

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# U.S. School Enrollment Hits Majority-Minority Milestone

By **Lesli A. Maxwell**

America's public schools are on the cusp of a new demographic era.

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This fall, for the first time, the overall number of Latino, African-American, and Asian students in public K-12 classrooms is expected to surpass the number of non-Hispanic whites.

The new collective majority of minority schoolchildren—**projected to be 50.3 percent** by the National Center for Education Statistics—is driven largely by dramatic growth in the Latino population and a decline in the white population, and, to a lesser degree, by a steady rise in the number of Asian-Americans. African-American growth has been mostly flat.



That new majority will continue to grow, the same projections show.

It's a shift that poses a plain imperative for public schools and society at large, demographers and educators say: The United States must vastly improve the educational outcomes for this new and diverse majority of American students, whose success is inextricably linked to the well-being of the nation.

The enrollment milestone underscores a host of challenges for educators, including more students living in poverty, more who will require English-language instruction, and more whose life experiences will differ from those of their teachers, who remain overwhelmingly white.

"We are talking about the kids that we historically have served least well," said Kent McGuire, the president of the Southern Education Foundation, an Atlanta-based advocacy organization for better public schooling in that region, especially for children of color and low-income students.

"Over the decades, we have not managed to reduce the variation in performance between kids of color and white kids, and we haven't closed the gap between advantaged kids and disadvantaged kids," he said, "so now we have to figure out how to do something we've never done before, for the majority."



Savana Punchard, far left, directs fellow students for a video on the dress code at Valley Point Middle School in Dalton, Ga.

—Photos by Shawn Poynter for Education Week

This new era has been approaching for more than two decades.

And though the projected diverse majority will remain concentrated in major urban areas and in a handful of historically diverse states such as California, Florida, New York, and Texas, it is by no means an exclusively big-city or big-state trend.

Many rural and suburban communities—long dominated by white families—have also diversified racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically, often as a result of immigration from Mexico and Central America.

### Signaling Broad Change

Consider the [Aberdeen, Idaho, school district](#), where Hispanic children made up 56 percent of the 823-student enrollment in 2011-12, up from 45 percent five years earlier. Mexican immigrant workers were drawn to the small town in rural, southeastern Idaho for jobs in the potato industry, had families, and stayed.

Such tectonic shifts in the public school population are a harbinger of what is to come for the American population as a whole within the next three decades. By 2043, the U.S. Census Bureau projects, higher birthrates among Hispanics, combined with declining birthrates among whites, will lead to a United States [where a majority of residents are nonwhite](#). During that time, African-American population growth is expected to rise modestly, while Asians are projected to more than double their share of the population by 2060, according to the Census.

Still, as younger, more ethnically diverse generations move into public schools and early adulthood, an older and mostly white baby-boom generation will be living longer.

"The number of children is going to grow, but as a share of the population, the growing group is the nation's seniors," said Richard Fry, a senior researcher at the Washington-based Pew Research Center.

In 1960, the share of population that was 65 and older was 9 percent and now it's about 13 percent, Mr. Fry said. By 2050, Pew researchers project that it will be 19 percent. And these older, mostly white Americans will still exert influence over public policy decisions, which could present new tensions over how much they are willing to invest in public schools that are increasingly diverse and bear little resemblance to those their own children attended.

"So, in state legislatures and in the realm of public resources, there is going to be a growing demand for medical services and services that target the aged," Mr. Fry said. "The public education enterprise already feels it's in competition for resources, and that's likely to get even tighter in an aging society."

The transformation to majority-nonwhite K-12 enrollments has already happened in two major regions of the country: the West and the South. As of the 2011-12 school year, 2,464 school districts, or 18.5 percent of all districts, had also crossed that threshold, according to an analysis of federal data by the Education Week Research Center.

#### The Changing Demographics of America's Schools

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Although most of the nation's 14,000-plus districts still have white majorities, attendance at school in districts where Latinos, blacks, Asians, or some combination of those groups, boast the biggest numbers is approaching the norm for most students, the Education Week Research Center found. But even with such profound demographic changes, schools in many communities remain highly segregated. It is still uncommon for white students to attend schools where they represent less than 25 percent of enrollment.

"I think even the use of the word 'minority' in the way we always have clearly doesn't make sense with these numbers," said Patricia Gándara, an education professor and a co-director of the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"The whole notion of being 'minority' is that you are marginalized and have a second-class status, but what does that mean in this new context?" she said. "When these students are at the margins with respect to achievement but at the center with respect to the population, how do we reconcile that?"

But as K-12 enrollment has become a richer tapestry of race and ethnicity, the corps of classroom teachers remains predominantly white.

### Teacher Disconnect

In the 2011-12 school year, **82 percent of 3.4 million public school teachers** were non-Hispanic white, while 7 percent were non-Hispanic black and 8 percent were Hispanic, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. That distribution has budged little in the last decade. In 2003-04, 83 percent of all public school teachers were non-Hispanic white.

That disconnect, says one New York City teacher, creates major cultural divides between students and their teachers that are difficult to bridge and that contributes to the difficulties students from disadvantaged communities have finding more success in school and beyond.

"This just signals even more that we have to address cultural competence for teachers across all of our schools," said **José Luis Vilson**, a middle school math teacher in the Washington Heights/Inwood community in the Manhattan borough of New York who is an advocate for recruiting more teachers of color, especially men.

"People are too often on this colorblind kick that is really detrimental," he said. "Kids respond better and connect better to school and their education when the teacher in front of them responds to who they are, and where they come from."



Omar Chavarria holds up an answer to a math problem in class at Valley Point. The school's enrollment became "majority minority" in the 2013-14 school year.

—Photos by Shawn Poynter for Education Week

Mr. Vilson also argues that educators and the school systems they work in need to embrace more-nuanced notions of "high expectations" for all students. And teachers, he says, need to develop their own "emotional intelligence."

"First of all, teachers need to understand what their students think of this notion of high expectations and how they can demonstrate what they know in different ways," he said. "We are too focused on one type of assessment and narrow ways of showing capability."

### **Language Challenges**

Perhaps the most dramatic transformation to public schooling, however, has been the rise in students whose first language is not English.

Thousands of communities, especially in the Southern states, became booming gateways for immigrant families during the 1990s. In the early years of the new century, public schools grappled with how to serve large numbers of English-language learners. They had to build instructional programs from scratch and train teachers who are not bilingual to teach English to non-native speakers and communicate with parents who speak no English.

That trend is expected to continue. By 2050, 34 percent of U.S. children younger than 17 will either be immigrants themselves or the children of at least one parent who is an immigrant, according to projections from the Pew Research Center.

"If future immigration flows in any way mirror what we've seen in the past, that means we are going to see an increasing demand for English-language-acquisition services as the number of children who speak a language other than English at home arrive in prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms," Mr. Fry said.

Such complex issues have certainly been at the center of a rapidly changing enrollment profile in the **21,000-student school district in Hillsboro, Ore.**, 15 miles west of Portland.

Hillsboro is a city of 91,000, where a thriving agricultural sector, booming high-tech businesses, and affordable housing have attracted immigrants in recent years. New arrivals pushed the school system over the majority-minority threshold in 2013-14, when the share of non-Hispanic white students fell to just under 50 percent.

Latino students constitute 36 percent of the enrollment, while Asian and Pacific-Islander students make up more than 7 percent. Two percent of the district's students are African-American, 1 percent are Native American, and 4.8 percent are multiracial, according to district demographics.

More than a quarter of Hillsboro's elementary school students are English-language learners, a group that district administrators and teachers began calling "emergent bilinguals" a few years ago in acknowledgment of students' home languages.

"The trend had been developing for several years, so we saw the shift coming and planned accordingly," said Mike Scott, the superintendent. "Our biggest challenge within the district is making sure our instruction matches the needs of our students."

One of the biggest adjustments was building an English-language instructional program from the ground up, and, in particular, recruiting and developing bilingual educators, said Dayle Spitzer, the district's executive director of elementary schools.

The Hillsboro district has come a long way in 15 years. It now serves 1,200 students in Spanish-English dual-language programs in eight of its elementary schools, and it is developing a pipeline of bilingual educators by providing tuition incentives and internship opportunities to classified employees who want to become classroom teachers.

The district has also focused on diversifying its ranks of principals and other administrators to help attract Latino and Asian teachers.

"If we can build on having that group look more like what our students look like, then we believe it will lead to the same result in our teaching workforce," said Matt Smith, the district's executive director of middle and high schools.

Bringing the broader community along is the tougher challenge, said Mr. Scott, who said that the district has lost some white, middle-class families to more-affluent neighboring districts.

"We can be deliberate with our staff and hiring members who meet the needs of the students of today, but it's much harder to change perceptions in the community," he said.

### **Poverty and Diversity**

As districts have become more racially and ethnically diverse, they've also become poorer.

That's certainly the case in Portland, Maine, where the **school district** of 7,000 students remains about 60 percent white, but is by far the state's most diverse, said David Galin, the chief academic officer. Four of its 10 elementary schools are now majority nonwhite, largely because of the city's recent history as a welcoming community for refugees. The shift started in the late 1980s, as a wave of Southeast Asian refugees moved in, followed more recently by communities arriving from Eastern European and Central African countries, Mr. Galin said.

"As we've become more and more diverse, our poverty rate has gone up," he said. "We're approaching 55 percent of our kids being eligible for free and reduced-price meals."

The schools in Portland with large numbers of diverse students who are low-income have really struggled with achievement, he said.

One challenge has been the nature of diversity in those schools' new majorities, with students who speak dozens of different home languages. Some students have had no schooling for years; others come with a solid educational experience that puts them ahead of their American peers in the content areas, even though they lack English.

Still, it's the cultural differences between students and their families, on the one hand, and the district's workforce, on the other, that remain particularly vexing, Mr. Galin said.

"We have the advantage of having a veteran teaching staff here, but a great majority of them are multigeneration Portlanders who went to schools in this community that look nothing like the ones they are presently teaching in," he said. "We've really had to work very hard at

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understanding the ideas of cultural differences as being a factor in education and in connecting with students."

At the same time, students from first- and second-generation immigrant families are more likely than their peers from non-immigrant families to have strengths such as parents who remain married and households where multiple generations of relatives may live, Mr. Fry of the Pew Research Center said.

"These children are more likely to live in intact, extended families," he said. "That's a positive for them and one that can be a counterbalance to poverty."

Mr. Galin sees those characteristics among his district's immigrant families as an asset that Portland educators are trying to harness.

"The desire to be in school is phenomenal," he said. "That drive to start anew is an enormous asset."

## New Faces, New Challenges, Your Thoughts

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This school year, America's schools are projected to reach a demographic milestone: For the first time, a majority of students in K-12 schools will be children of color.

**If this demographic transition has already occurred, or is occurring, in your school, we want to hear from you.**

Please send us stories, anecdotes, and reflections on how the new racial demographics are playing out in your schools and what these changes mean to you. Your input could be part of a future *Education Week* project on demographic changes in the nation's schools.

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