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Diversity changes face of education

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ARLINGTON - When Gayle Hibbitts started teaching at Johns Elementary School more than 40 years ago, the faces staring back at her were white.

Hibbitts retired in 1994 after 29 years at Johns. When she returned about six years ago, Hibbitts found herself in classrooms where 90 percent of the students were ethnic minorities.

The U.S. Census Bureau reported in August that public school enrollment in 2003 hit 49.5 million, surpassing the high, 48.7 million, set in 1970 when baby boomers were of school age.

With so many students in public schools, classrooms are more diverse than ever. Accessible colleges and universities are straining to find space for high school graduates and selective universities can be more so as they are flooded with applications.

In 2003, 42 percent of U.S. students were racial and ethnic minorities, compared with 22 percent in 1972. One of the most notable changes is the growth in the Hispanic student population. In 1972, 6 percent of students were Hispanic. In 2003, Hispanic students made up 19 percent of the national school population, overtaking blacks as the dominant ethnic group.

This constantly shifting diversity poses new challenges for educators trying to keep up with strict federal and state standards, which attempt to level academic playing fields and close achievement gaps. The federal government gives districts Title I money to supplement programs for low-income students and requires districts to provide English as a second language or bilingual education.

“When I started teaching, there was no Title I, no ESL. I never had a Spanish-speaking child before,” Hibbitts said. “I’ve learned so much in the last few years.”

In Texas, 14.1 percent of the state’s 4.3 million students were enrolled in the programs in 2003-04, compared with 7 percent of 3.6 million in the 1993-94 school year.

Facing challenges

The growing population of minority and immigrant students has presented area educators with challenges.

In 2002, President Bush launched the No Child Left Behind act. The law put in place an accountability system to help ensure that minority students, in particular, are not being overlooked by the public education system, thus allowing the achievement gap between minority and white students to grow.

“For the first time, we can see whether kids are doing as well as they should be in the schools,” said Russ Whitehurst, director of the Institute of Education Sciences, an arm of the U.S. Education Department.

“The designers of No Child Left Behind thought and think that shining a spotlight on the issue that had previously been in the shadows is going to result in better instruction.”

One of the most notable challenges for Texas educators is that much of that instruction must be done in multiple languages.

Under Texas law, if a school district has at least 20 students in one grade level who speak the same language but speak limited English, the district must offer bilingual education in the students’ native tongue.

In Texas, bilingual education almost always means teaching in Spanish. But Arlington typically has enough students who speak Vietnamese or Arabic to offer bilingual education in those languages. The Hurst-Euless-Bedford school district has a large Tongan population. Fort Worth has a significant Somalian and Kurdish population.

However, certified teachers who speak the languages are a rarity, and the districts must annually seek a state waiver from the requirement.

Several area districts, including Arlington, Fort Worth, Hurst-Euless-Bedford and Mansfield, have newcomer centers where immigrant students can become acclimated to the United States. Educators use English as a second language techniques.

“In ESL you have many different languages represented but provide instruction in English only,” said Guadalupe Barreto, Fort Worth’s elementary ESL coordinator.

Language is one of the top differences in the student population today, Arlington Superintendent Mac Bernd said.

“Second is cultural sensitivity,” Bernd said. “It’s important that we understand how to communicate with people from different cultures in an effective way, so they feel valued and respected by our teachers and other employees.”

Bernd said that in Latin or Spanish culture, for example, children do not make eye contact with adults.

“They may look down and away. That’s a gesture of respect,” he said. “But if we don’t understand that, we may come out with something like ‘Look at me when I’m talking to

you' because we think looking away is disrespect.”

H-E-B Superintendent Gene Buinger said another aspect of diversity can be seen in special education programs around the nation.

Nearly 12 percent of Texas' 4.3 million public school students were in special education programs in the 2003-04 school year.

“When I started out as an educator, and it seems just like yesterday, there was no such thing as special education,” the 35-year veteran said. “If you had a handicapped child, that child was educated at some sort of state school or state hospital or stayed home.”

Growing pains

The higher education community is also dealing with growing pains.

The number of 18- to 24-year-old Texans grew more than 7 percent from 2000 to 2003. According to the Texas State Data Center, the state had nearly 2.4 million people in this age group in 2003.

The growth has two distinct effects on higher education in Texas. It's straining accessible institutions such as the University of Texas at Arlington, the University of North Texas at Denton and community colleges, and the surge in applications is allowing selective universities to become even more choosy.

“We could fill three classes and not change the quality” of students accepted, said Ann Wright, vice president of enrollment for Rice University in Houston.

Ray Brown, admissions director for Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, said he's seen applications increase 70 percent in five years.

Brown and other experts said Texas has grown so much that it has attracted the attention of other parts of the country where growth in college-age students has been flat.

“A lot of states, like Oklahoma and Arkansas, are raiding Texas big time. They're setting up shop in Dallas and Fort Worth,” Brown said.

Marta Tienda, a Princeton University sociologist who studies college attendance, said Texas is one of the top feeders of students to Princeton, the Ivy League university in New Jersey. Texas ranks fourth after New Jersey, California and New York.

Impressive, but Tienda and state demographer Steve Murdock said students are leaving because Texas has so woefully underinvested in higher education; the second largest state in the country has only two selective public universities, the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University at College Station.

“Somebody’s going to have to have the courage to tell the Big Two, ‘You’re fine, we love you, you’re great. Now we have to take care of the rest of the state,’ ” Murdock said.

This is where universities like UNT and UT-Arlington come in. They’re hoping to be the next flagship universities, but they already have growing pains from their robust enrollments.

“It’s very difficult to grow and admit more students when you have limited facilities to educate them,” UT-Arlington Provost Dana Dunn said. She’d like to see the state spend more on classroom construction.

UT-Arlington just finished a five-year, \$72 million building campaign that brought 456 units in four apartment buildings and 1,000 beds in two residence halls.

UNT is starting a similar campaign with a 400-bed residence hall that opened last year, and the university plans to build three more.

Tarrant County College is considering construction on all four campuses. This includes a new academic wing that will double the number of classrooms at the Southeast Campus in Arlington and two new academic buildings at the Northeast Campus in Hurst. TCC also has plans to build a \$135 million campus on both sides of the Trinity River in downtown Fort Worth.

Constant change

The Mansfield school district has been struggling with diversity and growth issues. The historically suburban district of middle-class white families has seen its minority population grow from just under 30 percent in 2000 to 43 percent in fall 2004.

In early 2003, when officials redrew attendance zones to accommodate Timberview High School, the district’s third, some residents threatened to sue a volunteer committee, alleging that preferential treatment was being given to more-affluent residents to keep Mansfield High an elite school with a white majority.

Superintendent Vernon Newsom disbanded the committee and later recommended different attendance zones to the board. But trustees surprised many by approving a map that some said forced minority students close to Mansfield High in the southeast part of the district to travel farther to attend Timberview.

A complaint was filed with the U.S. Education Department's Office of Civil Rights in December 2003 alleging that the attendance zones were redrawn with race in mind. The investigation is still pending.

When the attendance zones are redrawn the next time, district officials can expect more dissent from parents.

“Over the last several years, we’ve made efforts to make the process more open and inclusive to our school community,” Newsom said.

Back in Arlington, Gayle Hibbitts continues her work at Johns Elementary. She knows that diversity isn’t seen as a good thing by some. She has defended her school many times and will defend it many more if needed.

“There are people in northwest and southwest Arlington who don’t consider Johns even being here, if you know what I mean,” she said. “I’ve worked on committees where they said they’re afraid of the east side of town. I tell them our kids are great. I’ve never had a problem, and I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

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