

Still Separate After All These Years

Despite efforts to integrate, Illinois remains home to some of the most segregated schools in the country.

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The buses keep coming. On a brisk autumn day, one after another pulls up next to the grandstand to let out dozens of students. The kids walk in bunches past the flagpole. A metal sign near the main entrance, glinting in the sun, reads, “Dunlap High School.”

The high school may not look it, but it’s something of an oddity. It’s a typical suburban-style school in a country setting, framed by rolling hills and cornfields. Its enrollment of 1,300 students nearly equals the population of Dunlap, Ill., itself. But the vast majority of its students are not from Dunlap. They’re from Peoria.

The city of Peoria has its own school district, a chronically troubled system with a declining enrollment that serves mostly black students. About 70 percent are low-income. White families have been avoiding the troubles of the inner-city school district by moving to the northern part of town, where they can send their kids to Dunlap instead. As a result, Dunlap’s school system is booming. The number of students enrolled has nearly doubled since the 2002-2003 school year. Nearly two-thirds of Dunlap’s students are white; only 7 percent are black. The Dunlap School District isn’t shy about its enviable position. Until recently, the high school’s website made that clear in bold lettering at the top of its profile page: “The high school graduation rate is 90 percent, and the low-income rate is 10 percent.” (Dunlap school officials removed the [page](#) in October, after *Governing* reporters asked about it.)

The Peoria area, in fact, has the most segregated public schools among black and white students of any metropolitan area in the nation, according to a [Governing analysis](#) of federal enrollment data. The region’s schools are more divided by race than those in metropolitan Boston, Detroit or Little Rock, all of which have been major battlegrounds in fights over school integration. “It’s been a problem for Peoria for some time that we’ve had these two school systems,” says state Sen. Dave Koehler, a white Democrat from Peoria. “It’s pretty widely known that the code word for the families moving into Peoria ... was that when you saw ‘Dunlap schools,’ that meant ‘a white school system.’”

While the Peoria area stands out, school segregation across metro areas is prevalent throughout Illinois. Eight of the state’s 10 metros [ranked](#) among the highest third nationally for black-white school segregation, when considering all metro areas in the country with at least 2,000 black students. And as the Dunlap example shows, segregation in schools doesn’t just occur because of the neighborhoods they are in. The schools themselves can also be a big reason why the neighborhoods in a metro area are so segregated.

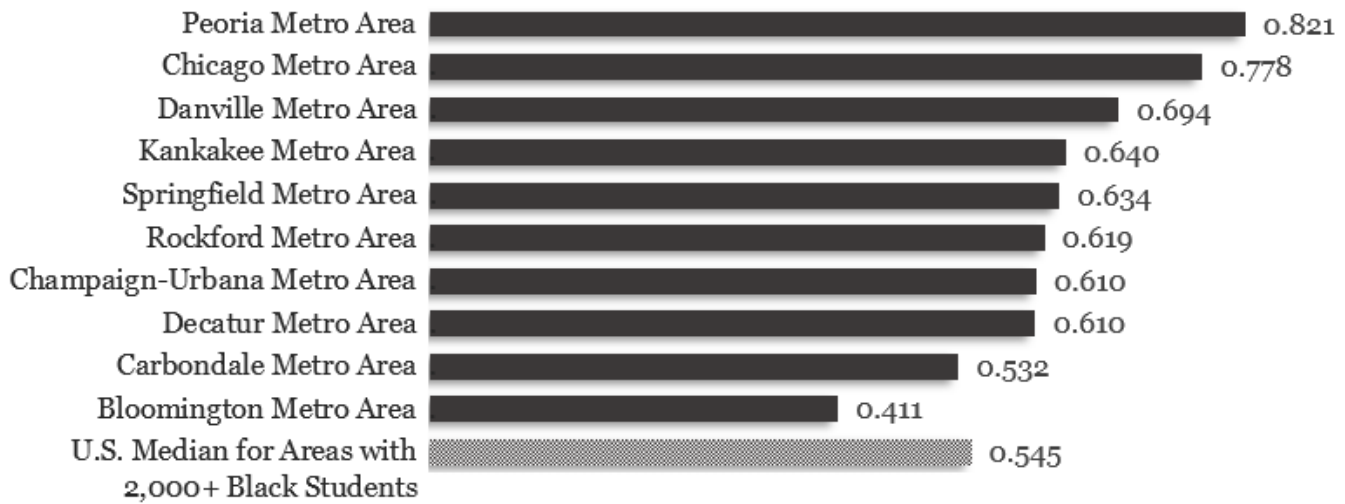
Those are among the findings of a [six-month Governing investigation](#) into segregation in Illinois. The examination focused on the metro areas of Bloomington-Normal, Champaign-Urbana, Decatur, Peoria, Rockford and Springfield -- all places outside the orbit of Chicago or St. Louis with similar-size populations in their urban cores. That investigation found that white flight and growing black populations are drastically changing the student makeup of school districts in midsize cities as well as larger ones. Just 15 years ago, the school districts in Bloomington, Champaign, Decatur, Springfield and Urbana had majority-white student bodies. Now none of them do, despite being majority-white cities.

The investigation also found that segregation within school districts -- the type that can set off heated legal battles over busing or school choice -- is less stark even in highly segregated cities such as Peoria than the segregation that occurs across metropolitan areas. Furthermore, a major obstacle to integration in Illinois is the state’s highly fractured system of school districts. It has about 850 districts, more than any state other than California or Texas.

The U.S. Supreme Court upended the nation’s educational and legal systems in 1954 when it ruled that “separate but equal” school systems for black and white students were unconstitutional. Six decades later, the ideal of racially integrated schools remains elusive. That is due to local opposition, societal shifts and several of the court’s later decisions, which limited the scope of desegregation efforts. A 1970s [U.S. Supreme Court decision](#), for example, makes it nearly impossible for courts to order desegregation plans that address metropolitan, rather than city, disparities. To integrate schools across district lines, the court held, judges must find the districts were drawn with racist intent. The differences between one district and the next can be dramatic: In Peoria’s school district, only 36 percent of high school graduates in 2016-2017 were prepared to do college work. In Dunlap schools, 79 percent were prepared.

Sociologists use a common measure called a “dissimilarity index” to assess the extent of school integration. It determines the percentage of white students who would have to attend predominantly black schools for the black-white ratio to match the black-white ratio for the area as a whole. It’s by this measure that Peoria -- when all schools across the metropolitan area are considered -- is the most segregated in the country.

Black-White School Dissimilarity Index for Illinois Metro Areas



NOTE: Dissimilarity index of 1 represents high segregation, 0 represents no segregation.

SOURCE: Governing [analysis](#) of enrollment data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 Common Core of Data

Looking at the entire metropolitan area is a way to reveal how racial segregation is occurring. Focusing on individual school districts can be helpful in some cases, but in a state with as many districts as Illinois, it can mask the severity of the problem. For example, Chicago Public Schools has twice the rate of segregation within its own boundaries as Peoria’s. Indeed, the school districts in the Peoria area generally don’t have high levels of segregation within their own borders. But that’s because the school district borders often also follow racial demarcation lines. What matters most is the disparity among neighboring districts.

Take, for example, two grade schools three blocks away from each other in the Peoria area. On the west side of Knoxville Avenue is Hines Primary School, where just over half of the students are black. Just a few blocks east is Peoria Heights Grade School, which is part of another school district and is two-thirds white.

The far-flung villages in the countryside, such as Dunlap, are booming, primarily by attracting white residents. Their schools reflect this. The Central School District in the town of Washington, on the other side of the Illinois River from Peoria, is actually growing faster than the one in Dunlap; it has more than doubled its student population in the last 15 years. The boom has brought some diversity to the school district, but not much. It has gone from 99 percent to 90 percent white.

Growth like this is especially notable at a time when many school districts are losing students. The core city districts are losing students fastest of all. The Champaign and Urbana school districts, for example, both lost a third of their white students in the last 15 years, but the rest of the metropolitan area in which they are located lost only 11 percent.

The Courts Thwart Desegregation

The Champaign school district takes in not only the city it's named for, but also vast swaths of farmland surrounding it. That means it, unlike Peoria, can theoretically harness the growth in the outlying areas to improve its services in the older parts of town. It has tried to do this, although the effort has been complicated by white flight.

The line dividing blacks from whites in Champaign, while it can be a bit porous, has been and continues to be University Avenue. Black families and black majority schools lie to the north of University, and white families and white majority schools to the south. In the 1940s, black children on the North End were sent to either the cramped Willard School or Lawhead School. White kids in the area were assigned to the all-white Columbia School. The district built a bigger facility, called Booker T. Washington Elementary School, to replace Lawhead in 1952; it became a magnet school during the 1960s in an effort to try to entice white students to the North End. By and large, though, the district remained divided by geography and race.

It took decades and a lawsuit filed against the school system by families and local black activists to alter this arrangement. In 1997, Champaign's school district agreed to a plan under which geography no longer determined the schools that students attended. Instead, families submitted their top elementary school choices, and the district used those choices and the racial balance of each school to determine where students were assigned.

One of the goals of the plan, and a subsequent consent decree that incorporated the plan, was to make sure no schools became "racially identifiable." That is, all the schools would have to have their black and white student populations within 15 percentage points of the district's overall makeup.

Stratton Elementary School, built in 1998 in the North End, has been at the center of those efforts. In the 2002 consent decree, a federal judge designated Stratton as "a special desegregation school": Its students were 68 percent black, and even many black families in the neighborhood chose to send their children elsewhere. The school district agreed to spend more money on the school, keep its student-to-teacher ratio below 20 to 1 and launch a special recruiting campaign for the school. The initial results were promising. By 2009, 44 percent of Stratton's students were black, and 27 percent were white.

But in 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court **found** that assignment schemes used by schools in Louisville, Ky., and Seattle were unconstitutional, because they, like Champaign, used race as a factor in assigning students to schools. "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race," Chief Justice John Roberts wrote for the court. The decision meant Champaign had to reconfigure its assignment procedures to use poverty as a proxy for race, and the district is no longer under a consent decree.

Since then, the district has had difficulties maintaining the racial balance in elementary schools.

Overall, the district is diverse. Thirty-six percent of its students are white, 35 percent are black, 12 percent are Hispanic and 9 percent are Asian. The district has been able to reflect that racial balance in its middle and high schools. But achieving racial balance in elementary schools has proven to be much more difficult because they are smaller and there are more of them. The elementary schools are open to students from across the district, but, in practical terms, they draw heavily from their own neighborhoods.

In 2011, the Champaign district received a \$9.6 million federal grant to assist in balancing the district's elementary schools over five years. The money helped change three existing schools into magnet schools to attract white students to the North End. Stratton became Stratton Academy of the Arts, where K-5 students can

put on plays, learn dance or play guitar. But Stratton has had a hard time attracting white students from farther south. Of the 56 families who listed Stratton as their top choice for their students last year, 50 had low enough incomes to qualify for free or reduced lunches. Its students are now 61 percent black and 13 percent white -- both numbers well outside the 15 percent threshold the district once used for racially identifiable schools. The problem appears to be getting worse, not better. White students make up slightly less of the student body than they did five years ago.

That’s a far different story than in Carrie Busey Elementary School, on the southern edge of the district. Busey is a new school, relocated from southern Champaign and now wedged into a subdivision in the majority-white village of Savoy even farther to the south. Over the last five years, the school’s student population has become less black and more white. Whites now make up just above half of the student body, while blacks account for roughly a fifth. Both numbers are far enough from the district average to put Carrie Busey on the cusp of becoming a “racially identifiable” school. Unlike Stratton, it would be racially identifiable as white rather than black.

There are two reasons for Busey’s predominantly white student population. First, as part of its placement process, the school gives a preference to students who live within 1.5 miles of the school and can walk there. Second, even white parents who don’t live in the neighborhood are disproportionately picking the out-of-the-way school as their top choice, says Angela Smith, assistant superintendent for achievement and equity at Champaign Unit School District 4. “Carrie Busey,” Smith says, “is overrepresented in our parents’ choices for elementary schools.”

Since about 90 percent of incoming kindergarten students are assigned to the school their parents list as their top choice, Busey is getting more white students even as the district as a whole is losing them. The scramble to get into Busey coincides with a big jump in the popularity of Savoy as a place to live. The population there has nearly tripled since 1990. Today, more than 8,500 people live there. Two-thirds are white, 18 percent are Asian and 5 percent are black.

Declining White Enrollment Over the Past 15 Years

Urban school districts incurred drastic declines in white student enrollment in recent years compared to others in the same surrounding metro areas.

City School District	Change in Whites	Change in Blacks	White Change for Other Metro Districts	Black Change for Other Metro Districts
Champaign CUSD 4	-33%	16%	-16%	5%
Decatur SD 61	-38%	-11%	-7%	4%
Bloomington SD 87	-35%	-10%	-9%	20%
Peoria SD 150	-52%	-17%	-8%	53%
Springfield SD 186	-33%	3%	-4%	111%
Rockford SD 205	-37%	-2%	-19%	26%
Kankakee SD 111	-27%	-33%	-17%	-10%
Danville CCSD 118	-39%	4%	-17%	-39%

(SOURCE: 2017-18, 2002-03 fall enrollment counts, Illinois State Board of Education)

The Role of White Flight

The Peoria Unified School District learned early on the pitfalls of trying to integrate its schools. In 1966, the school board worked with business and community leaders to devise an integration plan. At the time, blacks were concentrated in nine of the district's 39 schools, while whites made up 98 percent or more of the population of 20 schools. Within two years, the district issued an ambitious 103-page desegregation plan, and the integration efforts started in the fall of 1968. By the 1971-1972 school year, the number of Peoria schools deemed "segregated" by the state had dropped from 25 to 10.

But the public -- at least, the white public -- quickly soured on the plan. It elected a new school board majority that made opposition to the plan part of its campaign platform. Administrators, teachers and even some black parents grew disillusioned, too.

Student enrollment in the district started to drop off quickly, especially for white students. The district lost 2,800 of its 26,700 students between 1968 and 1975. "The problem was straightforward," the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights wrote in 1977. "Minority enrollment in Peoria's schools rose 30 percent between 1968 and 1975 while white enrollment dropped by 19 percent during the same period. In a changing situation, the district's desegregation efforts had not kept pace."

Meanwhile, three schools came together in 1969 to form the Dunlap Unit School District No. 323. Within seven years, the district had opened a new high school with a heated pool, a new football field, a computer lab, a greenhouse, a band and music room, and a large library. Dunlap High School has been growing ever since. "I have lived in the Peoria area my entire life [48 years] and the demographics of Peoria are well documented," says Scott Dearman, the superintendent of the Dunlap School District. "I see Dunlap as a resource to the Peoria area in that we are expanding cultural diversity to geographic areas within the Peoria metro that were not diverse before."

Dearman says that Dunlap is more racially diverse than other school districts in the area. A fifth of the students are of Asian descent. The Caterpillar Corporation and local hospitals help attract families from around the world. According to the district, it has students from 27 countries on five continents. They speak 29 different languages.

But Dawn Bozeman, the only black member of the Dunlap school board, says that diversity only goes so far. She's excited by the number of languages spoken by students, but she's discouraged that so few of the district's teachers are black. "When we [at Dunlap] talk about being diverse," she says, "we are diverse in terms of other school districts in central Illinois."

The Peoria Unified School District, on the other hand, has had to find ways to keep white students coming to its schools, in order to maintain its diversity. By the 1980s, the district was trying a new method of integrating its schools. The plan was to transform a school that had been operating since 1932 into Roosevelt Magnet School, an elementary-level fine arts mecca that would draw kids from all over the city to a predominantly black neighborhood. It was the same basic concept Champaign tried with Stratton. For a time, the Peoria plan worked.

Roosevelt Magnet School "was a shining star of the district for about 12 years," says Superintendent Sharon Desmoulin-Kherat, who once worked as an assistant principal at Roosevelt. "A lot of people bought into the idea, because they had the best orchestra teachers, the best band teachers and the best director. They were able to entice families from all over the city to come and be part of this robust, exciting fine arts curriculum. We had about 50 percent African-Americans and 50 percent white students. It was half neighborhood and half magnet. They integrated well."

In the 1980s and 1990s, students needed to audition to get into Roosevelt and its fine arts programs. The school required students to wear uniforms, so that poor children could show up dressed much the same as their

wealthier counterparts. Some of the more affluent parents chipped in to help the poor parents pay the uniform costs.

Koehler, the state senator, was one of the parents who was sold on Roosevelt. His daughter, Kate Pastucha, who is now a Peoria County board member, started going there when she was in fourth grade. “I loved it,” she says. “Once we got into our seventh- and eighth-grade years, I just really felt like there was this great blending. Everybody was best buds. It didn’t matter if you were from the neighborhood, if you were from up north, or where you were from.”

But eventually, Roosevelt lost its allure. Desmoulin-Kherat likens the situation to a supermarket chain that goes out of fashion: consumer tastes change, and competition grows. In the same way, parents want different things from schools than they did a generation ago, and more schools are offering the type of arts-centric curriculum that once made Roosevelt unique. “We’re back to where we started in terms of the numbers and the segregation,” Desmoulin-Kherat says. “The majority of the kids are African-American kids again. Folks are not coming from other parts of the city, it’s a magnet program that only attracts kids from the neighborhood.” Last year, the district eliminated the application process for Roosevelt, making it a magnet school in name only.

But local activist Rita Ali says part of the reason the Roosevelt experiment ended was the school’s location. “Roosevelt now doesn’t have the draw anymore,” she says. “The neighborhood, 61605, became poorer and blacker.” Now that Roosevelt is a neighborhood school again, the socioeconomic challenges of the surrounding neighborhood show up at the schoolhouse door every morning. The school is 88 percent black, and more than 8 in 10 students qualify for free or reduced lunch, meaning they live below or hover just above the poverty line.

Outside the schoolhouse doors, the situation is tough. More than 40 percent of the residents in the [61605 ZIP code](#) were living in poverty in 2017. Job prospects for black workers are bleak. Peoria as a whole has the highest black unemployment rate of any metropolitan area in the nation.

Conditions in the schools and the neighborhoods feed off each other. The dire economic situation means residents, even black residents, around Roosevelt are leaving the immediate area, even if they stay within the Peoria school district. As the population shifts, it’s harder for the school district to operate the same number of schools on the southwest side. But closing more schools further reduces the number of jobs available locally, which prompts more people to move.

Peoria’s school officials are trying several tactics to keep kids and families in the area. The district has launched an international baccalaureate program at one of its high schools. Desmoulin-Kherat talks about developing better online instruction and offering more services, such as athletics, to home-schooled children in the area.

One of the biggest draws to the district now is the Washington Gifted Middle School for children between fifth and eighth grade. The district evaluates test scores for admission to Washington Gifted. The demographics at the school are almost the exact opposite of those in the district at large. Nearly two-thirds of the students at Washington Gifted are white. Less than a quarter are poor enough to qualify for free and reduced lunches, compared to 72 percent of the students in the district as a whole. The school is so popular that parents sometimes pull their kids out of private schools to enroll them at Washington Gifted if they can test in.

Pastucha, the Peoria county board member, sends one of her daughters there and says she thrives in that environment. Pastucha wonders about the fairness of the process. “How is it,” she asks, “that in a majority black school district you all of a sudden skim the cream off the top and it’s majority white?” But as a public official who went through Peoria’s public schools as a child and sends her own children to them now, Pastucha is disturbed most by the people who move out of the district in search of better schools. “Every time I hear someone else is moving out of the district,” she says, “I feel like they’re giving up. I feel like they’re leaving and saying, ‘Forget that.’”

“I don’t think any of those people are leaving because they’re trying to escape black people, but I’m calling it ‘unintentional racism,’” she adds. “Everybody is making a decision for their family and what’s best for them, but when you add up all these people’s individual decisions, what you get is white people leaving a majority black district.”