

The Right Schools for the Right Kids

An aging white population, increasing minorities, and poverty among the young point to crucial new responsibilities for education

Photograph Courtesy Southern Coalition for Educational Equity



Today's very young children illustrate cultural, ethnic, and behavioral diversity that Hodgkinson calls a "new order of pluralism."

		1970	1982	Percent Change
U.S. Total	K-12	45,909,000	39,643,000	-14
	9-12	13,332,000	12,501,000	-6
	K-8	32,577,000	27,143,000	-17
Maryland	K-12	916,000	699,000	-24
	9-12	252,000	237,000	-6
	K-8	664,000	462,000	-30
Arizona	K-12	440,000	510,000	+16
	9-12	126,000	151,000	+20
	K-8	314,000	359,000	+14

Fig. 1. School Enrollment Trends
(*The Condition of Education*, p. 16)

Students who will be taught in schools of the future will be drastically different from students today, with a greater variety of backgrounds, languages, values, and abilities than ever before. If we want a picture of those students, we must look at major demographic changes in the U.S. Called "the celestial mechanics of the social sciences" by Kenneth Boulding (1984), demographic projections are better predictors than most. For example, the elementary school population of a state is one of the best predictors of its future adult population, because kids all have a common tendency: they grow up. By doing so, they become the adult population of that state, if we disregard in- and out-migration. To be specific, a majority of today's California elementary school students are minorities; therefore, we can predict a "minority majority" in California adults by 2010.

Let's look at demographic projections in terms of five major concepts: fertility, age, region, race, and immigration. Later we will pull this information together to look at the implications for tomorrow's schools.

One of the simplest yet most effective demographic ideas is that those people who have more children will be overrepresented in the next generation; those who have fewer children will be underrepresented. All NATO nations have had major declines in birthrates in the last decade. As a result, "The West," which was 30 percent of the world's population in 1900,

is 14 percent today, moving down to 9 percent by 2010. The current world population of 5 billion is only 18 percent white, and declining, as 9 of every 10 children born in the world are born in a developing nation.

Fertility

In this context, fertility behavior in the U.S. may be more understandable. Generally, in order for a population to be stable, women must produce 2.1 children each, 2 to replace mom and dad and .1 to cover infant mortality. Currently in the U.S., Mexican-Americans produce 2.9 children per female; blacks, 2.4; Puerto Ricans, 2.1; whites, 1.7; Cubans, 1.3.

The "Baby Boomlet" (children produced by the 70 million Baby Boomers) has been a true fizzle, as many Baby Boomers are deferring marriage and family decisions into their late 30s. Today 50 million women are having fewer children than 33 million women did during the Baby Boom. Why? First, we have an epidemic of singles of marriageable age, and single people living alone do not produce many children. Second, there are millions of marriages in which one of the marriage vows was *not* to have children. Third, a majority of women are in the workforce; and because the number of children they expect to have (a pretty good predictor) has declined from 4 kids per female to under 2, it is unlikely that women will give up paid employment, return to the hearth in

droves, and find their life mission in the production of children.

Nevertheless, because of the huge number of women of child-bearing age, there has been a small increase in births over the last six years, which is producing uneven increases in early elementary school enrollments. (A decline in number of births occurred in 1986.)

These increases are not distributed evenly across the U.S. From 1980-84, kids under 5 years of age increased 9 percent nationally—17 percent in the West, 11 percent in the South, 5 percent in the Northeast, and only 2 percent in the Midwest. Seventy-three percent of the increase in kids aged 1-6 occurred in only five states—Texas, California, Florida, North Carolina, and Arizona—each with a very large minority birthrate.

Families with a working father, a housewife mother, and two school-age kids now constitute only 7 percent of U.S. households. It is unclear what would be necessary to cause white birthrates to go up again and the family of the Norman Rockwell paintings to re-emerge.

A second major fertility trend is seen in the increasing number of children raised by single parents, overwhelmingly women, many with no major job skills and no access to training. Indeed, the "new poverty" among youth is primarily the result of having a single parent. Currently, 24 percent of all kids and 17 percent of school-age kids live below the poverty line.

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The chances of a child's being poor are six times greater than those of an elderly person. Most poor kids are white; the highest *percentage* of poor kids is black. Furthermore, the social factors that encourage the production of children in poverty are very difficult to change.

A third trend is the increased production and/or diagnosis of children with physical and emotional handicaps. First, the increased use of mainstreaming is now producing an increase in handicapped students in high schools and colleges. Second, medical advances allow severely premature babies to survive, even though there is a 30 percent chance of permanent damage that will inhibit learning. Third, increased family instability probably increases the occurrence of emotional problems.

These increases have become spectacularly visible because of one phenomenon: the dramatic decline in fertility among the white middle class. Although this decline was not mentioned in all the 40 or so commission reports on the status of public education, it explains more of what is going on than anything else. If white birthrates were still at 2.9 children per female, as they were during the Baby Boom, there would be no proportionate increase in minority children, except through immigration.

Age

Our country is aging rapidly. Thirty-four thousand citizens are over 100 years of age; 2.2 million are over 85 (and half of them voted in the 1984 Presidential election); and 24 million are over 65. In fact, the most rapidly growing age group in America is people over 85.

We are now approaching parity regarding youth and aged dependents. In 1983, we crossed a major watershed: we had, for the first time, more people over 65 than we had teenagers. This will be true as long as you live. The consequences for education will be momentous. Dependent youth need expensive educational services; dependent elderly need expensive medical services. Since 65-year-olds

have completed their own education and that of their children, their interest in educational issues will have little to do with their own perceived self-interests. In a conflict over resources, how would HeadStart, for example, fare in competition with medical care for the elderly?

Shortly after the year 2000, 70 million Baby Boomers will begin to retire, with their retirement benefits provided by a much smaller generation of workers. We have gone from 17 workers paying the benefits for each retiree to 3.4 workers per retiree; and the number will decline further when the Baby Boom retires.

Region

Different parts of our country are becoming more unlike, in important ways. For example, suppose we were reviewing school enrollments as a factor in considering federal education policies that would have equal value in various states. Figure 1 presents enrollment data for Maryland, Arizona, and the United States.

With heavy losses in Maryland contrasting strong gains in Arizona, it is clear that a policy that benefits Arizona may well be questionable in Maryland. National views can mask regional differences, regional views can mask state differences, and state views can conceal large county and community differences. When making decisions about schools, it is important to use pertinent data.

Different regions of the country reflect very different population densities. The Eastern time zone contains 50 percent of our 241 million people. The Central zone has 30 percent. The Mountain zone has only 5 percent of the people, although it gets a lot of media coverage for "growth." The Western zone contains 15 percent of the people, heavily concentrated in California. When we read of the population "explosion" of 36 percent in Wyoming, we need to remember that the actual number of new people is about what you'd find in a single city block in Newark. We continue to be a nation dominated by Eastern and Midwestern regional values and densities.

	State	Percent
Top Ten		
1	Minnesota	86.0
2	North Dakota	84.9
3	Iowa	84.8
4	South Dakota	82.8
5	Wisconsin	82.3
6	Nebraska	81.3
7	Montana	80.9
8	Kansas	80.5
9	Utah	80.2
10	Wyoming	80.0
Bottom Ten		
41	California	68.0
42	Kentucky	67.3
43	Alabama	67.1
44	North Carolina	67.1
45	Tennessee	66.7
46	New York	65.9
47	Georgia	64.3
48	Florida	63.7
49	Louisiana	63.4
50	Mississippi	61.8

Fig. 2. High School Retention Rates
All State Systems, p. 111

Regions with unused school capacity, mostly the Midwest and parts of the Northeast, also have very rapidly increasing elderly populations, especially the Midwest. This combination suggests the possibility of converting school plants to other community uses, with the option of converting these sites back to schools should the need arise. "Community holding companies" allow municipalities to maintain properties while altering their use, a much cheaper arrangement than selling them and then rebuilding them in a decade. Given that we will need to build an enormous number of facilities for the elderly, if we cannot convert existing buildings, this strategy might help to avoid the possible War Between the Generations, especially in the Midwest. However, many areas will need more elementary schools and elderly facilities simultaneously!

We also need to see how regions affect educational performance. If we look at the states with the highest levels of retention of youth to high school graduation compared with those with the lowest, interesting patterns appear (see fig. 2).

Does this mean that the top ten states have better teachers, more money per student, and the like? Definitely not. It does mean that they have small cities and towns, few ghettos, and little ethnic diversity. They tend to have small schools and small classes, which may also account for better retention. And because most of the high retention states are in the Midwest, an area of very low fertility, their influence on the national scene will diminish in years to come. States with the lowest retention share another characteristic: very high poverty levels. Poverty is a better predictor of student achievement than race.

Race and Immigration

It is important to consider these two categories together, as immigration is one of the major routes through which minorities are increasing their presence in the nation. In the 1920s, we had about 14 million immigrants in

the U.S., virtually all from Europe. In the 1980s, we have more than 14 million immigrants; and 80 percent of them are from South America and Asia.

The new immigrants represent an amazing diversity. Some have no formal education, while one out of three adult Asian immigrants has a college degree. Cultural diversity within ethnic groups is also vast—our handy use of *Asian-American* ignores the conflicts between Korean and Japanese, just as *Hispanic* glosses over the problems of Puerto Ricans and Chicanos working together. Our educational system—all of it—will have to learn to work with these new pluralities.

Immigration represents a major portion of the change in youth numbers. Without immigration, our overall population would not have advanced during the last decade. It is likely that immigration will continue in the next few years at a high level, as long as repression continues in Asia and South America. And remember that two-thirds of the world's immigrants today are coming to the United States.

1986 may go down in history as the year in which we discovered minority middle classes. Previously, *black* meant *poor* almost automatically. Today many blacks have moved to the suburbs, own their own homes, and have income levels unheard of in the 1950s. The social programs of the '60s have been roundly criticized because poverty still exists, but the fact is they accomplished their mission: the bright and energetic have been able to leave the ghettos. Of course, the remainder are a formidable challenge to our educational system.

It is important to note the large and increasing black and Hispanic middle classes, because children from these homes perform like white middle class children. There is still much work to do in the equity area; but now we know that, given the opportunity, youth from every ethnic background can realize their potential. However, we can speculate that even in non-white groups, increased wealth may lower birth rates.

"We need all the middle class members we can get—white, black, Hispanic, and Asian. The school role in making this happen will be crucial."

Ethnic Group	Percent
Finishing High School	
Japanese	96
Chinese	90
Filipino	89
Korean-Indian	94
Vietnamese	76
White	67
Black	74
Attending College	
Chinese	60
Japanese	48
Vietnamese	42
Korean	40
Filipino	27

Fig. 3. Graduation and College Attendance Rates

Hispanics, blacks, and Asian Americans are using the two classic paths to "making it" in America: developing small businesses and entering politics. Hispanics are now a major market, consuming about \$70 billion a year, with 30,000 members of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. There are 286 black mayors in America today. And in California, the average Asian American household has more income than the average non-Latino Caucasian.

In the earlier immigration waves, Jewish children were the ones who worked harder and did better in school and college. Today Asian Americans have become the "new Jews." Their educational participation and success rates are phenomenal, particularly in math and science. Even in New York, an area not growing as rapidly as California in its Asian populations, enrollment at prestigious Peter Stuyvesant High School was more than 30 percent Asian American last year. (Already we hear of "quotas" on Asians in college, as was true for Jewish students in the '60s.)

For the country as a whole, the Population Reference Bureau reported high school completion rates as of 1985 (see fig. 3).

The college teachers of tomorrow will be recruited from the graduate students of today; and with black and Hispanic college-going rates declining, that means whites and Asian-Americans. Black participation in graduate school study is declining, and Hispanic rates were always very low. Graduate work in arts and sciences is seen by many minorities as a "white person's toy," not designed to get one quickly into either wealth or high status. Unfortunately, too, neither black, Asian, nor Hispanic students have seen public school teaching as an appealing career, as the percentage of minority school teachers drops from 12 to 9 percent.

One route to upward mobility for blacks is military service, particularly the Army. In 1982, there were 76 black generals and admirals, almost all of them generals. For talented black leaders, the Army has provided a path to real leadership unmatched by academe and corporate life. Also, the Army has increased its share of college eligible high school graduates and plans to do even better. We in educa-

"When students are scarce, we need them all to do well."

tion need to take the services more seriously as collaborators and as competitors.

One for All, All for One, Economically Speaking

We can't plan schools for tomorrow without thinking hard about the kids we're planning for. Putting together what we know about fertility, age, race, and immigration will give us a clear view of the youngsters we will have in school and a clear sense of what we need to accomplish with them.

First, if we add immigration figures to birthrate data—14 million immigrants in the U.S., 80 percent from South America and Asia—we come to a clear conclusion: the future of the U.S., its youth, will be steadily more Asian, more Hispanic (but not Cuban), slightly more black, and less white. Shortly after the year 2000, we will become a nation in which one of every three persons is nonwhite. There will be great economic and political strength in the black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans. (And what do we call minorities when they are more than half the population of a city or state?)

Second, the average white in America today is 31, the average black is 25, and the average Hispanic is about 22. In the future, the white population will continue to increase its average age compared to minorities, leading to a situation in which an aging white workforce will be dependent upon an increasingly minority workforce to pay their social security bills. (Eighty-three percent of the 20 million new workers

between now and 2000 will be a combination of women, minorities, and immigrants.)

Next, what is coming toward the public schools is a major new set of challenges in terms of three student characteristics: (1) poverty, (2) non-English speaking, and (3) physical and emotional handicaps. In addition, the cultural, ethnic, and behavioral diversity of today's very young children represents a new order of pluralism. Yet our present concern seems to be to tighten standards for educational outcomes, without providing the resources to ensure every child a reasonable chance of attaining these standards.

All the national commissions are telling the schools to pick winners, but we need the schools to create winners. There is a big difference between picking and developing winners. This is precisely the wrong time, demographically, to push for schools as selecting and rejecting devices. Further, we need all the middle class members we can get—white, black, Hispanic, and Asian. The school role in making this happen will be crucial.

The conclusion is clear: in a time of decreasing white middle class fertility and increasing minority enrollments, we need to make sure that every kid succeeds in school. When students are plentiful, we can just pick the best. But when students are scarce, we need them all to do well. They are too important to fail. □

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Harold Hodgkinson is Senior Fellow, American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, Washington, DC 20036.

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