South’s Schools Pass Milestone on Poverty

By Debra Viadero

Faced with growing numbers of students from low-income families, schools in Wake County, N.C., last year swung into action. One elementary school held parent meetings in low-income neighborhoods.

Another filmed students at work, showing the footage at a “movie night” designed to better engage families. Other schools strengthened policies on tardiness or began offering Saturday writing classes and after-school tutoring.

Such strategies could become more common throughout the South, says a report released last week, because the region now has a “new majority” in its public schools: students from low-income families. According to the study, published by the Atlanta-based Southern Education Foundation, poor children, for the first time in at least 40 years, now constitute 54 percent of students in public schools across that part of the country.

While that makes the South the nation’s first geographic region to reach that milestone, researchers said the West is not far behind. If current population trends continue, the report adds, students from low-income households will constitute more than half of K-12 enrollment in public schools nationally within 10 years.

“What these figures are beginning to tell us is that we’re no longer talking about a small slice of the population when we talk about low-income students,” said Steve T. Suitts, the report’s author.

“We’re talking in the South about a majority of students, and that does have profound implications and challenges for schools.”

Meeting the needs of this growing population, which is statistically more likely than affluent children to require special education or English-language instruction, could mean a redoubling of efforts and financial support for schools across the region.

But some experts said last week that the statistics might not be as alarming as they sound at first blush, because the report uses as its poverty yardstick, the percentage of students who qualify for free- or reduced-rate meals under the federal school lunch program.
The eligibility threshold for that program is up to 185 percent of the federal poverty line, which comes to about $38,000 for a family of four. While commonly used in education research, that indicator can be controversial.

On one hand, older students, embarrassed to be identified as needy, often refuse to sign up for the meals program. On the other, some schools, looking to avoid stigmatizing children, serve subsidized meals to everyone.

**National Trends**

So “sometimes what you see in the [U.S. Bureau of the] Census count is not the same as what you see in the school program,” said Laura A. Beavers, a research associate for the Kids Count statistical reports compiled annually by the Baltimore-based [Annie E. Casey Foundation](http://www.anneecasey.org/).

“But I think it washes out at the state level,” she added. “The reality is that $40,000 is about what it takes to support a family of four,” though in the rural South, living costs might be lower than the U.S. average.

Demographers such as Ms. Beavers said the report’s findings are not surprising, because they square with national trends showing overall growth in the number of U.S. children living in poverty.

The Kids Count data, for instance, show that 1.3 million more children were living at the more stringent federal poverty line—about $21,000 for a family of four—in 2006 than was the case in 2000. That brought the overall percentage of poor children to 18 percent in 2006, up from 17 percent six years earlier.

On an international scale, the percentage of American children living in poverty is the highest of any of the 24 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member nations, said Harold L. Hodgkinson, an Alexandria, Va.-based education demographer, who adds that the United States has held that distinction for more than 10 years.

“This seems like a very important trend,” Ms. Beavers added, “and something that folks who are doing the planning in school districts should pay attention to—and also child advocates.”

**West’s Rate Rising**
Focusing on data from the 2006-07 school year, the Southern Education Foundation, a 140-year-old advocacy group, found that low-income students make up majorities in public schools in 11 of 15 Southern states.

The exceptions are Oklahoma, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia. (Unlike the U.S. Census Bureau, the SEF researchers did not include Delaware as part of the South.)

Outside the South, disadvantaged students constitute a majority in only three states: California, New Mexico, and Oregon. The study also predicts that the West will reach that demographic tipping point in three to five years.

“These two regions guide the national pattern and explain why low-income students constitute as much as 46 percent of U.S. public school enrollment,” the report concludes. “If recent rates of growth continue in the South and the West and in two other large states, Illinois and New York, the United States could have a majority of low-income students in public schools within the next 10 years.”

In the 134,000-student Wake County system, which includes Raleigh, the impact of growing numbers of poor students may be especially dramatic for some schools. That’s because the district uses a 6-year-old student-assignment plan that is designed to distribute poor children more evenly throughout the district.

Districtwide, the percentage of children enrolled in the subsidized-meal program grew from 22.5 percent in the 2001-02 school year to 29.1 percent last year, said David L. Holdzkom, the assistant superintendent for evaluation and research.

“Not only has the school district been growing rapidly, but the percentage of kids who qualify for free and reduced lunch has also been growing,” he said.

The challenge for the system is that this population also includes a disproportionate share of students with disabilities and limited English skills. “As these risk factors multiply, students’ needs intensify,” Mr. Holdzkom added.

One result of that trend has been a stubborn academic-achievement gap that has disadvantaged students lagging behind their better-off peers. In grades 3-8, for instance, the number of students meeting reading-achievement targets is 11 percent lower for disadvantaged students than it is for students who are not on the meals program.

To narrow the gap, the district last year launched an initiative aimed at helping schools better serve poor children and encouraging schools to test out strategies geared to that population.

**NCLB Concerns**

Farther south, in the Edgefield, S.C., schools, the proportion of low-income students grew from just under half to 60 percent over the past 10 years, said Frank G. Roberson, the superintendent of that 4,000-student district.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, though, districts such as Edgefield and Wake County have to meet the student-proficiency goals set by their states, despite serving growing numbers of poor children. That means increasing test scores every year for all
students, as well as for certain subgroups, including those from low-income families—a requirement that some Southern school administrators see as unfair.

“We would expect all students to become proficient,” Mr. Roberson said. “But it may take a little longer for some groups.”

Mr. Suitts said the demographic shifts that his report documents stem from a mix of factors, including increases in the numbers of Latino and African-American children, populations that are both statistically likelier than white children to be poor.

Immigration plays a role in the rise among Latino students, the report says, but so do the high birth rates found among American-born Hispanic families.

Private school enrollment was not a factor in that growth, according to Mr. Suitts, who said that numbers of students enrolling in private schools in the South leveled off after peaking in the 1970s in the wake of court-ordered desegregation. According to the National Center on Education Statistics, private school students account for 9 percent of total school enrollment in the South—lower than in the Northeast or Midwest.

Also, some states, such as Mississippi, South Carolina, Kentucky, and Arkansas, have experienced persistently high rates of underemployment. The South, moreover, has a long history of poverty dating back to the Civil War.

“Because the percentage of low-income students in the South was high to begin with,” said Joan Lord, the vice president for national policies at the Southern Regional Education Board, an Atlanta-based education reform group, “with the add-on increases, it’s taken the South over the 50 percent line.” Her organization, though, puts the overall percentage of low-income children closer to 53 percent, a notch below the SEF’s reckoning.

“If this new majority of students fail in school,” Mr. Suitts said, “an entire state, an entire region, and—sooner or later—an entire nation will fail simply because there will be inadequate human capital to build and sustain good jobs, an enjoyable quality of life, and a well-informed democracy.”

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