

# The new racial divide in Charlotte, N.C.



DAVIS TURNER FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Children from a newly segregated school in Charlotte, N.C., get extra tutoring at a Baptist church.

**The city was central to a landmark, 1971 U.S. Supreme Court decision that led to the desegregation of the nation's schools. But now, Charlotte's students are segregated once again, and non-white children are paying the price**

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. – Shamrock Gardens Elementary School, not far from Charlotte's downtown, is a pleasant looking place where the children appear industrious and happy. About 85 per cent are black and Hispanic, some 6 per cent are white, and the rest belong to other minority groups.

Only six years ago the school's white population was much larger – and there was a more representative balance among racial groups.

The same sign has been posted, here and there, by parents: "We Chose Shamrock," a statement of faith in their local school. The test scores for reading are good at Shamrock, but when the school is measured against the other 93 elementary schools in Charlotte, its

composite test results still rank in the lower third, which makes it less appealing to parents scouting for schools.

"This school has resegregated economically," says Pamela Grundy, a white woman and independent historian whose 7-year-old son, Parker, is in Grade 1. "Eighty-nine per cent of the children here get a free or reduced (fee) lunch, which means you are dirt poor.

"The tragedy is, there is a whole neighbourhood of wealthy folks over here who don't come, and who would make a tremendous difference if they did."

Across the United States, schools are resegregating – about two-thirds of black and Hispanic students in major cities now go to intensely segregated schools, according to a report last month from the Civil Rights Project, based at the University of California Los Angeles. Invariably, the mostly non-white schools are in the poorest neighbourhoods.

The numbers are sobering, and mark a dramatic reversal of the Civil Rights era. In 1960, only one in every 1,000 black students in the South attended a majority-white school. But with desegregation, that number had risen to 330 in 1970 and to 435 by 1988. The number in 2005: 270.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system was once hailed as a model of peaceful integration – a delegation of Charlotte students even went to Boston at the height of that city's 1970s desegregation turmoil to share the story of their success. But now it's in full-throttle reversal.

This trend was reinforced by a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1990s – and one as recent as last June – that limited school districts' ability to overcome racial inequality by saying, in effect, that students could not be assigned to schools on the basis of race. Instead of being bused to other schools to create a balance of black and white students, kids could go to schools in their own neighbourhoods.

Some see this as a resurrection of so-called separate but equal schools, where blacks end up going to local schools with a majority of black children, and whites with whites. But the split is also in academic and economic achievement.

Two examples: Providence High School in suburban Charlotte is 82-per-cent white and 7-per-cent black. Its test scores are the highest in the district. West Charlotte High School is 88-per-cent black and less than 2-per-cent white. Its test scores are lowest in the district.

Poor schools in Charlotte are less likely to have experienced teachers working their area of certification and have a higher rate of teacher turnover. Studies also show that students, both white and black, who attend racially balanced schools do better than those who attend racially isolated schools – research that is of interest as Toronto plans Canada's first Africentric school.

"Racially imbalanced minority schools with high concentrations of poverty are bad learning environments for all students," a recent study by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte found. "Importantly, poor children of colour are the most likely type of student to attend these schools."

But Carolyn Means, a senior administrator for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, says all-black schools can succeed with the right leadership. "You need a strong principal. If I was in Toronto, I would want to hand-pick the principal and vice-principal who are the best educators you have."

Charlotte, a business-oriented city of 700,000 in the south of the state, is home to seven of America's biggest corporations, including Bank of America. In fact, it's the country's second-largest banking centre, after New York City. It has a cluster of shimmering new downtown towers at its core and residential areas of beautifully restored Arts and Crafts-style houses and plain brick bungalows set among groves of pines. Manners and civility are prized; accents are thick as buttermilk.

In the 1970s, Charlotte's bankers bought into desegregation, says Carol Sawyer, an education activist. "It was a point of honour; they didn't want Charlotte to have a black eye."

"They were building the New South and wanted to show it could be done," adds Roslyn Mickelson, a sociologist from the University of North Carolina who has studied the local Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system. "They took their Christianity seriously, and it made good business sense. If you had race wars, people wouldn't want to relocate here."

But newcomers who arrived in the late 1980s and the 1990s didn't share the same values as the many veteran Charlotte residents who had worked so hard to achieve a measure of integration – about 60-per-cent white and 40-per-cent black. Progressive coalitions crumbled. "As people from outside Charlotte flooded in," continues Mickelson, "they didn't share the culture and values, the sense we'd lived through this and were going to make it work."

But some say this is looking at the past through a golden lens. "I was part of that era which a lot of people describe as friendly and inviting and welcoming," says Liz Downing, a white mother of three teenagers who has twice been a board of education candidate. "It was very difficult to go through that change. School was sometimes dangerous. You couldn't go down some hallways."

Downing, who works for an insurance company, supports the move to neighbourhood-based school assignment. "It's unfair to leave your area and lose potential neighbourhood and family support."

One of the failures of the desegregated system was that schools did not address the gaps in black student achievement, but were more likely to cover them over, she contends. "When Charlotte went back to a neighbourhood school plan, it was harsh, but it revealed

that the situation has not changed in 30 years. Children who are socio-economically disadvantaged have a harder time."

Sixteen years ago she moved close to Providence High School. "It was a calculated decision to be in this school. It was not racially motivated. It was more because of the achievement of the school."

But for many blacks, resegregation is a troubling trend. "We've gone backwards rather than forward," says a senior educator who asked not to be named. "I'd like to see us move away from it. As a city and a country, you don't grow if you have segregation."

It's a view shared by 18-year-old African-American Nykole Creighton, who now attends a majority-black school. While she's fond of the place, she thinks a balance between black and white students is ideal. "A lot of kids who go to all-African-American schools, they are more closed-minded and mentally can't grow."

Shanta Evan, also black and 18, is more blunt: "When you separate us, we don't know that much about the other race and that can cause problems. I don't think I could just sit there and look at my kind all day."

One of the complaints about busing children out of their own neighbourhoods to attend desegregated schools was the long ride. And it was often the black children who rode the longest.

Brumit Belton De Laine, known as B.B. and a man with a long history in the civil rights struggle, was glad his children could ride a bus to school. Son of a legendary South Carolina activist preacher, he sat in the hearings that became part of the landmark 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, in which the Supreme Court abolished the practice of sending blacks and whites to separate schools. And as a college student, he was among the first demonstrators against segregated lunch counters in Charlotte. He was also Charlotte's first black teacher at an all-white high school.

"I had classmates who walked four or five miles to school; in high school some walked 10 miles," recalls De Laine, 70, leaning forward in a rocker in the corner of his living room, in the house where his three children were raised. "So when people complain about putting their children on a bus across town, I'm not sympathetic."

Almost everyone agrees it was a cumbersome system, but busing was the only way to get any reasonable equality, says De Laine, who lives on nine acres in a semi-rural area.

But in 1999, federal court Judge Robert Potter ruled that the school system had eliminated "all vestiges of past discrimination" and no longer required mandatory busing for racial balance.

Now that children are assigned schools based largely on where they live, they are missing out on learning with kids from other racial and socio economic groups, De Laine

says. "It's not just being able to sit beside a white or black child; it's understanding, tolerating, getting along with people who are different. They learn from you and you learn from them. All children are losing out, but poor children are losing out more."

He calls this "a different kind of segregation, but just as oppressive and vicious as racial segregation."

De Laine goes back, for a moment, to 1969, when busing was not yet widespread in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system. Director of driver education for the board for 20 years, he was assigned to ride the buses with black children who were attending mostly white suburban schools, to make sure the trip went smoothly. The journey took them through downtown Charlotte, only a mile or so from their homes. "There were kids who had never seen the downtown Sears, Roebuck before. It blew my mind when they said, 'Look at that!' That tells you how small one's world can be when you live in certain neighbourhoods."

"You need a mix of children who have been exposed to everything so that one child can look at another and say, 'I can do that'," says Patsy Burkins. The 49-year-old runs an after-school enrichment program for about 40 children at her church, the First Baptist Church-West, the oldest black Baptist church in Charlotte but a sprawling modern building with lots of spacious rooms. "I'm talking about those middle-class things – if we didn't do it here, most of these kids would not be exposed to piano and violin."

She sees the danger in having schools full of poor children. "You're ghettoizing them. We went to school with doctors' kids, and middle-income people and people who were struggling. If you have poor people together, it's segregation of a different stripe, and don't be surprised if things don't get better."

At the same time, she adds, she has sent her own 15-year-old daughter, who developed a taste for grunge music and wearing all-black clothes while attending a more integrated school, to a majority-black institution.

"I saw her being not very comfortable with her own people. I had to do the reverse. We also have to be careful, we don't so diversify, they forget their own culture."

Still, says Burkins, because of her daughter's mixed-school experience, "my child is so diverse. She sees the world differently. She sees people as people."

Walk through the doors of storied West Charlotte High, and there's every chance during your visit you'll be swept up in the wide embrace of Mabel Latimer, class of '52. She graduated from West Charlotte when it was an all-black school, and where she never once had a new textbook. She watched it become what people in Charlotte called the jewel of the desegregated school system in the '70s and sadly observed its decline through the '90s – and later when a federal court judge formally brought an end to mandatory busing.

Latimer had volunteered at the school for eight years before she was hired in 2005 as assistant to the new principal, John Modest, brought in to fix the broken school. "We had five principals in five years up to 2005 – some didn't stay a year," says Latimer, who with frosted short hair and silvery nails is a youthful 73 and is valued as what Modest calls a "grandmother figure" by the students.

Today, West Charlotte, a series of well-cared-for, low-storey buildings, is almost all black. Test results show only 45 per cent have passed state exams. Its poverty rate, which is measured by the number of students who qualify for a free or reduced fee lunch program, is 75 per cent.

Modest, a polished man wearing a light suit, says he is focused on education, not on the political skirmishes around Charlotte's resegregation. After he set benchmark standards for his teaching staff, 20 teachers resigned. Now, 30 per cent of the staff have less than one year of classroom experience. But on the upside, there's been a 12-per-cent increase in test scores.

Still, it's a far cry from the school's 1970s heyday. Back then, wealthy and influential white families agreed that if all races worked together, something beautiful could be achieved at West Charlotte, where black and white students were about evenly numbered. Half of the teachers had advanced degrees, and the dropout rate was 4 per cent, Frye Gaillard reports in his book on desegregation, *The Dream Long Deferred*.

But José Hernández-París, who arrived as a 13-year-old from Colombia in 1977, says his time at West Charlotte was about more than school achievement. "The system wasn't perfect, but it was the right one. I went to two high schools and three middle schools to make sure there was a racial balance. Sometimes I had to get up at 5 a.m. to get to schools on the other side of town."

He learned from his classmates in more established families, recalls Hernández-París, now the diversity specialist for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. "I learned about life, about success. I learned skills from other students. They had more affluent parents who taught them how to manage finances and manage relationships. I learned from African-American students about differences in equality.

"It's more than your test scores in math and English – that alone is not education. Education requires exposure to historical influences in the world, to cultural patterns, how science works, not only how it's tested."

Not far from West Charlotte High, about two dozen people gather for the Tuesday-morning breakfast forum, a weekly meeting to discuss community issues. They are blacks and whites, business folk and activists who display a mutual respect that comes from years of co-operating with each other. This Tuesday, two young black men from a group called GenerationEngage are speaking of the need to bring those they describe as the "post-civil rights generation" into the political and civic debate. But education is not far from people's minds. Lucy Bush Carter speaks up to say one of the presenters, an

articulate young African-American, is a product of the former system in Charlotte schools, which ensured a racial, economic and geographic balance of kids. "He's a poster child for that and it's gone, and I don't understand why the community gave up on that style of education because it worked."

After the forum, some retired black men say integration never really happened in local schools. One of them calls it "mixed" education. "But it worked better than what we have now," says Malachi Greene, 65. "You cannot concentrate underprivileged people in one area and expect them to do better."