Diversity Study Finds Economic Disparities Rising In NC Schools

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DURHAM, N.C. -- The racial balance in North Carolina’s public schools has remained steady since 2005-06, ending a trend of growing disparity from the previous decade, but students are increasingly separated by income. These are among the findings of a comprehensive report from three Duke University public policy professors who studied whether schools in each of the state’s 100 counties mirror the racial and economic composition of that county as a whole.

"Although state-enforced school segregation is now a distant memory, significant disparities remain between schools, both racial and economic," said study co-author Charles Clotfelter. "These disparities are among the most pressing civil rights issues of our time."

"Racial and Economic Diversity in North Carolina’s Schools: An Update" highlights the important role played by public policies in shaping the diversity of school populations. Local districts can reduce disparities by merging city and county school districts and adopting student assignment plans that minimize economic disparities between schools, while state policymakers can take steps to limit the number of charter schools or ensure they have diverse student bodies, the report states.

Clotfelter, Helen Ladd and Jacob Vigdor, professors in Duke’s Sanford School of Public Policy and fellows at Duke’s Center for Child and Family Policy, updated their earlier research on the topic that was published in the NORTH CAROLINA LAW REVIEW (2003) and the VIRGINIA JOURNAL OF SOCIAL POLICY AND THE LAW (2008). Their latest report uses data from the 2011-12 school year and is available online. Charts showing the economic and racial disparity rankings of the state’s most populous counties are available in the executive summary.

"With the annual commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday on the horizon, we wanted to re-examine progress toward one of King’s goals -- equal access to a high-quality education for all students," said Clotfelter, author of the 2004 book "After Brown: The Rise and Retreat of School Desegregation."

Ladd noted that across some North Carolina counties, racial and economic imbalances in schools are large. "These disparities are important because research shows they can have negative educational consequences for students," she said.

Schools serving a disproportionately black, Hispanic or low-income student body tend to have teachers with weaker credentials than schools serving more advantaged students, according to the report. Teachers in these schools tend to have fewer years of teaching experience, degrees from less competitive colleges, fewer regular teaching licenses or National Board certification and lower scores on tests taken by teachers.

Other report findings include:

• Imbalance by economic status has increased steadily since 1994-95. This index measures disparities in the percentage of students eligible for free lunch across schools within each of the state’s 100 counties. Vance, Mecklenburg, Hyde, Forsyth and Bertie counties have the highest rates of economic imbalance, meaning school populations do not mirror the counties’ populations.

• Enrollment of Hispanic students in N.C. public schools grew from 1.5 percent in 1994-95 to 13.3 percent in 2011-12. Largely as a result of this growth, the proportion of students attending predominantly white schools (those at least 90 percent white) decreased from 9 percent of all students in 2005-06 to 4 percent in 2011-12.

• After increasing between 1994-95 and 2005-06, average white-nonwhite imbalance in the state’s public schools has remained stable. The study’s racial imbalance index assesses whether the racial makeup of schools mirrors the county’s population. • Racial imbalance is highest in Halifax County, followed by Davidson County. Both counties are served by three racially disparate school districts, a county-level district and two citywide districts. Mecklenburg, Alamance and Forsyth round out the top five most racially imbalanced counties. Each of these counties has one school district.
Public charter schools are much more likely than regular public schools to be racially unbalanced. Whereas 30 percent of regular public school students attended a racially unbalanced school (one with less than 20 percent or more than 80 percent minority enrollment), more than 60 percent of charter school students attended a racially unbalanced school. This measure considers the racial makeup within a particular school, rather than comparing the school to the county as a whole.

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