realize how lucky we were to have already dealt with that since we went to school with people from every culture."

Cultural differences

Other schools make an effort to help students break out of race-based cliques.

In West Bloomfield schools, teacher Ida Turpin is a co-sponsor of the African American Awareness Club to help black students feel more comfortable in the predominantly white school.

"If we limit ourselves to one group, we're not getting the full flavor and we're not prepared to communicate to all kinds of people," Turpin said. "School sets the stage for what happens in our later adult life. If we keep our kids segregated when they grow up, what can we expect when they grow older?"

Pretending that there are no cultural differences between races contributes to the problem, Dunbar said. Differences should not only be acknowledged, but used to improve education.

For example, research shows African-American children respond better to direct commands because it's closer to what they hear at home, Dunbar said.

Disparate expectations should be addressed as well, Dunbar said. For example, some whites assume black parents care little about education. And some blacks assume everything comes easy for white students, he said.

Such misconceptions, born in the schools, may blossom in the work place as assumptions about race-based hiring or promotions, even a lack of trust while working together

...of just white working together.

For example, many blacks and Asians are culturally less likely to speak up, either in self-promotion or to make it clear they want a promotion or to be on a project, said Sharon Davis, whose Farmington Hills business helps businesses resolve racial conflicts.

As a result, a white boss may decide the black employee is not really interested in the job while the employee may assume she's being passed over because of her race. The result can be anything from an unproductive work place to litigation.

"A lot of those misunderstandings come up as a result of segregation," Davis said. "If there were more interaction between cultures ... you wouldn't have that void of unfamiliarity."

Recalling her mostly black second-grade classes, the issue for former Detroit teacher Virginia Sloan Robinson is simple: How are you going to know everything you need, unless you know lots of different kinds of people?

"If you are exposed to everything, you can choose from the best of everything," said Robinson, 73. "I think it would have been good for everyone if there had been a little more diversity."

Students in Metro Detroit school districts

According to Michigan Department of Education 2000-01 enrollment figures, 73 of Metro Detroit's 88 districts are at least 80 percent white; six districts are 21 percent or less white, leaving very few districts even somewhat integrated. In most cases, integration is due to Asian, Indian or Hispanic students.

LIVINGSTON COUNTY

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL STUDENTS	PERCENT		SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL STUDENTS	PERCENT	
		BLACK	WHITE			BLACK	WHITE
Brighton	6,859	0.3	95.5	East Detroit	6,730	4.5	91.1
Fowlerville	3,142	0.0	91.6	Fitzgerald	3,098	5.5	87.2
Hartland	4,222	0.7	97.7	Fraser	4,625	2.4	94.4
Howell	7,139	0.5	98.3	Lake Shore	3,087	1.0	92.1
Pinckney	4,784	0.4	98.7	Lakeview	2,762	0.2	95.9

MACOMB COUNTY

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL STUDENTS	PERCENT		SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL STUDENTS	PERCENT	
		BLACK	WHITE			BLACK	WHITE
Anchor Bay	5,357	2.4	95.1	L'Anse Creuse	10,541	3.8	93.4
Armada	1,783	0.1	98.6	Mt. Clemens	3,356	40.1	55.9
Center Line	2,690	2.6	89.3	New Haven	1,112	16.9	79.9
Chippewa Valley	11,864	1.3	96.3	Richmond	1,917	0.5	95.7
Clintondale	2,652	23.0	70.0	Romeo	5,181	1.4	95.9

OAKLAND COUNTY

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL STUDENTS	PERCENT		SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL STUDENTS	PERCENT	
		BLACK	WHITE			BLACK	WHITE
Avondale	3,732	11.3	80.3	Lamphere	2,485	1.5	93.4
Berkley	4,207	5.7	90.7	Madison	1,950	3.0	94.4
Birmingham	7,502	5.5	90.5	Novi	5,728	1.6	86.6
Bloomfield Hills	5,806	6.6	82.3	Oak Park	3,781	83.5	13.5
Brandon	3,418	0.4	98.7	Oxford	3,752	1.8	95.7
Clarenosville	1,908	5.5	89.8	Pontiac	12,290	62.4	20.5
Clarkston	7,199	1.0	95.7	Rochester	13,386	2.6	89.4
Clawson	1,519	0.5	97.2	Royal Oak	6,585	3.0	95.8
Farmington	11,641	6.8	86.5	South Lyon	5,967	0.9	96.3
Ferndale	4,046	33.1	64.5	Southfield	9,518	80.1	17.7
Hazel Park	4,411	2.5	88.6	Troy	12,066	2.5	81.1
Holly	4,183	2.2	95.3	Walled Lake	13,965	2.3	91.9

Huron Valley	10,893	0.4	96.7	Waterford	11,217	2.7	92.1
Lake Orion	6,442	1.2	96.3	West Bloomfield	6,158	7.7	82.2
WAYNE COUNTY							
SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL STUDENTS	PERCENT BLACK	WHITE	SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL STUDENTS	PERCENT BLACK	WHITE
Allen Park	3,304	0.2	96.0	Melvindale-	2,252	3.8	87.6
Crestwood	3,122	1.3	92.8	N. Allen Park			
Dearborn City	16,171	1.8	94.9	Northville	5,060	0.9	92.3
Dearborn Hts.	2,484	1.6	92.4	Ply.-Canton	16,275	3.6	86.8
Detroit City	154,648	91.2	3.9	Redford Union	4,287	4.9	92.4
Ecorse	1,085	61.3	32.6	River Rouge	2,661	53.3	41.8
Flat Rock	1,620	0.9	97.3	Riverview	2,190	1.6	95.5
Garden City	4,822	0.9	97.5	Romulus	3,982	45.2	52.2
Gibraltar	2,841	1.4	88.9	South Redford	3,410	15.2	82.5
Grosse Ile	2,077	0.0	94.6	Southgate	4,306	2.0	91.3
Grosse Pointe	8,590	3.6	98.9	Taylor	11,069	13.1	83.2
Hamtramck	3,618	18.0	80.5	Trenton	3,241	0.4	97.5
Harper Woods	1,075	15.0	78.3	Van Buren	6,214	23.0	75.0
Highland Park	2,980	99.5	0.1	Wayne-West.	14,569	14.6	81.3
Huron	1,946	1.3	98.9	Westwood	2,182	68.5	29.6
Inkster-Edison	1,527	98.4	1.5	Woodhaven-	4,656	5.0	83.8
Lincoln Park	5,522	1.8	91.3	Brownstown			
Livonia	17,877	2.4	98.9	Wyandotte	4,199	0.9	95.7

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