

An American Profile: Trends and Issues in the 80s

Migrations to the Sun Belt, exodus from urban areas, the aging of baby boom children, and single-parent families are significantly altering the needs and priorities of America's schools.

Although final comprehensive population statistics of the 1980 census have not been released, current reports indicate directions of change for Americans. Educators in particular need to focus on the emerging trends and issues suggested by current census data. They also need to begin to make immediate and long-range plans that seem likely to serve the needs of individual learners and of society. Following are some of the factors and questions that will bear most heavily on those plans.¹

The growth of the 65 and older population will be little short of spectacular between now and the end of the century. Census projections indicate this group of senior learners will double between 1976 and 2020, topping out at approximately 45 million. Although the rate of increase in the 65 and over population will decline between 1990 and 2010, after 2010, baby boomlets of post World War II will swell the senior citizen population.

Educators must begin now to consider how older learners are portrayed in the curriculum. Are they acknowledged in our textbooks, media, and classroom discussions? Equipping today's youth with positive attitudes toward older Americans is an important and often neglected educational goal.

Patently, one of the issues and chal-

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lenges of the next several decades is how education may best respond to the needs of mature learners. Educational experiences will be needed in retirement villages, shopping centers, parks, and recreation centers. Since computer networks will proliferate among seniors, their social and educational opportunities will expand.

Whose role will it be to finance education for lifelong learning? Will the young want to support the heavy financial commitment for a population that will likely outnumber them substantially and who may be competing with them for part-time jobs? Will older learners be able to finance their own way? The extent to which the public will support education for all levels is questionable.

Migrations to the Sun Belt are creating dramatic shifts in population. The Northeast and North Central states are losing population; at the same time, the South and the West have been growing substantially more rapidly than the national average. The states that have shown the largest population increases include Florida and Texas, California, Arizona, Colorado, Virginia, Georgia, North Carolina, and Washington.

Heated issues about the shifting population have brought demands for population recounts, and suggestions that the government should assist persons in relocating to areas where jobs are more plentiful. Consider the potentially volatile issues: Is there an attempt to shift

welfare cases from one state to another? If economic conditions are so much better in other localities, why do they have welfare rolls too? What about those people moving to other localities—are they unskilled, unemployable, or highly skilled with salable qualities? How will large in-migration affect an area's quality of life? What are our obligations to our declining industrialized cities? What will happen to the cities when their youth, their future, leave for hope of a promised land?

While tax revenues and federal monies decrease in areas of population decline, areas of population growth will experience increased revenues. However, this does not mean the booming Sun Belt will consequently have excess funds. Since census data show interstate migration is most common among the young, they are likely to bring needs for post-secondary training, school buildings and equipment, teachers, infant-toddler programs, and day care. Concomitant with increased revenue will come increased needs that will swiftly deplete monies and generate issues that schools must consider in establishing priorities.

With mobility comes a degree of instability in life, at least temporarily. Because Americans are demanding decreased taxes, it is unlikely that more money will be directed toward assimilating newcomers into school systems. However, persons who are helped to quickly lower roots and adapt to a new environment settle into the school community more quickly and perform more

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effectively. Possibly schools could begin to involve mature learners in this role. This would be a precursor to a time when mature learners will proliferate and opportunities for their services will need to be found. What can and should the school's role be in an age of transition?

Hispanic population will likely outnumber blacks. Moderate estimates by the Bureau of the Census place the Hispanic population in the United States at well over 12 million and multiplying quickly (estimates exclude substantial numbers of undocumented Mexicans). If present trends persist, the mushrooming Hispanic population will outnumber blacks as the largest minority group by 1990. Hispanics will be vying with blacks for jobs and making inroads into jobs now held by blacks.

The leaping Hispanic population will also bring increased business to school systems where they settle. Those districts will face a range of needs: the need to have teachers fluent in Spanish; the need to provide media in Spanish to inform persons of the school and community; the need for young single-parent mothers to meet educational requirements for high school graduation and their need for child care arrangements during this period; and the need to stress foreign languages, especially Spanish, in the curriculum.

Cultural differences, too, must be considered. For example, one school system in Florida discovered Cuban refugee children did not drink milk because they thought it smelled and tasted strangely. In Cuba milk is rationed after children are seven; therefore, its taste was foreign. After adding chocolate or sugar, children readily drank it. How to effectively meet cultural needs and how well Hispanics are integrated into the mainstream of American life will be a factor in determining our cohesiveness as a nation.

Concurrent with migration from regions of the nation is a hastening flight from metropolitan areas. Within the last four years, over six million people over four years of age have moved to a nonmetropolitan area. Although cities have continued to grow, a more rapid annual rate of population increase occurred in nonmetropolitan areas. As predicted, central cities lost population and suburbs gained; more blacks are now moving to the suburbs, and blacks are now 6 percent of the suburban population, but most blacks continue to live in central cities. Hispanics as well as

single men and women most frequently reside in central cities, too. If such trends continue, will society be more segregated by 2000 or will there be ways to bring diverse groups together without physical proximity? Possibly technology will provide the means for achieving this via computer, holography, or other developments.

Just as Americans are shifting from one geographic region to another, they are also shifting family composition. Unprecedented numbers of single-parent families are evolving primarily because of divorce. During the 70s two-parent families plummeted by 1 million, or 4 percent, while one-parent families climbed by 2.6 million, or 79 percent.

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At the close of the decade, the number of divorces (1,170,000) was approximately half the number of marriages (2,317,000).

Since divorce is most likely to occur during the first seven years of marriage, elementary school age children are usually involved. At a time when divorce can so acutely affect a child's life, elementary schools are often understaffed with counselors. In addition, since projections indicate that almost half of the children born today will spend part of their life in a single-parent family, issues they face should become primary factors for educators to consider in curriculum development. While single fathers maintaining households represent only approximately 2 percent of families, their ranks are growing. During the 70s, census data show, single fathers maintaining households swelled by 65

percent. Single parents, especially fathers, have expressed difficulty in parent-teacher relationships (Long, 1978) and have suggested a need to close this communication gap. Have fathers been provided meaningful opportunities for school involvement or are school opportunities too women-oriented? Involvement of single fathers needs attention.

Legal issues emerge concerning “child snatching” from school grounds; rights of noncustodial parents to attend conferences and to view student records. Single parents object to the lack of media that portray a realistic image of single parents and their children.

Because record-breaking numbers of mothers entered the work force in the 70s, quality of life for millions of children in the 80s will be affected. In two-parent families, 56 percent of all children between 14 and 17 years, 50 percent of the 6- to 13-year-olds, and 39 percent of children under age 6 have working mothers. These percentages are much greater in single-parent families.

During the 70s, 59 percent of the increase in the labor force occurred among women, especially among married women with preschool age children—43 percent in the labor force in 1979 compared with 19 percent in 1960. With this increase, renewed cries for quality day care and after-school care will be heard; issues have also risen about whose role it should be to provide child care. Infant and toddler care as well as home day care will expand to meet critical needs. Issues pertaining to establishing and maintaining well-developed programs and rehiring of well-trained personnel will merit even closer scrutiny as more young children are provided services. Characteristics of quality care must be recognized by parents and by educators. Retraining or in-service training of personnel must be provided; partnerships will be formed between business and educators to provide quality child care in business settings. Child services will be provided in apartment complexes, shopping areas, and other environs with large concentrations of working mothers.

The 1980 Census will confirm bounding increases in nursery school and college level enrollment. It will also show a decline in elementary school enrollment (20 percent since 1970), which is the result of fewer births in the 1960s and 1970s. Although the number of 3- and 4-year-olds decreased by approximately 18 percent in the 70s, nursery school enrollment increased by 71 percent, a re-



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sult of the increasing recognition of the worth of preschool education, the presence of more young mothers in the work force, and the increased educational level of today's parents. It is noteworthy that preschool group enrollment was almost exclusively in private schools.

U.S. census projections place the 1990 preschool population at approximately 23.3 million or 37 percent more than in 1978. About 10.5 million in this group are estimated to have mothers in the labor force—50 percent over 1978. With the decline in teacher education, will the preschool need be met with trained preschool personnel or will the preschool become staffed with teachers trained for junior high school? Not only will there need to be teachers with four-year degrees but there will also need to be teachers with intensive early childhood training in two-year programs. Do university programs have the vision to anticipate and meet this need?

While the preschool population provides bright labor possibilities for educators, so does the college level enrollment (35 percent increase). Not only do women outnumber male college students less than 20 years of age, but also among students 35 years old and over, almost twice as many are women.

While full-time enrollments declined, part-time enrollments swelled during the 70s.

Part-time enrollments reflect a growing nontraditional approach to campus life that generates new facets in educational curriculum planning. Major increases in women students over 25 necessitate innovative approaches to learning. Substantial portions represent persons with four-year degrees who return for training in new areas or for enrichment. Many part-time students attending urban campuses are employed; so they must budget their time among work, studies, and commuting. Many remain single while attending college and establishing themselves in a career. Others are single parents who enroll to sharpen skills, especially when they are re-entering the labor force after divorce.

While the number of births decreased in the 70s, the number of live births is beginning to inch upward again. Although the annual total fertility rate reached a record low in 1976, live births increased 9.5 percent between 1976 and 1979. Women are currently having an average of 1.8 children, which is less than in earlier decades. Many demographers think the rise in births will con-

tinue, if economic conditions improve.

Shaping Change for the 80s

Trends in American society are forming the foundation for change and for decisions in the 80s. These societal trends and analyses create a profile of the American people and reflect clues as to the nature and the degree of change in our lives. Educators may employ these trends to focus the future and to direct it toward a meaningful and productive tomorrow. ■

¹Data cited in this article were obtained from the U.S. Bureau of the Census in *Current Population Reports, 1979-1981*.

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