Schools in the United States grapple with change as demographics alter the education landscape.

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On October 17, 2006, the U.S. population officially reached 300 million, double the nation's population in 1950. The United States houses less than 5 percent of the world's population, but it is the third most populous country in the world, after China (1.3 billion) and India (1.1 billion). The United States is expected to be the only developed country on the top-10 list of most populous countries by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a), at which point its population is expected to exceed 420 million.¹

In addition to the rapid growth of the U.S. population, there have been dramatic changes in the population's composition in the last 50 years: Americans are growing older, more educated, and more diverse. These trends have implications for school districts in terms of enrollment levels, student characteristics, and the resources available for education. Five demographic trends in the United States are influencing school districts around the country.

**TREND 1: The Enrollment Roller Coaster**

As many long-time school administrators know firsthand, enrollment fluctuations can seem like a roller-coaster ride. U.S. enrollments increased throughout the 1950s and 1960s, peaked in 1970, and fell from the early 1970s through the mid-1980s. This caused many districts to close schools and reduce their teaching staffs. But then enrollment increases accelerated in the late 1980s and grew for the next decade, causing school districts to open new schools, reopen old ones, or otherwise cope with overcrowding.

By the late 1990s, elementary enrollments had leveled off (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Today, many districts are experiencing the results of the low birthrate of a decade ago. Most of the children born in 1997—a year that saw the fewest U.S. births in recent years—are now in 4th grade. In many districts, this will be the smallest cohort of students. A recent upward trend in U.S. births may reverse the elementary enrollment decline in a few years.

Meanwhile, many districts are experiencing a high school "bubble" as cohorts born around 1990 reach the high school grades. But high school enrollments will head downward during the next decade and then level off or inch up again, following the elementary trends.

U.S. birth patterns always have some effect on the nation's school districts, but local conditions can sometimes overpower the national trend. Despite national increases in the number of chil-
Enrollment declines are often painful for districts, especially when the decline warrants school closures. In general, urban areas have been hardest hit, as families leave the cities and birthrates fall. Even if school buildings remain open, declining enrollments usually mean reduced funding for schools, which can result in teacher losses and program reductions.
TREND 2: Immigration and Diversity

Fertility and mortality rates are relatively low in the United States. When a nation reaches these low levels, which is the case in most developed countries, its population grows slowly and may even decline. At this point, immigration plays a crucial role in population growth.

In 2002, net migration to the United States (the difference between the numbers entering and leaving) was over one million, more than three times higher than the next highest-receiving countries: Afghanistan (300,000), which saw many refugees returning in 2002; Canada (190,000); Germany (180,000); Russia (140,000); United Kingdom (130,000); Italy (120,000); and Singapore (120,000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002b).

The 1965 amendments to the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act created a major shift in both the number of arrivals to the United States and their countries of origin, fueling increases in the numbers of entrants from Latin America and Asia. Moreover, once these populations arrive, family reunification laws make it likely that more people from these countries will follow.

In 1970, more than 60 percent of the nation’s 9.6 million foreign-born people originated in Europe, 19 percent in Latin America, 9 percent in Asia, and 10 percent in other areas. By 2000, only 15 percent of the 28.4 million foreign-born population came from Europe. More than half originated in Latin America—with Mexico accounting for more than half of this group—and more than one-quarter came from Asia (primarily from China, the Philippines, India, Vietnam, and Korea; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a).

Immigrants continue to be attracted to a handful of states—California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois—and half of the nation’s foreign-born population resided in five metropolitan areas in 2000—Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Miami, and Chicago (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a). However, since 2000, the long-standing concentration of Hispanics and Asians in port-of-entry metropolitan areas has been eroding as these two groups disperse inland toward more suburban metropolitan areas (Frey, 2006) and new immigrant hot spots, such as North Carolina, Georgia, and Nevada (Martin & Midgley, 2006).

The advantages and challenges of an ethnically diverse population are being felt throughout the United States. A diverse U.S. population may engender an entrepreneurial spirit and fresh perspectives conducive to new discoveries and approaches. At the same time, the recent influx of Hispanics and Asians to the United States has resulted in greater demands for social and education services, including English as a second language (ESL) instruction. The 2000 Census reported 380 categories of single languages or language families other than English spoken at home. Spanish is the most common, with more than 28 million speakers among the U.S. population 5 years and older, followed by Chinese (2 million); French (1.6 million); German (1.4 million); and Tagalog (1.2 million; Shin & Bruno, 2003).

In 2004, 9.9 million school-age children (ages 5–17) spoke a language other
than English at home, representing 19 percent of all children in this age-group, a 9 percent increase from 3.7 million in 1979 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). More than 67 percent of Hispanic children and almost 63 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander children spoke a language other than English at home, compared with only about 5 percent of their white and black counterparts. Of the children who spoke a language other than English at home in 2004, a disproportionate share were U.S.-born or naturalized U.S. citizens (81 percent); poor or near-poor (37 percent); and living in the West (40 percent) and South (29 percent) of the United States. About 2.8 million, or 28 percent of children who spoke a language other than English at home, reportedly spoke English less than "very well."

Virtually all children and grandchildren of immigrants accept the necessity of learning English (Alba, Logan, Lutz, & Stults, 2002). On the other hand, children in immigrant families are well positioned to become proficient bilingual speakers, for which there is a growing need in an increasingly multilingual world. From one-quarter to more than one-half of children in immigrant families speak English well and, at the same time, speak a language other than English at home (Hernandez & Denton, 2005). In 2000, 92 percent of the U.S. population ages 5 and older had no difficulty speaking English (Shin & Bruno, 2003).

An often-overlooked characteristic of migration is that immigrant populations generally assimilate rapidly. Research has shown that second- and third-generation children assimilate on several economic and social measures, such as learning English at young ages, closing the college attendance gap with native-born whites, and achieving more than 50 percent home ownership in middle age.

In terms of residential segregation, generational status also makes a difference. Although immigrants tend to cluster in neighborhoods, second-generation Hispanic adults are about half as clustered as their parents, whereas many Asian groups are even more integrated into the general population. This suggests that ethnicity has less of an effect on indicators of economic and social well-being than does generation, age of arrival, or country of birth (Myers, 2007). Also, the continual flow of new immigrants might mask the fact that Hispanics and Asians are assimilating. Some third-and-greater-generation Hispanics may not even identify themselves as Hispanics, further complicating efforts to measure assimilation.

**TREND 3: The Varied Home Front**

Three family characteristics in the United States materially influence a child’s situation: the presence of married parents in the household, poverty, and secure parental employment. Children who live with two married parents generally have access to better economic and social resources and experience more favorable health and education outcomes (Carlson, 2006; Fields & Smith, 1998). Today, more than two-thirds of children ages 0–17 live in households with two married parents. The percentage has been stable since the
The proportion living below poverty generally has declined for all household types nationally since the 1990s. This is good news because economic deprivation is associated with a variety of poor outcomes for children at all stages of development, from low birth weight to problems with cognitive development, school achievement, and emotional well-being (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997).

The period between 1980 and 2004 saw a steady increase in the percentage of children who lived with at least one parent who worked full-time year-round (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2006). Of children living in families with two parents, the percentage with both parents working full-time year-round increased from 17 percent in 1980 to 33 percent in 2000. Since 2000, however, the percentage has slightly dropped.

An increase in parental employment may be a mixed blessing. When both parents work full-time, the family has greater economic resources, and parents may share child-care responsibilities. However, the family's schedule may be more stressful, and parents may be less nurturing, less emotionally available, and less likely to set limits for their children (Schor, 1995).

To improve student performance, schools may need to look increasingly beyond the academic curriculum and offer support to children of working parents outside of normal school hours. This might take the form of after-school enrichment opportunities, organized athletic activities, or meaningful volunteer or community-service projects. Support would also include high-quality child care before and after school, particularly for elementary school students.

TREND 4: An Aging Population

The baby-boom generation will soon reach retirement age. The 55- to 64-year-old population group is projected to be the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. adult population during the next decade. By 2030, the over-65 population will most likely be twice as large as its 2000 counterpart, growing to 71.5 million, or nearly 20 percent of the total U.S. population.

Americans are living longer than ever before. A baby born in 2004 can expect to live almost 78 years, up from 71 years in 1970 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). Despite such impressive gains in survival, racial/ethnic and gender disparities persist, although they have narrowed. By far, the largest variation in death rates is by education attainment: In 2002, the age-adjusted death rate for people with fewer than 12 years of schooling was four times higher than that for people ages 25–64 with at least 13 years of schooling (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005).

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Individuals have higher education attainment. Today, 19 percent of people age 65 and over have a college education, compared with only 5 percent of that age-group in 1965. And the trend continues: When the baby-boom generation retires, more than 30 percent will have been college educated (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2006). Higher levels of education are usually associated with higher incomes, higher standards of living, above-average health, and longer life expectancy.

The aging of the population necessarily offers challenges for schools. First, districts may lose a large proportion of their most-experienced teachers and administrators during the next two decades. In anticipation of potential labor shortages in K–12 districts, various colleges and some states are developing new programs to encourage second careers in teaching (Poster, 2003). For example, Virginia’s community colleges are providing a statewide “career switcher” initiative. Second, an aging population could diminish school funding for education because older and childless voters are generally less supportive of public school funding than are voters with school-age children (Poterba, 1998). In California, most districts exempt seniors from special local parcel or bond taxes. In close elections, this helps ameliorate the potentially negative senior vote on school funding initiatives. Districts in other states with significant proportions of older residents may want to consider adopting similar approaches to protect school budgets.

But the soon-to-retire baby boomers also offer great opportunities for schools. Well-educated, committed, and healthy, many could serve as volunteers in local communities or embark on second careers as teachers and school administrators. Retiree volunteers could help boost a declining education workforce (see The Longevity Dividend, p. 14). The flexibility of part-time work and creative job situations may appeal to prospective teachers in this age-group.

TREND 5: Obesity

Despite the generally positive circumstances of older Americans, unaddressed health issues foreshadow potential problems. Between 1999 and 2002, almost two-thirds of adults (ages 20–74) were considered overweight; almost one-third were considered obese; (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005). This problem begins in childhood for many people. According to data from the 1999–2002 National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys, which collect data from physical examinations throughout the United States, nearly 16 percent of children were considered obese (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005). The historical trend is troublesome; only 4 percent of children were considered obese in the early 1970s. The high percentage of Americans who are physically inactive raises significant concerns because overweight and obesity are risk factors for many chronic diseases and disabilities, including heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, some
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types of cancers, and back pain. To counter these trends and help establish health-promoting habits early in life, schools should consider placing greater emphasis on health programs, nutrition, and physical activity during the elementary school years.

The Two Ends of the Spectrum

Compared with 20 years ago, the average child entering school today is less likely to live in a family with two married parents but is more likely to have a living grandparent, reside in a nonpoor family with secure parental employment, encounter classmates of other races and ethnicities who speak a language other than English at home, and become obese. At the other end of the age spectrum, older adults in the United States are, on average, more educated and can expect to live longer and be healthier than previous generations. As involved community members, older adults can serve as intergenerational role models. They can also help schools face the challenges of the 21st century by sharing their skills and experiences and contributing to improving school and after-school learning environments in their neighborhoods.

In contrast, the population in more than half of the world’s developed countries is expected to decline over the next 50 years. By 2050, Germany’s current population of 82 million and Japan’s current population of 127 million are expected to fall below 74 million and 100 million, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

The “white-alone” and “black-alone” categories refer to those who indicate only one racial category.

For adults, obese is defined as a body mass index greater than or equal to 30; overweight (including obese) is a body mass index greater than or equal to 25.

The Longevity Dividend

With the growth of an elderly population destined to live longer and healthier, it makes sense to harness the experience and social capital of older adults—not just for the benefit of future generations but also for their own good health. One key to successful psychological aging is “generativity,” the opportunity to leave the world better for future generations through productive, meaningful engagement (Fried et al., 2004). Generative roles not only give meaning and purpose but also provide social engagement, which has been shown to maintain cognition, decrease disability, and delay mortality. Findings also indicate that loneliness has implications for health (Cacioppo et al., 2002).

The challenge for our aging society is to provide opportunities for the elderly to engage in meaningful roles after retirement. Experience Corps (www.experiencecorps.org) does just that (see “The Value of Experience,” Educational Leadership, March 2005). Launched in 1995, the program seeks to

- Channel the talent and energy of growing numbers of older adults into public and community service.
- Provide significant benefits for the older people who participate.
- Achieve real outcomes in the community.

Now active in 19 U.S. cities, the program enlists volunteers ages 55 years and older to serve in public elementary schools (grades K–3).

Volunteers ideally commit to at least 15 hours each week for a full school year and are paid a monthly stipend to cover expenses. Experience Corps projects place a critical mass of tutors and mentors at each school so that the presence of the older adults influences the climate of the entire school. Volunteers are involved in academic support (literacy, math, and computer support; working in school libraries); behavioral support (conflict resolution, positive attention); school attendance, parental outreach, and public health (asthma club).

Initial results suggest that high-intensity volunteerism can lead to improvements in the level of physical activity among previously physically inactive volunteers. The program also can lead to meaningful improvements in student reading scores and to a reduction in student behavior problems. Moreover, as Experience Corps members engage with students and teachers and take on key leadership roles, they create healthier and more positive perceptions about aging in the schools and communities in which they work.

References


References

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