



July 2, 2003

The face of the American teacher; White and female while her students are ethnically diverse.

By Greg Toppo

Fifteen years ago, nearly nine out of 10 public school teachers were white, and more than seven in 10 were women. Their classrooms were mostly white as well -- fewer than three in 10 were minorities.

Fast-forward to today.

Minority students account for four in 10 public school kids. One in five speaks a language other than English at home, and one in four comes from a single-parent household.

But wait: There's still a white woman at the head of the class. She's a little better qualified, but, otherwise, the typical American teacher hasn't changed much.

While public school students have grown much more diverse, schools still rely overwhelmingly on white women to teach them. And despite decades of efforts to attract more minorities and men, they simply aren't stepping into the frame.

While race and gender don't mean everything -- and they certainly don't make up for poor training -- experts say the lack of male and minority role models may be exacerbating a nagging achievement gap that sees fewer young men than women attending college, and a smaller proportion of black and Hispanic students succeeding than white peers.

The issue is a perennial concern among leaders of the National Education Association, the USA's largest teachers union. Its annual meeting is in New Orleans this week.

"The demand for male teachers is always high in public schools across America," says NEA president Reg Weaver, who is black. "The sad reality is that a young boy could go through his entire education without ever having a teacher who looks like me."

And while the nation's teaching force is as well prepared as it has ever been, critics say President Bush's No Child Left Behind education reform law could hurt teacher diversity even more, unless schools improve working conditions and salaries.

The law requires that schools hire only "highly qualified" teachers, which means more coursework for thousands of teachers.

"Many people just don't want to go into teaching for that reason," says Evelyn Dandy, a professor of education at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Ga.

Government and NEA figures paint a portrait of a teaching force that has barely changed its complexion in decades, even as U.S. families have been transformed.

Race and ethnicity

When the government last counted during the 1999-2000 school year, about 84% of teachers were white vs. 61% of students.

In 2001, 90% of the NEA's teachers were white, up from 88% in 1971. The government counts all teachers; the NEA surveys only its members, who are less likely to teach in some big cities such as New York and Chicago.

Black pupils make up about 17% of public school students, while fewer than 8% of teachers are black. Hispanics have risen to about 16% of all students, but fewer than 6% of teachers are Hispanic.

During the 1999-2000 school year, 38% of public schools had not a single teacher of color.

But Linda Darling-Hammond, a Stanford University professor who studies teaching trends, says the tide has shifted in the past decade.

"It's not what many people would like to see, but it's better than it used to be," she says.

While only 16% of teachers are minorities, 21% of new teachers are minorities, she says.

Research is limited on how ethnicity affects learning, but the lack of male minority role models is already affecting many students, critics say.

"These kids are growing up without seeing a person of authority of their race," says researcher Beatriz Chu Clewell of the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Institute.

In one study, Clewell found that Latino elementary school kids with Latino teachers do better, primarily in math, than with other teachers. Other studies, by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, found that black students are more likely to be labeled "mentally retarded" as the socioeconomic status of their school rises.

Some observers blame lack of diversity on a job that has lost prestige as it has become harder. Others say minority candidates simply have more opportunities.

When Dandy went into the field 40 years ago, "being a teacher was a great thing, a noble thing to aspire to. It's not so much a noble profession anymore. Everybody is dumping on teachers."

Some experts predicted 20 years ago that the proportion of minority teachers would plummet to 5% by now. It's only through a 20-year campaign to make the teaching force more diverse that minorities have the representation they do.

Private foundations, including the Ford Foundation and the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, have devoted more than \$ 100 million to helping recruit and keep minority teachers.

Efforts to get minority teachers' aides, substitutes and even cafeteria managers into teaching jobs have paid off, but the results are small, at least among blacks, says University of Pennsylvania researcher Richard Ingersoll, a leading expert on teacher workforce issues.

"Overall, it doesn't seem to have made a dent in things."

Better qualifications

Teachers are more qualified than ever -- at last count, in 1997, 98% had either a bachelor's, master's or specialist's degree, up from 84% in 1961. But Ingersoll and others say that new, more stringent requirements under No Child Left Behind could scare off many potential teachers, including minority and male candidates.

Ingersoll fears that, while the law requires all teachers to be "highly qualified" in every subject they teach, schools won't improve working conditions and sweeten salaries to offset the burden of coursework and certification. As states suffer through their worst budget crises in decades, it's unlikely that they'll be able to cover such costs.

Males vs. females

Researchers say the dearth of male teachers is affecting boys in unexpected ways.

Sally Shaywitz directs the Connecticut Longitudinal Study, which since 1983 has followed 445 students. In the study, schools identified three to four times as many boys as girls with reading problems, but when compared, their skills were remarkably alike. Shaywitz theorizes that this is because boys are generally less attentive and get bored more easily. In the study, 90% of second- and third-grade teachers were women.

Men make up only about 10% of elementary school teachers, but nearly half in middle and high school. Men are even losing ground here, NEA figures show: In 1971, they accounted for 55% of high school teachers; now it's 41%.

Many observers say teaching will always attract more women because it allows them to follow their children's schedules, complete with summers off.

But others say low salaries keep men, as well as many women, out of teaching. The average U.S. teacher's salary is \$ 45,822, the NEA says. In many Southern states, salaries are less than \$ 35,000; these states also have the fewest male teachers. Michigan, which has the most (37%), has the fifth-highest salary of any state, \$ 51,317, the NEA says.

But education-watchers see bright spots on the horizon. Cities including Denver; Jacksonville, and Columbus, Ohio, have tried unique approaches to attracting minorities, working with universities to establish "professional development schools" -- the public-school equivalent of a

teaching hospital. North Carolina is offering college students what amounts to a free ride if they agree to teach for several years in public schools.

"If you want to change those demographics, you've got to focus on doing something like that," Darling-Hammond says.

Others say they're encouraged by the popularity of alternative programs like **Teach For America**, which sends new college graduates into inner-city school districts, and Troops to Teachers, which trains former military personnel for careers in teaching.

"There have been great strides in this area. Hopefully, this will continue," says Mildred Hudson of Recruiting New Teachers, a Massachusetts non-profit group. "Our teachers should be excellent, and they should look like America."

Contributing: Anthony DeBarros

How schools have changed

Recruitment of non-white teachers hasn't kept up with diversity among U.S. students:

Teacher race/ethnicity

White, non-Hispanic
1987-1988 86.9%
1999-2000 84.3%

Black, non-Hispanic
1987-1988 8.2%
1999-2000 7.6%

Hispanic
1987-1988 2.9%
1999-2000 5.6%

Asian or Pacific Islander
1987-1988 0.9%
1999-2000 1.6%

American Indian or Alaskan Native
1987-1988 1.0%
1999-2000 0.9%

White, non-Hispanic
Fall 1986 70.4%
Fall 2000 61.2%

Black, non-Hispanic
Fall 1986 16.1%
Fall 2000 17.2%

Hispanic
Fall 1986 9.9%
Fall 2000 16.3%

Asian or Pacific Islander
Fall 1986 2.8 %
Fall 2000 4.1%

American Indian or Alaskan Native
Fall 1986 0.9%
Fall 2000 1.2%

Student race/ethnicity

Source: U.S. Department of Education (may not add up to 100% because of rounding)