



Report to the Chairman,  
Committee on Education and Labor,  
House of Representatives

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June 2022

# K-12 EDUCATION

Student Population  
Has Significantly  
Diversified, But Many  
Schools Remain  
Divided Along Racial,  
Ethnic, and Economic  
Lines

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104737](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

It is widely recognized that a history of discriminatory practices has contributed to inequities in education, intertwined with disparities in wealth, income, and housing. Because district boundaries typically define the schools a student can attend and public education is partially funded by local property tax revenues, lower-income communities generally have fewer resources available for schools. For example, GAO previously reported that students who are poor, Black, and Hispanic generally attend schools with fewer resources and worse outcomes.

GAO was asked to examine the prevalence and growth of segregation in K-12 public schools. This report examined the extent of (1) racial, ethnic, and economic divisions in K-12 public schools, and (2) district secession and any resulting student demographic shifts.

To determine the extent of divisions along racial, ethnic, and economic lines in schools, GAO analyzed demographic data from Education's Common Core of Data by school type, region, and community type, covering school years 2014-15 to 2020-21, the most recent available data since GAO last reported on this topic in 2016.

To identify the number and location of districts that seceded from school year 2009-10 through 2019-20, GAO analyzed and compared school district data from the Common Core of Data for the new and remaining districts in the year after secession to identify and describe any differences in demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

GAO incorporated technical comments from Education, as appropriate.

View [GAO-22-104737](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov).

June 2022

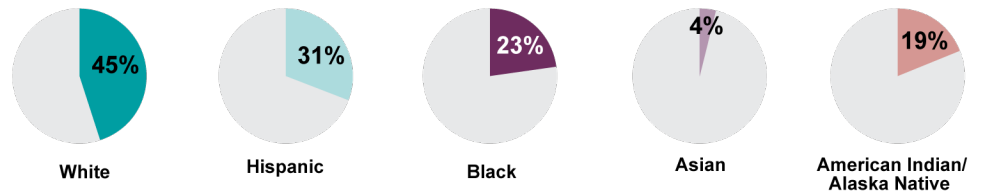
## K-12 EDUCATION

# Student Population Has Significantly Diversified, But Many Schools Remain Divided Along Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Lines

## What GAO Found

As the K-12 public school student population grows significantly more diverse, schools remain divided along racial, ethnic, and economic lines throughout the U.S. These divisions span school types, regions, and community types (urban, suburban, and rural). More than a third of students (about 18.5 million) attended a predominantly same-race/ethnicity school—where 75 percent or more of the student population is of a single race/ethnicity—according to GAO's analysis of Department of Education data for school year 2020-21. GAO also found that 14 percent of students attended schools where 90 percent or more of the students were of a single race/ethnicity.

**Percent of Public K-12 Students Attending School Where 75 Percent or More of the Students Are of Their Own Race/Ethnicity**

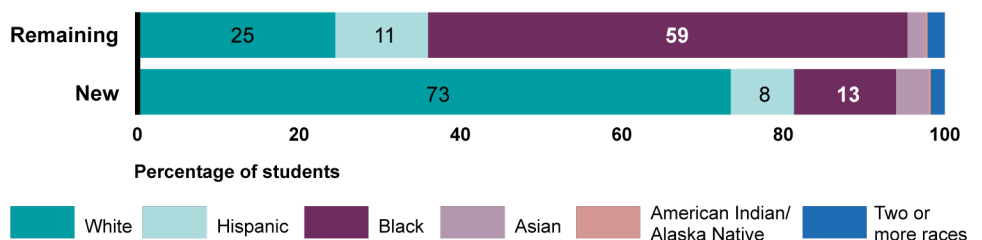


Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Education's Common Core of Data for school year 2020-21. | GAO-22-104737

Because diversity within a school is generally linked to the racial/ethnic composition of the district, school district boundaries can contribute to continued divisions along racial/ethnic lines. For example, about 13,500 predominately same-race/ethnicity schools (about 14 percent of all public K-12 schools) are located within 10 miles of a predominately same-race/ethnicity school of a different race/ethnicity; of these schools, 90 percent have a different same-race/ethnicity pair in a different school district.

GAO's analysis of 10 years of Education data shows that district secession—a process by which schools sever governance ties from an existing district to form a new district—generally resulted in shifts in racial/ethnic composition and wealth. Compared to remaining districts, new districts had, on average, roughly triple the share of White students, double the share of Asian students, two-thirds the share of Hispanic students, and one-fifth the share of Black students (see figure below). New districts were also generally wealthier than remaining districts. Specifically, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch—a proxy for poverty—was half that of the remaining districts.

**Racial/Ethnic Composition of New and Remaining Districts One Year after District Secession**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education's Common Core of Data for 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

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### Abbreviations

CCD	Common Core of Data
CEP	Community Eligibility Provision
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
Education	Department of Education
FRPL	free or reduced-price lunch
Justice	Department of Justice
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
OCR	Education Office for Civil Rights
Title IV	Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964
Title VI	Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964
Title IX	Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972

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June 16, 2022

The Honorable Robert C. “Bobby” Scott  
Chairman  
Committee on Education and Labor  
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Ensuring equal access to educational opportunity—a key component of the Department of Education’s mission—remains a persistent challenge. In a wide body of work, we have reported on significant socioeconomic and racial/ethnic inequities in the nation’s K-12 public schools. Students who are poor, Black, or Hispanic generally attend schools with fewer resources and worse outcomes (about 80 percent of students attending low-income schools are Black or Hispanic).<sup>1</sup> They are also more likely to be referred to alternative schools for disciplinary reasons, and Black students experience disproportionate and more severe discipline, which can remove them from classroom learning.<sup>2</sup> These inequities can have serious life-long implications, including lower earnings and less access to post-secondary education and skill building. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequities for these students. For example, GAO estimates that teachers who taught in a virtual environment for the majority of the year with mostly high-poverty students were about six to 23 times more likely to have students who lacked an appropriate workspace, compared to all other teachers in their grade-level band.<sup>3</sup> We also reported that over a million teachers reported having students who

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, GAO, *K-12 Education: Public High Schools with More Students in Poverty and Smaller Schools Provide Fewer Academic Offerings to Prepare for College*, [GAO-19-8](#) (Washington, D.C.: October 11, 2018); and GAO, *K-12 Education: Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination*, [GAO-16-345](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 21, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, GAO, *K-12 Education: Certain Groups of Students Attend Alternative Schools in Greater Proportions Than They Do Other Schools*, [GAO-19-373](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2019); and GAO, *K-12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities*, [GAO-18-258](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 22, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>GAO, *Pandemic Learning: Teachers Reported Many Obstacles for High-Poverty Students and English Learners As Well As Some Mitigating Strategies*, [GAO-22-105815](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2022).

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were registered to attend but never showed up for class in school year 2020-21.<sup>4</sup>

It is widely recognized that a history of discriminatory practices has contributed to inequities in education, which are intertwined with disparities in wealth, income, and housing.<sup>5</sup> The legacy of federal housing policies such as “red-lining”—a form of illegal disparate treatment—has contributed to racial, ethnic, and economic segregation, which, in turn, has contributed to disparities in education and wealth.<sup>6</sup> Previously red-lined neighborhoods often remain divided along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. About seventy percent of schoolchildren attend their local neighborhood schools. Public schools are primarily funded by state and local property taxes; and, at the local level, lower property values mean less local revenue to provide for public education, including providing funds to pay teachers, finance building maintenance, and pay for new or updated technology. Schools in poorer districts also tend to rely more heavily on federal funding to address the effects of poverty, such as achievement gaps that exist between poor students and their wealthier counterparts.

School district boundaries typically define which schools a student can attend. These boundaries can be fairly rigid and difficult to change. Sometimes new school districts are created through a process commonly

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<sup>4</sup>GAO, *COVID-19: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Accountability and Program Effectiveness of Federal Response*, [GAO-22-105051](#) (Washington, D.C.: October 27, 2021); and *K-12 Education: An Estimated 1.1 Million Teachers Nationwide Had At Least One Student Who Never Showed Up for Class in the 2020-21 School Year*, [GAO-22-104581](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 23, 2022. Reissued with Revisions on Apr. 19, 2022).

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, L. Burke and J. Schwalbach, *Housing Redlining and Its Lingering Effects on Education Opportunity*, No. 3594 (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, Center for Education Policy, March 11, 2021), <http://report.heritage.org/bg3594>. T. Monarrez and C. Chien, *Dividing Lines: Racially Unequal School Boundaries in US Public School Systems*, (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, Center on Education Data and Policy, September 2021). R. Rothstein, “The Racial Achievement Gap, Segregated Schools, and Segregated Neighborhoods – A Constitutional Insult,” *Race and Social Problems* 6(4) (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, November 12, 2014).

<sup>6</sup>For information on current trends, key facts, drivers of uncertainty, and policy implications of racial and ethnic disparities, see GAO, *Trends Affecting Government and Society*, [GAO-22-3SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 2022). Redlining is a form of illegal disparate treatment in which a lender provides unequal access to credit, or unequal terms of credit, because of the “race, color, national origin,” or other prohibited characteristic(s) of the residents of the area in which the credit seeker resides or will reside or in which the residential property to be mortgaged is located.

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referred to as “district secession.” District secession occurs when one or more schools sever governance ties from an existing school district and form their own new district. District secession has an impact on which public schools are assigned to which neighborhoods, and therefore, can affect socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of school districts, as well as local tax revenues available to them. State laws and requirements regarding school district secession vary.<sup>7</sup>

You asked us to examine the prevalence and growth of segregation in K-12 public schools. This report examines the extent of (1) racial, ethnic, and economic division in K-12 public schools; and (2) district secession and any resulting socioeconomic and demographic shifts.

To determine the extent of racial/ethnic and economic division in K-12 public schools, we analyzed demographic data from the Department of Education’s Common Core of Data, covering school year 2014-15 to school year 2020-21—the most recent available data since we last reported on this topic in 2016.<sup>8</sup> The Common Core of Data is a national dataset that annually collects information on the characteristics of all K-12 public schools and students in the United States. We also analyzed the data by school type and location. We characterized schools with populations of 75 percent or more students of a single race/ethnicity as “predominantly same-race/ethnicity” and schools with a population of 90 percent or more students of a single race/ethnicity as “almost-exclusively same-race/ethnicity” schools.<sup>9</sup> In addition to our analysis of predominately same-race/ethnicity schools, for some analyses on economic division, we also analyzed schools in which Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students together make up 75 percent or more of the student population. We combined these groups because census data

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<sup>7</sup>According to a 2017 report by EdBuild, state laws can include requirements such as a majority vote in the seceding neighborhood, multistep processes involving approval from a state agency or the legislature, or socioeconomic impact analysis. EdBuild, *Fractured: The Breakdown of America’s School Districts* (June 2017), <https://edbuild.org/content/fractured/fractured-full-report.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup>See GAO- K-12 Education: *Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination*, [GAO-16-345](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 21, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>In our analyses, we included the following races/ethnicities: White, Hispanic, Black, Asian (including Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander), American Indian/Alaska Native, and two or more races. While Hispanic is an ethnicity rather than a race as defined in the Common Core of Data, the categories are mutually exclusive. As such, White and Black racial categories exclude White Hispanic and Black Hispanic people.



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indicate they have significantly higher rates of poverty than White and Asian students.

To analyze district secessions, we identified the number and location of districts that seceded from the 2009-10 through 2019-20 school years using the Common Core of Data. After developing a comprehensive list of districts that states had identified as new districts and districts that had boundary changes, we refined the list to include only districts with schools that had previously been part of other districts. We further refined our list to exclude districts that experienced changes other than secession, such as district mergers or closures. This left us with a list of 36 new districts. We compared the characteristics of the 36 new districts to the districts from which they seceded to identify and describe any demographic and socioeconomic changes that occurred after the secession.

We determined that the data from the Common Core of Data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report by reviewing documentation about the systems used to produce the data and interviewing Education officials. Our analyses of Education's data in this report are intended to describe demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of schools pre- and post-secession; they should not be used to make conclusions about the presence or absence of unlawful discrimination or illegal segregation or compliance with federal or state laws and regulations.

We also reviewed relevant federal laws and interviewed relevant federal officials, as well as researchers who had knowledge of or had researched key concepts under study. See appendix I for more detailed information on our scope and methodology.

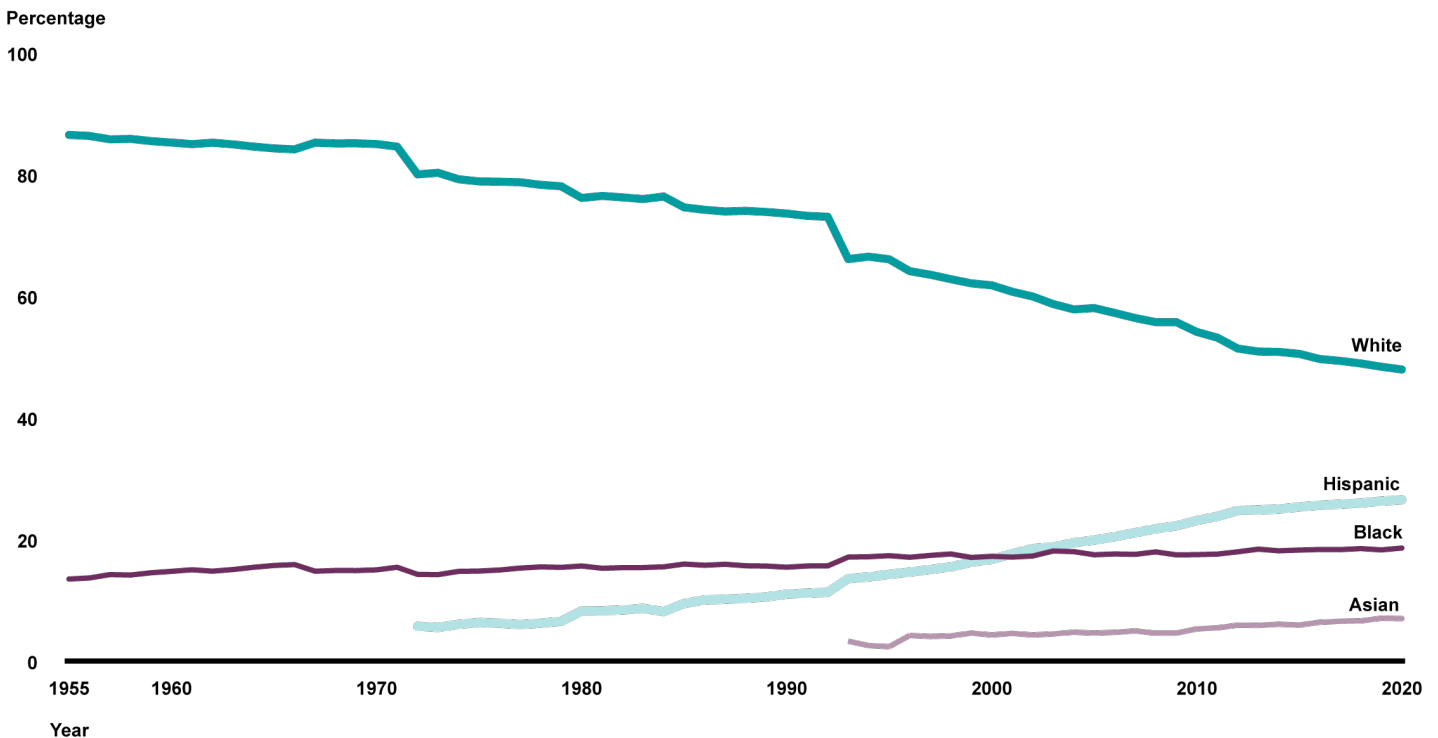
We conducted this performance audit from January 2021 through June 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

## Background

### Demographic Shifts in K-12 and Overall U.S. Populations

Over time, the composition of the K-12 public school population has become increasingly less White and increasingly more diverse. (See fig. 1.) In the 1950s, White students comprised the overwhelming majority (nearly 90 percent), followed by Black students (over 10 percent). Education’s most recent public school enrollment data for school year 2020-21 shows that White students (the largest single racial group) now represent less than half of K–12 public school enrollment, with Hispanic and Black students representing the next-largest groups (28 and 15 percent, respectively) (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). The U.S. Census Bureau projects that people who identify as two or more races will be the fastest-growing racial/ethnic group in the U.S. over the next several decades, followed by Asians, then Hispanics. If these projections materialize as expected, White students will represent an increasingly smaller share of the K–12 student population over time.

**Figure 1: Changes in K-12 Public School Enrollment from 1955 through 2020, by Race/Ethnicity**

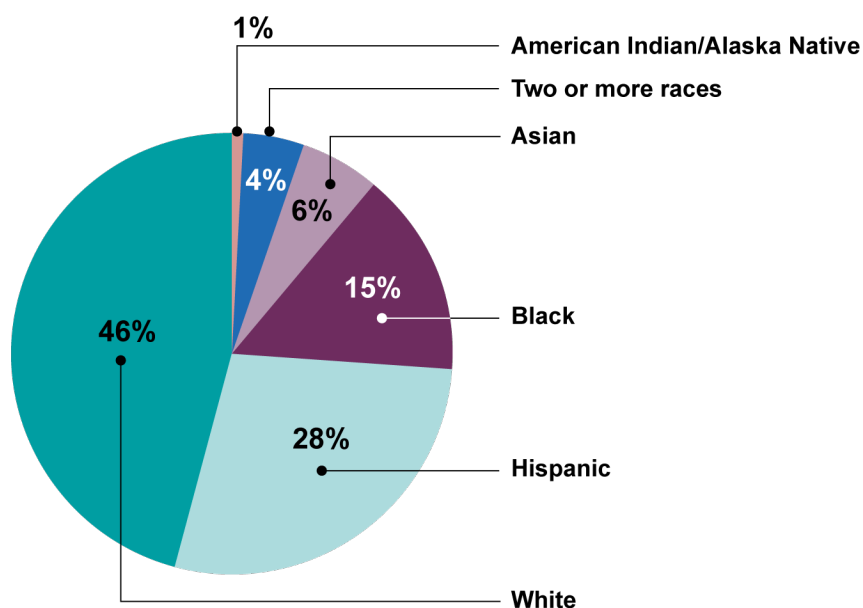


Source: GAO analysis of data from the Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, 1955-2019. | GAO-22-104737

Note: In constructing data for the White population, we used “White alone, not Hispanic” after this category was available starting in 1993. We used “Black alone or in combination with another race”

and “Asian alone or in combination with another race” to characterize Black and Asian populations respectively in the years those data were available, starting in 2003. Because these categories are not mutually exclusive, there is some double counting between Black, Asian, and Hispanic categories. These Current Population Survey data do not break out data on the American Indian/Alaska Native population.

**Figure 2: Nationwide K-12 Public School Enrollment, by Race/Ethnicity, School Year 2020-21**



Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Education’s Common Core of Data for school year 2020-21. | GAO-22-104737

Note: Hispanic people can be any race, but in Education’s Common Core of Data (CCD), Hispanic people are only included in the Hispanic category, and not in the other White, Black, or Asian categories. As a result, the CCD’s White category is non-Hispanic White, and the Black category is non-Hispanic Black, for example.

As has historically been the case, the poverty rates for Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students are significantly higher than those of White and Asian students. In 2019, the percentages of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native children living in poverty were two to three times higher than those of White and Asian students.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, *American Community Survey (ACS)*, 2019, prepared by National Center for Education Statistics in December 2020

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## Studies on Race/Ethnicity and Poverty and on Academic Outcomes

Academic outcomes are closely linked to a student's race/ethnicity and level of poverty. In 2019, about twice as many fourth graders who were White or Asian (groups with generally lower levels of poverty) scored at or above proficient on a national education assessment as their Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander counterparts (groups with generally higher levels of poverty).<sup>11</sup> An extensive body of research shows that schools with higher concentrations of students from low-income families were generally associated with worse academic outcomes, and schools with higher concentrations of students from middle- and high-income families were generally associated with better outcomes.

Further, while studies have found that living in poverty accounted for a portion of the differences in academic outcomes, differences in academic outcomes by race/ethnicity still exist even after accounting for income. For example, two national studies conducted by Education found reading and math achievement gaps between both White and Black and White and Hispanic fourth grade students. While the achievement gap narrowed after controlling for differences in poverty among students, a gap still remained.<sup>12</sup>

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## Relevant Federal Civil Rights Laws, Federal Desegregation Orders and Plans, and the Federal Role

Ten years after the Supreme Court unanimously held that state laws establishing racially segregated public schools were unconstitutional, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted to prohibit discrimination in schools, employment, and places of public accommodation. Title VI of the act specifically prohibits discrimination on the basis of "race, color, or national

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<sup>11</sup>Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, "National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2019 Reading Assessments."

<sup>12</sup>F. Hemphill, A. Vanneman, and T. Rahman, *Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress*, NCES 2011-459 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, June 2011). A. Vanneman, L. Hamilton, J. Baldwin Anderson, and T. Rahman, *Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress*, NCES 2009-455 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, July 2009).

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origin” in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance.<sup>13</sup> With regard to K-12 public schools, Title VI generally extends to state educational agencies, school districts, and vocational schools, among others. Title IV authorizes Education to provide technical assistance to states or school districts in preparing, adopting, and implementing desegregation plans, to arrange for training for school personnel on dealing with educational problems caused by desegregation, and to provide grants to school boards for staff training or hiring specialists to address desegregation. Additionally, Title IV gives the Attorney General authority to address certain complaints of discrimination alleging denials of equal protection to students based on “race, color, sex, religion, or national origin” by public schools and institutions of higher learning.<sup>14</sup> Title IX of the act authorizes the Department of Justice to intervene in lawsuits alleging constitutional violations.<sup>15</sup>

Both Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and Justice’s Civil Rights Division’s Educational Opportunities Section investigate complaints or reports of discrimination and harassment on the basis of certain protected classes, including race, color, and national origin. Investigations may cover many facets of education, including academic programs, resource comparability, student treatment and services, counseling and guidance, discipline, classroom assignment, grading, vocational education, recreation, physical education, athletics, and employment. Both offices

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<sup>13</sup>Specifically, Title VI provides that “[n]o person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” Each federal agency that provides federal financial assistance is responsible for ensuring compliance with this requirement. See 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000d–2000d-7. While this report also addresses issues related to socioeconomic status, such status is not a protected class under federal law.

<sup>14</sup>42 U.S.C. §§ 2000c-2000c-9.

<sup>15</sup>42 U.S.C. § 2000h-2. Justice is also responsible for enforcing the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, which, among other things, prohibits states from denying equal educational opportunity to individuals, including deliberate segregation of students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. See 20 U.S.C. §§ 1701-1758.

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maintain searchable information on closed cases (such as case findings, resolutions, and settlement agreements) on their websites.<sup>16</sup>

Typically, determinations about segregation and discrimination by school districts have been made by Education's OCR or by courts. When school districts have been found to have engaged in unlawful segregation, desegregation plans or orders have been used to remedy the unlawful conduct.<sup>17</sup> In some cases, districts enter into voluntary agreements with OCR, which require the districts to develop and implement desegregation plans. OCR is responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance with these plans. In other cases, desegregation was court ordered or resulted from a settlement agreement. When the U.S. is a party to a civil case in which desegregation is court ordered or a settlement agreement is reached, Justice represents the U.S. as counsel. Other desegregation orders involve only private parties in state or federal courts, or state agencies that have ordered districts to desegregate.<sup>18</sup>

Desegregation plans or orders may address a variety of issues, such as student assignments to schools and classes; faculty and staff hiring and assignments; building conditions and resources; and athletics and other extracurricular activities. Desegregation plans or orders may impose various requirements or remedies that districts must take to desegregate

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<sup>16</sup>OCR provides access to case resolutions reached on or after October 1, 2013 at <https://ocrcas.ed.gov/ocr-search>. OCR also maintains a list of open investigations online at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/investigations/open-investigations/index.html>. Justice lists some of its cases sorted by protected class with links to case summaries and related important information at <https://www.justice.gov/crt/educational-opportunities-cases#race>.

<sup>17</sup>According to Justice, the purpose of desegregation orders is to ensure that state-sponsored segregation is eradicated.

<sup>18</sup>Litigation may occur in both state and federal courts. Justice is only involved in federal cases and may not be involved in every desegregation or discrimination case at the federal level.

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their schools or otherwise comply with the law.<sup>19</sup> For example, according to Justice officials, desegregation orders may require creating or closing schools, redrawing attendance zones, creating advisory committees, addressing inequities in school facilities and construction, or reassigning or desegregating faculty. A federal desegregation order may be lifted when the court determines that the school district has complied in good faith with the order since it was entered and has eliminated all vestiges of past unlawful discrimination to the extent practicable, which is commonly referred to as achieving unitary status.<sup>20</sup>

The House Committee on Appropriations, in a Fiscal Year 2022 committee report accompanying the Labor, Health, and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies appropriations bill, urged OCR to make a report publicly available on Education’s website, detailing a comprehensive list of all existing federal desegregation orders in the United States, their principle requirements, and the status of the affected districts’ compliance with these orders.<sup>21</sup> OCR agreed to do so and told us that it is still determining how best to accomplish this.

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<sup>19</sup>Desegregation orders or plans may only provide certain remedies. For example, the Supreme Court has held that “[a] federal court may not impose a multidistrict, area wide remedy for single-district *de jure* school segregation violations, where there is no finding that the other included school districts have failed to operate unitary school systems or have committed acts that effected segregation within the other districts, there is no claim or finding that the school district boundary lines were established with the purpose of fostering racial segregation, and there is no meaningful opportunity for the included neighboring school districts to present evidence or be heard on the propriety of a multidistrict remedy or on the question of constitutional violations by those districts.” *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717, 718 (1974).

<sup>20</sup>In deciding whether a district has achieved unitary status and whether a desegregation order should be lifted, courts should “look not only at student assignments, but to” “every facet of school operations—faculty, staff, transportation, extracurricular activities, and facilities.” *Bd. of Educ. of Oklahoma City Pub. Sch. v. Dowell*, 498 U.S. 237, 249-51 (1991) (quoting *Green v. Cty. Sch. Bd. of New Kent Cty.*, 391 U.S. 430, 435 (1969)).

<sup>21</sup>The committee report directed this action to address the Committee’s concern about the lack of transparency around federal desegregation orders, stating “there is no clear or accurate reporting or transparency on the number of federal desegregation orders, the status of these orders, or the impact they have had on segregation in districts.” H.R. Rep.No. 117-96 (2022).

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## Widespread Division along Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Lines Remains in U.S. K-12 Schools

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### A Substantial Portion of Students Attend Schools Divided by Race, Ethnicity, and Poverty

#### Race/Ethnicity

#### **What Is a Predominantly Same-Race/Ethnicity School vs. an Almost-Exclusively Same-Race/Ethnicity School?**

We defined a predominantly same-race/ethnicity school as one where 75 percent or more of the student population is the same race/ethnicity. When we identify schools as being predominantly of a certain race/ethnicity, (e.g., “predominantly White schools”), we mean schools in which 75 percent or more of the students are of that race/ethnicity.

We defined an almost-exclusively same-race/ethnicity school as one where 90 percent or more of the student population is the same race/ethnicity. Similarly, when we identify schools as almost exclusively of a certain race/ethnicity (e.g., “almost-exclusively White schools”) we mean schools where 90 percent or more of the students are of that race/ethnicity.

Source GAO: | GAO-22-104737

The proportion of K-12 public school students attending a predominately same-race/ethnicity school declined slightly from 42 percent in school year 2014-15 to about 38 percent (about 18.5 million students) in 2020-21. Nearly half of White students attended schools predominantly with students of their own race/ethnicity compared to nearly a third of Hispanic students and nearly a quarter of Black students in school year 2020-21.<sup>22</sup>

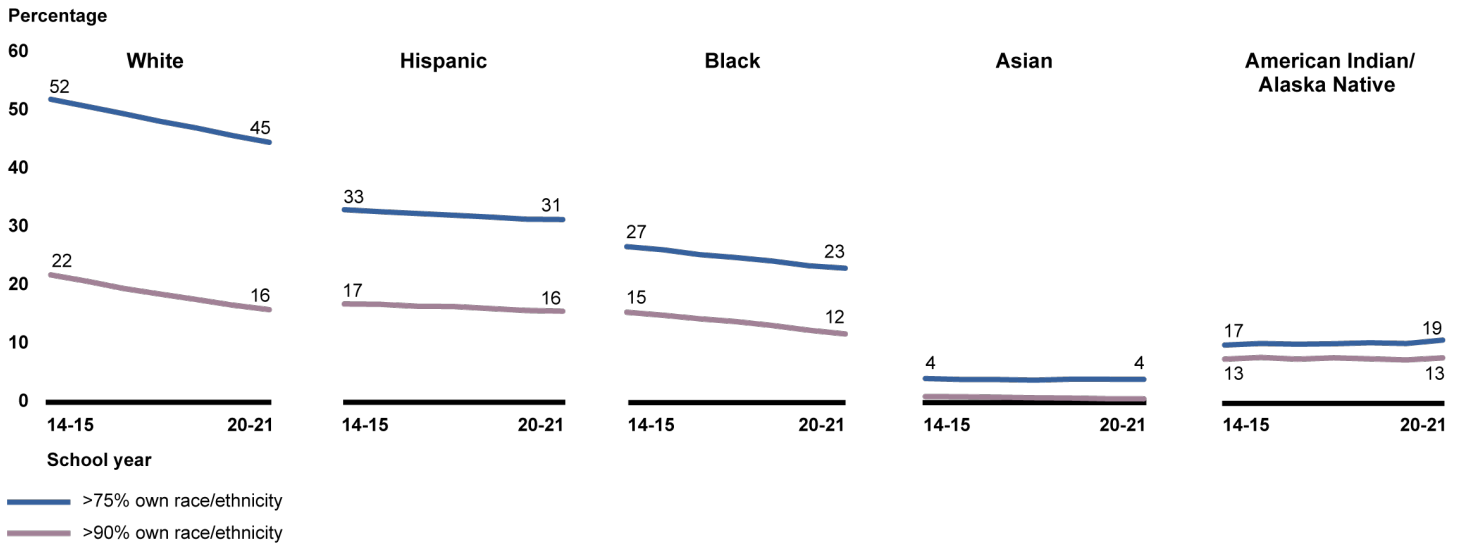
Fourteen percent of the K-12 school population (about 7 million students) attended almost-exclusively same-race/ethnicity schools. Said another way, more than one in 10 White, Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students attended a school that was almost exclusively comprised of students of their own race/ethnicity (see fig. 3).

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<sup>22</sup>Overall, predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools declined between school years 2014-15 and 2020-21, from 47 to 43 percent of schools. For individual races/ethnicities, predominantly White schools declined while predominantly Hispanic schools increased slightly—going from 7.4 to 8.4 percent of schools—and other predominantly same-race schools remained the same over this period.



**Figure 3: Percentage of Students, by Race/Ethnicity, Attending Schools Where 75 Percent or More, or 90 Percent or More, of Students Are of Their Own Race/Ethnicity, from School Year 2014-15 to 2020-21.**



Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Education’s Common Core of Data, for school years 2014-15 to 2020-21. | GAO-22-104737

Note: The percent of Asian students attending schools that were almost exclusively Asian was less than 1 percent in all years. Two or more races is omitted from this figure because the percentages are too small to appear in a chart.

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## Race/Ethnicity and Poverty

### **What is a Predominantly Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native School vs. an Almost-Exclusively Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native School?**

We defined a predominantly Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native school as one where Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students together make up 75 percent or more of the student population.

We defined an almost-exclusively Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native school as one where Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students together make up 90 percent or more of the student population. For some analyses, we combined these groups together because census data indicate they have significantly higher rates of poverty than White and Asian students.

Source: GAO | GAO-22-104737

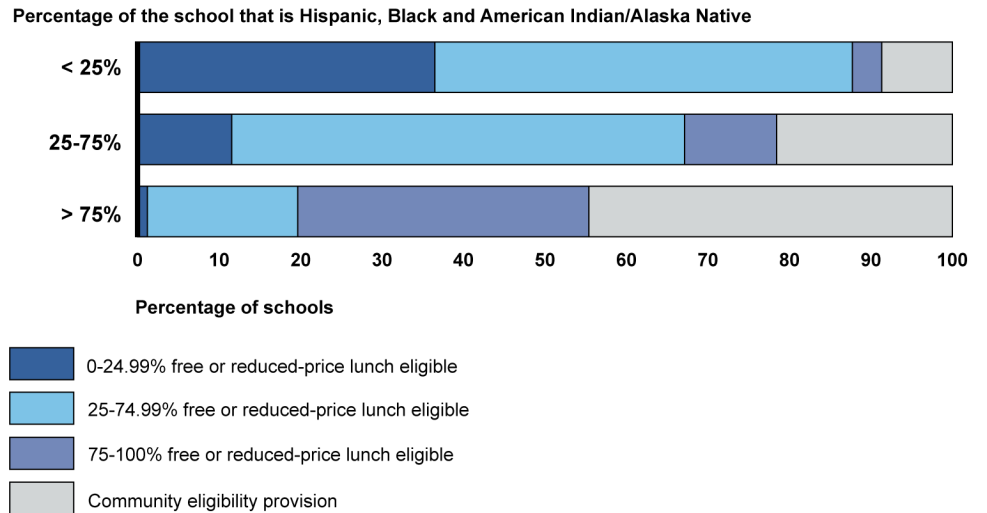
While the percentage of students attending predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools declined between school year 2014-15 and 2020-21, the percentage attending schools where the population of Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students together was 75 percent or more increased slightly (from 22 to 24 percent) over this period. About half of all Hispanic students, half of all Black students, and about one-third of American Indian/Alaska Native students attended one of these schools.

The well-established link between race/ethnicity and poverty is also evident in these schools. Specifically, 80 percent of predominately Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native schools have at least 75 percent of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—a proxy for poverty—compared to 12 percent in schools in which these racial/ethnic groups were less than 25 percent of the student population (see fig. 4).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Includes schools that adopted the Community Eligibility Provision of the National School Lunch Program, which allows schools, a group of schools, or school districts where poverty is high to provide free lunch to all their students.

**Figure 4: Schools by Percentage of Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native Students and by the Percentage of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch, in School Year 2020-21**



Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Education's Common Core of Data for school year 2020-21. | GAO-22-104737

Note: Community Eligibility Provision refers to schools that have adopted the Community Eligibility Provision of the National School Lunch Program. This provision allows schools, a group of schools, or school districts where poverty is high to provide free lunch to all their students.

**Students in Almost-Exclusively Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native Schools Are Divided Along Racial/Ethnic and Economic Lines**

More than one-quarter of Hispanic and Black students, and more than one-fifth of American Indian/Alaska Native students, attended an almost-exclusively Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native school and these students as a group have higher rates of poverty. In comparison, nearly a third of White students attended a school that was almost-exclusively White, Asian, and multi-racial and these students as a group have lower rates of poverty.

Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data, school year 2020-21 | GAO-22-104737

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## Schools Divided along Racial/Ethnic Lines Are Pervasive Across School Types and Urbanicity

### By School Type

Our analysis showed traditional public, charter, and magnet schools divided along racial/ethnic lines in school year 2020-21.<sup>24</sup> (See fig. 5.) Specifically:

#### What Are Charter and Magnet Schools?

Charter schools are public schools typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract—a charter—with the state, the district, or another entity. Through the Department of Education's Charter School Program, charter schools may receive funding to start up and expand enrollment in charter schools. This program gives priority to charter schools that serve underserved students, many of whom are students of color.

Magnet schools are public schools that generally operate as a form of intra-district school choice. Magnet schools attract students across school boundary lines, usually by providing a themed academic or social focus such as science/math, performing arts, or foreign language. Many are designed to assist in desegregation by encouraging the voluntary enrollment of students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, but not all magnet schools have a desegregative purpose.

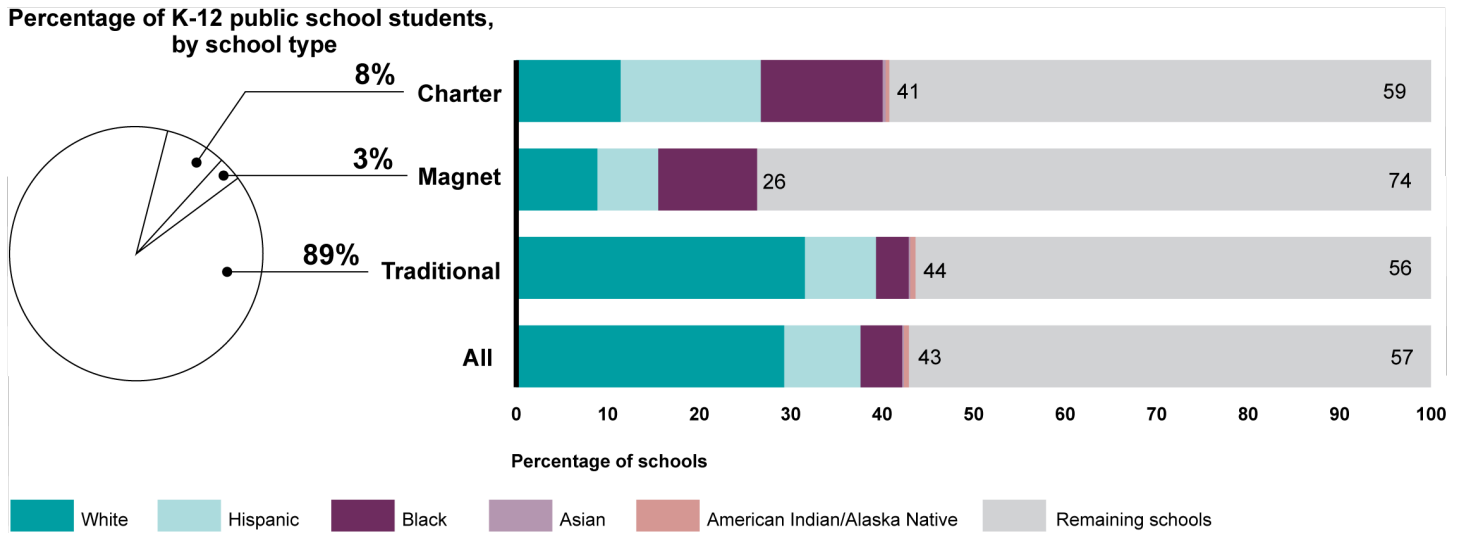
Source: GAO | GAO-22-104737

- 44 percent of traditional public schools were predominantly same-race/ethnicity; the majority of these were predominantly White. Nearly 90 percent of all K-12 students attended traditional public schools.
- More than a third (41 percent) of charter schools and about a quarter (26 percent) of magnet schools were predominantly same-race/ethnicity, the majority of which were predominantly Black or Hispanic. Although many magnet schools were established to assist in the desegregation of schools, about one in four magnet schools are predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools.

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<sup>24</sup>We found similar racial/ethnic isolation patterns in almost-exclusively same-race/ethnicity schools and schools that are predominantly Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native combined compared to patterns found among predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools.

**Figure 5: Percentage of K-12 Public Schools That Were Predominantly (75% or more) Same-Race/Ethnicity, by School Type, in School Year 2020-21**



Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Education’s Common Core of Data for school year 2020-21. | GAO-22-104737

Note: The number of schools that are predominately made up of students of two or more races is too small to appear on this chart.

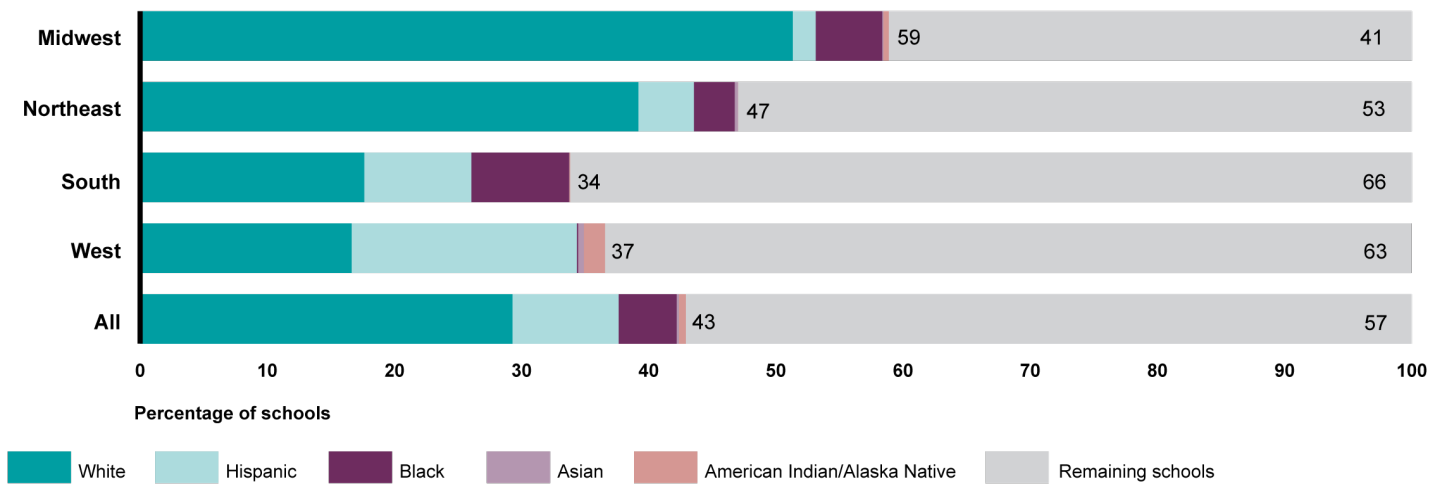
## Across Regions

For both predominantly same-race/ethnicity and almost-exclusively same-race/ethnicity schools, we found division along racial/ethnic lines in every region of the country in school year 2020-21.<sup>25</sup> For example:

- The Midwest and the Northeast had the highest percentages of predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools, and the majority of these schools were predominantly White (see figs. 6 and 7).
- Among these predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools, the West had more predominately Hispanic schools and the South had more predominately Hispanic and predominantly Black schools compared to other regions.

<sup>25</sup>We found similar racial/ethnic isolation patterns in almost-exclusively same-race/ethnicity schools compared to patterns found among predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools.

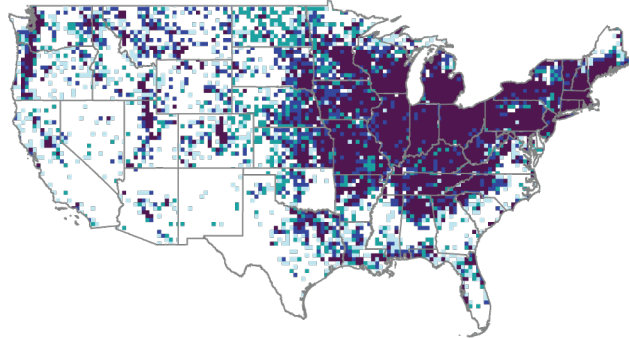
**Figure 6: Percentage of Schools That Are Predominantly (75% or more) Same-Race/Ethnicity, by Region, in School Year 2020-21**



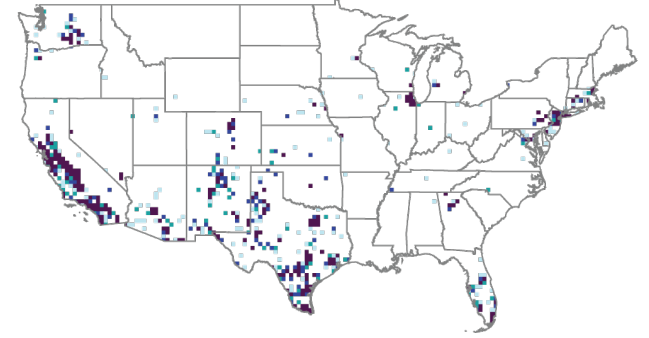
Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Education's Common Core of Data for school year 2020-21. | GAO-22-104737

**Figure 7: Location of Predominantly (75% or more) Same-Race/Ethnicity Schools, by Race/Ethnicity, in School Year 2020-21**

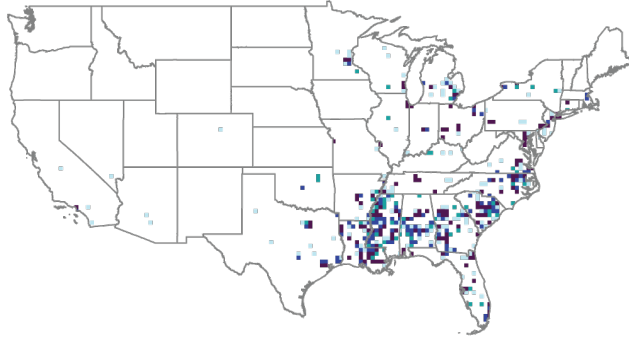
Number of schools where 75% or more of students are White



Number of schools where 75% or more of students are Hispanic



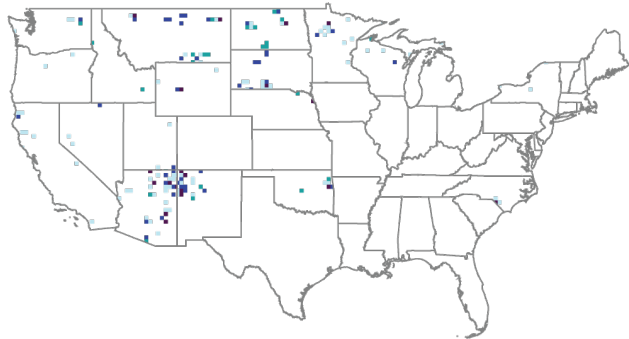
Number of schools where 75% or more of students are Black



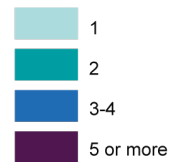
Number of schools where 75% or more of students are Asian



Number of schools where 75% or more of students are American Indian/Alaska Native



Schools per district



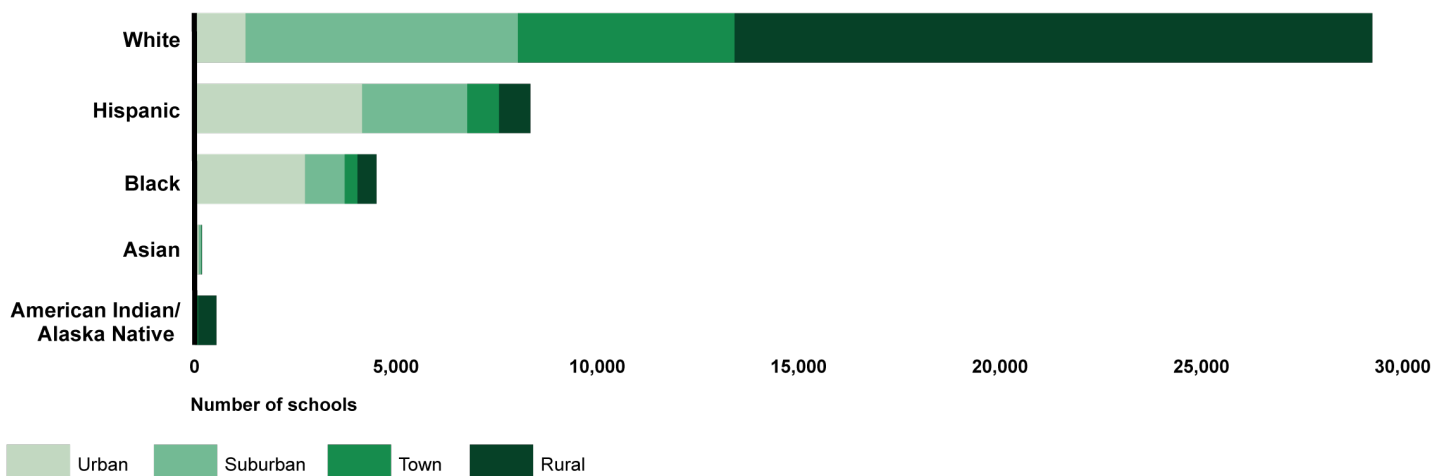
Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

Note: Predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools are defined as those schools where 75 percent or more of the student population was of the same race/ethnicity.

## Urbanicity

We found predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas. (See fig. 8.) Predominantly White schools are more often in rural areas, while predominantly Black and Hispanic schools are generally located in urban and suburban locales.

**Figure 8: Number of Predominantly (75% or more) Same-Race/Ethnicity Schools, by Race/Ethnicity, by Locale, in School Year 2020-21**



Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Education's Common Core of Data for school year 2020-21. | GAO-22-104737

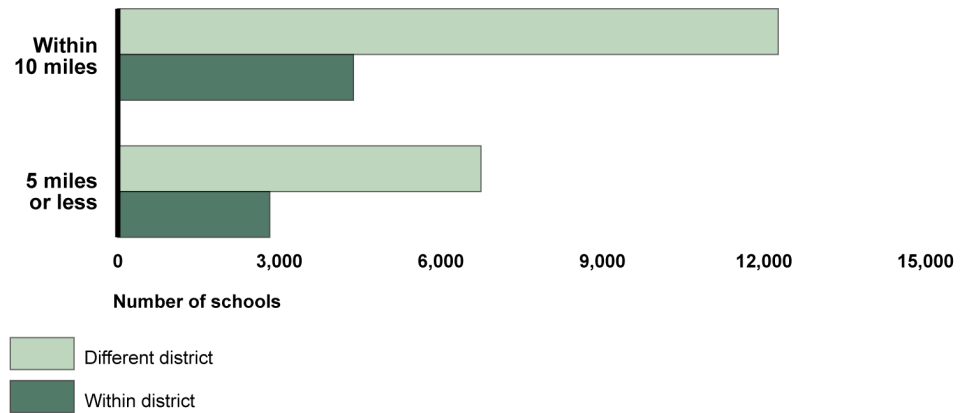
## In Close Proximity

Our analysis showed that predominately same-race/ethnicity schools of different races/ethnicities exist in close proximity to one another within districts, but most commonly exist among neighboring districts (see fig. 9). Specifically, nearly 8,000 predominantly same-race/ethnicity schools (8 percent of all K-12 public schools) exist within 5 miles of another same-race/ethnicity school and over 13,000 (14 percent of schools) exist within 10 miles of another same-race/ethnicity school. Furthermore, ninety percent of schools with a different same-race/ethnicity school within 10 miles has such a paired school in a different school district.<sup>26</sup> Because school district boundaries typically define which schools a student can attend, school district boundaries can contribute to continued division along racial/ethnic lines.

<sup>26</sup>86 percent of schools with a different same-race/ethnicity school within 5 miles have such a paired school in a different school district.



**Figure 9: Number of Predominantly (75% or more) Same-Race/Ethnicity Schools in Close Proximity to Another Predominantly Same-Race/Ethnicity School of a Different Race/Ethnicity (within same district or in a different school district), School Year 2020-21**



Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Education's Common Core of Data for school year 2020-21. | GAO-22-104737

## Seceding Districts Were Generally Whiter and Wealthier than Districts They Left, with Some Regional Exceptions

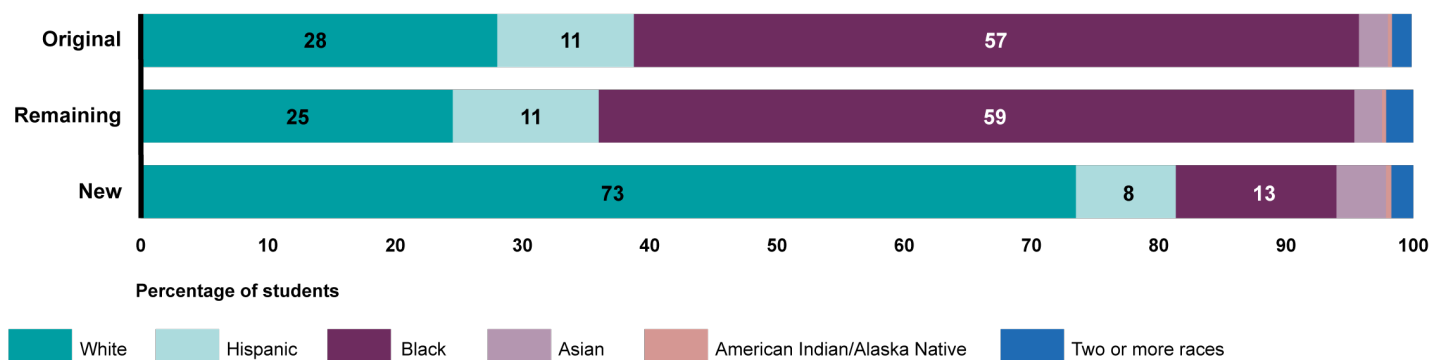
Overall, Seceding Districts Had Higher Percentages of White and Asian Students than Districts They Left

We identified 36 new school districts that seceded from existing districts from school years 2009-10 through 2019-20.<sup>27</sup> These districts were located in seven states—Alabama, Arkansas, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Utah. Overall, one year after seceding, the new districts had larger percentages of White and Asian students and lower percentages of Black and Hispanic students, compared to the districts they left. Specifically, on average, the new districts' share of White students was almost triple and the share of Asian students was almost double the share of the districts they left. In contrast, the share of

<sup>27</sup>Each secession created one new district.

Black students was about one-fifth of the percentage of the districts they left. (See fig. 10.)

**Figure 10: Racial/Ethnic Composition of Students in New and Remaining Districts 1 Year after Secession and in Original District Prior to Secession for the 36 Secessions, School Years 2009-10 to 2019-20**

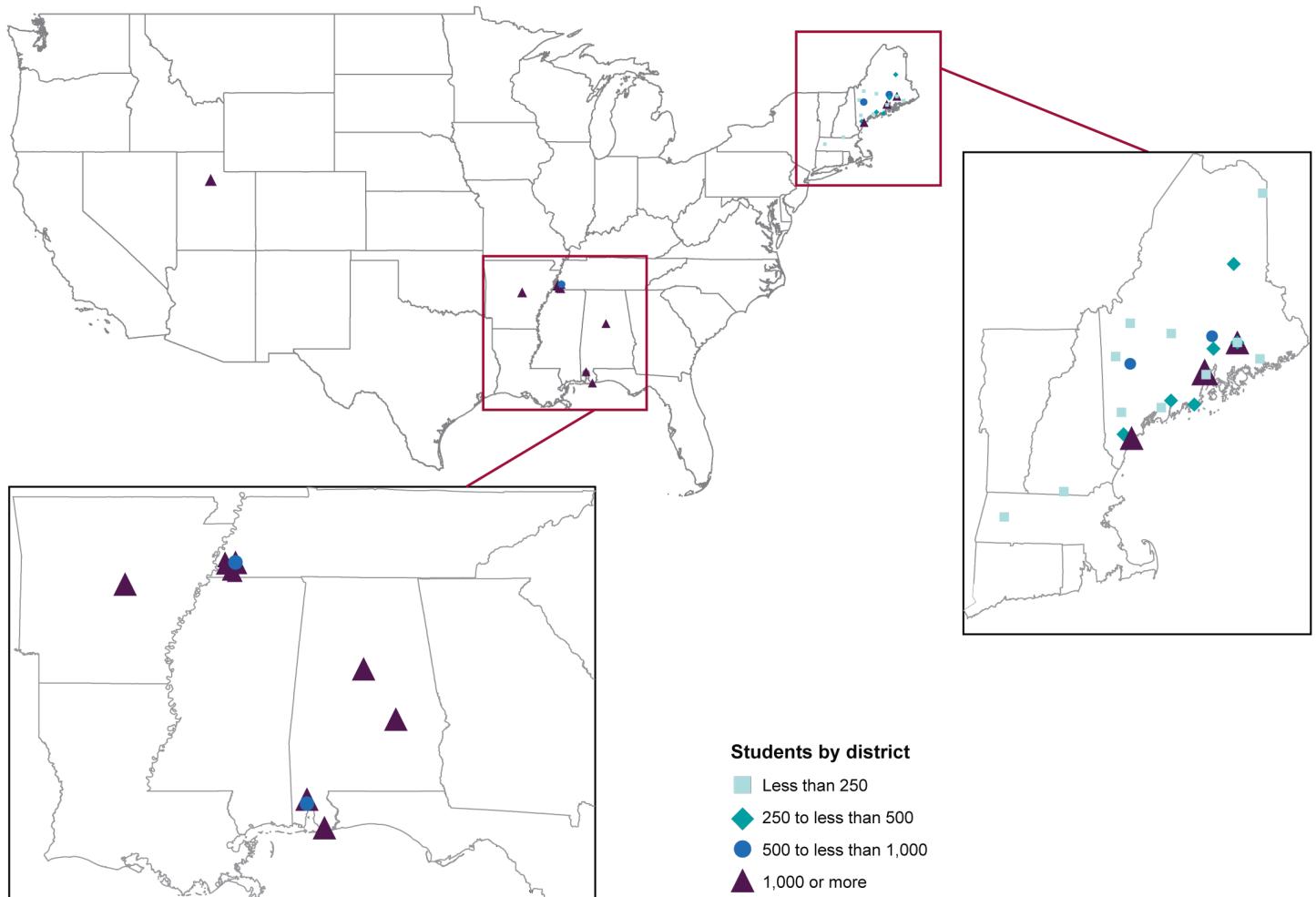


Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

### The Greatest Number of Secessions Occurred in the Northeast but Those in the South and West Affected Far More Students

Small rural districts in Maine and New Hampshire accounted for about 60 percent of secessions, whereas those in Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Utah (mostly suburban districts) affected the majority of students (nearly 90 percent). (See fig. 11.)

**Figure 11: Locations of the 36 District Secessions, School Years 2009-10 to 2019-20**

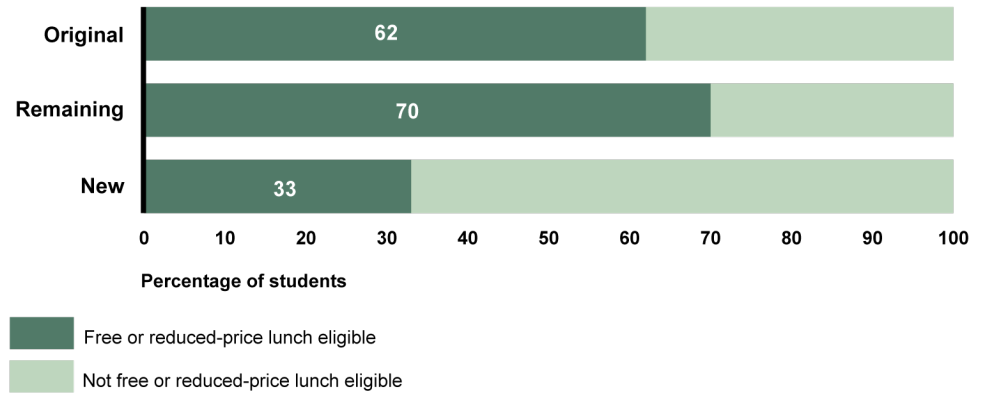


Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

## Seceding Districts Were Generally Wealthier than Districts They Left

Seceding (new) districts were generally wealthier than the original and remaining districts. On average, 33 percent of students in new districts were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch compared to 62 percent of students in the original districts and 70 percent of students in the remaining districts. (See fig 12.) The size of this difference varied widely among districts. The largest difference occurred in a Tennessee district, where 7 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in the new district compared to 80 percent in the remaining district. The smallest occurred in a Maine district where there was a 1 percentage-point difference between the new and remaining district.

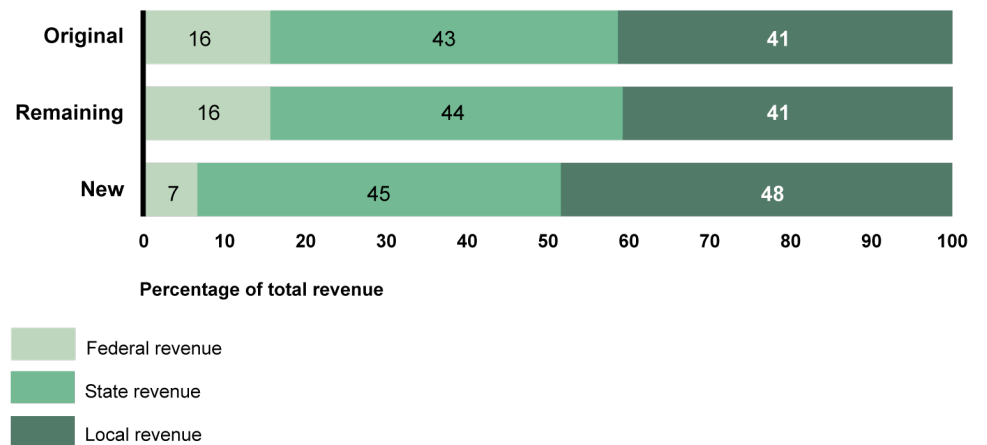
**Figure 12: Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility in New and Remaining Districts 1 Year after Secession and in Original District Prior to Secession for the 36 Secessions, School Years 2009-10 to 2019-20**



Source: GAO analysis of Education’s Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

Another measure of the relative wealth of school districts is the proportion of funding from federal versus state and local sources. This is because a significant amount of federal funding for K-12 education is typically targeted to low-income districts. We found that the proportion of federal funds was generally lower in new districts than in original or remaining districts. (See fig. 13.)

**Figure 13: Share of Federal, State, and Local Revenue in New and Remaining Districts 1 Year after Secession, and in Original Districts Prior to Secession for the 36 Secessions, School Years 2009-10 to 2019-20**



Source: GAO analysis of Education’s Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

Note: Due to rounding, shares may not total to 100 percent.

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**While Seceding Districts  
Were Generally Wealthier  
and Whiter, There Were  
Exceptions**

**Southern region.** There were 13 district secessions in three states. Nine of the 13 new districts were Whiter and wealthier than the original or remaining districts, and four were more Hispanic or Black and poorer; three of those four were under active federal desegregation orders or plans at the time of secession.

**Alabama Overview:** (See fig. 14.)

**Number of secessions:** 6 secessions from 4 districts

**Students affected:** About 14,700

**Average new district size:** About 2,450 students

**Outcomes:** Three of the new districts were Whiter and wealthier.  
Three were more Black or Hispanic and poorer.

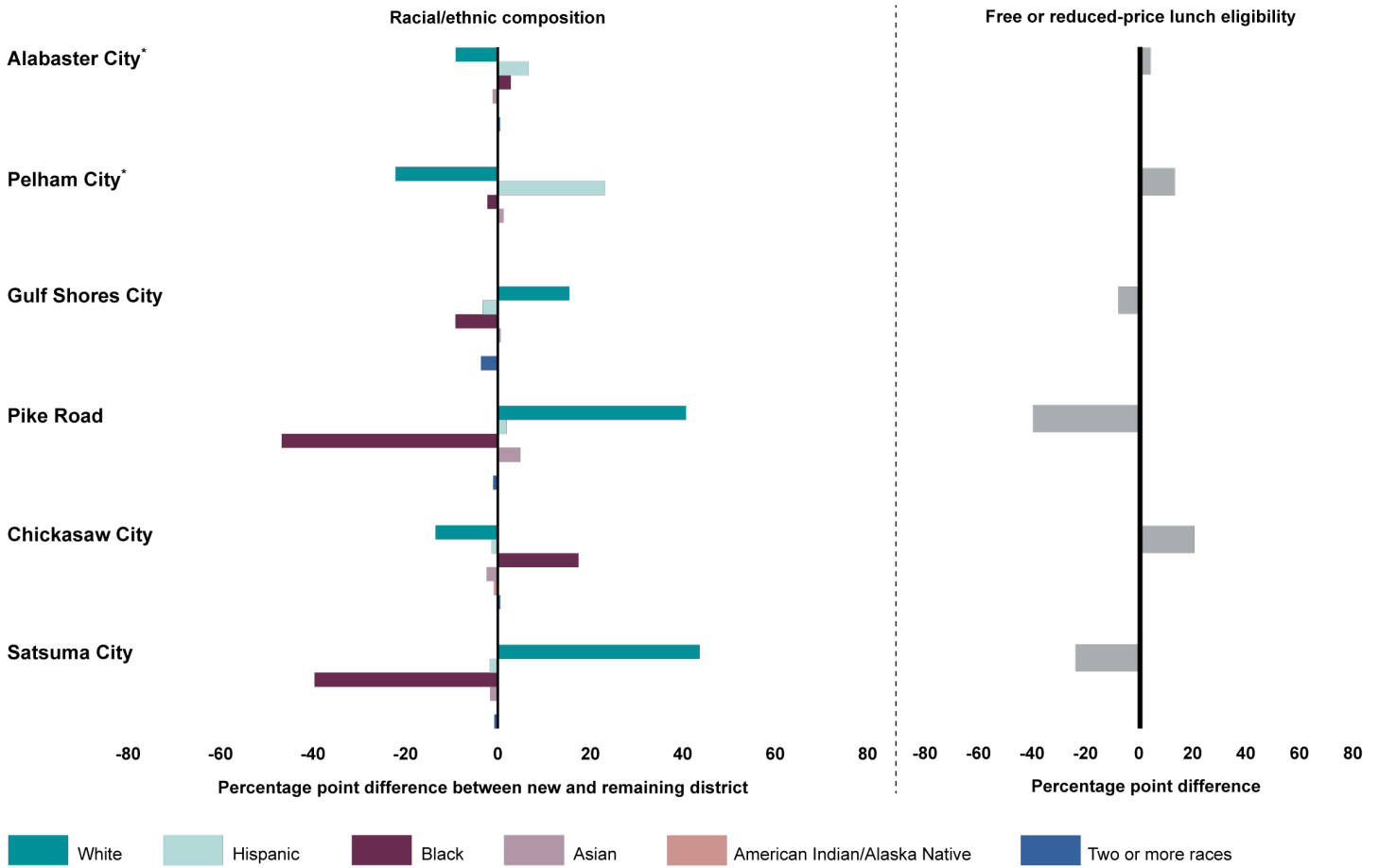
**Desegregation orders or plans:** When Alabaster City and Pelham City seceded from Shelby County, Shelby County was under an active federal desegregation order. According to a 2007 report by the United States Commission on Civil Rights, the other school districts attained unitary status in 1977, 1993, and 1997.

**Context:** Absent a desegregation order, an Alabama municipality with a population of 5,000 or more can secede from their county school districts by negotiating an agreement with the county district, according to a 2017 report on school secession.<sup>a</sup>

Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20 | GAO-22-104737

<sup>a</sup>EdBuild, Fractured: The Breakdown of America's School Districts (June 2017).

**Figure 14: Percentage Point Differences in Racial/Ethnic Composition and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility between New and Remaining Districts in Alabama, 1 Year after Secession**



Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

Note: Districts marked with \* seceded from a district that was under an active federal desegregation order at the time of secession.

**Arkansas Overview:** (See fig. 15.)

**Number of secessions:** 1 secession from 1 district

**Students affected:** About 4,600 students

**Outcomes:** New district was less White, more Black, and poorer. Percentage of revenue from local sources in new district dropped by about half.

**Desegregation orders or plans:** Pulaski County Special School District was under a federal desegregation plan at time of secession.

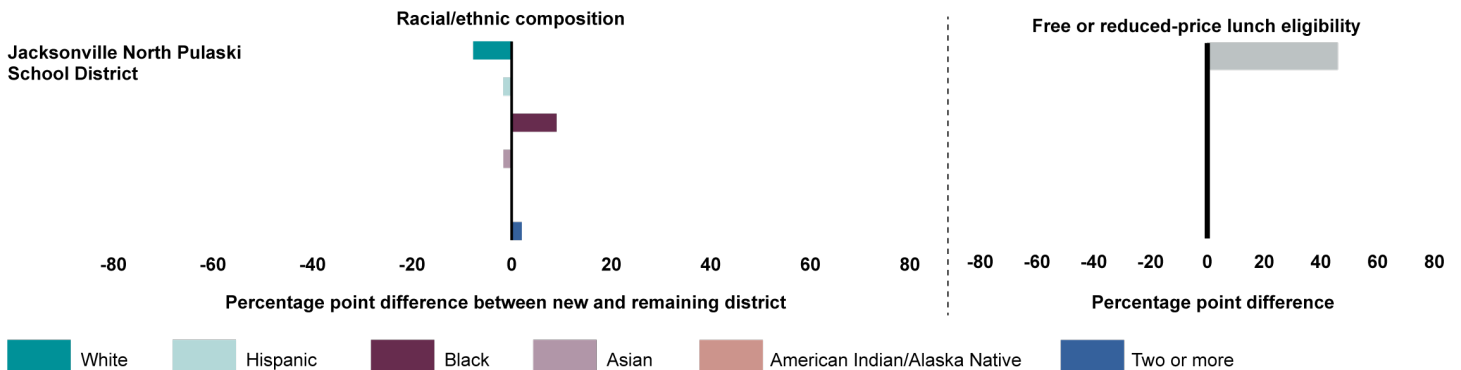
**Context:** Proposed secession of Jacksonville/North Pulaski School District from Pulaski County Special School District, which was under an active desegregation plan, required approval from a federal judge.

Additionally, Arkansas law required, among other things, a feasibility study stating the effect of the proposed secession on court-ordered desegregation and an advisory opinion from the state's attorney general concerning the impact of the proposed secession on desegregation efforts.

A majority of the voters in Pulaski County approved the secession.

Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20 | GAO-22-104737

**Figure 15: Percentage Point Difference in Racial/Ethnic Composition and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility between New and Remaining Arkansas District 1 Year after Secession**



Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

Note: The district seceded from a district that was under an active federal desegregation plan at the time of secession.

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**Tennessee Overview:** (See fig. 16.)

**Number of secessions:** 6 secessions from 1 district

**Students affected:** About 31,000 students

**Average size of new districts:** About 5,200 students

**Outcomes:** New districts were all Whiter and wealthier.

**Desegregation orders or plans:** Original district was not under an active federal desegregation order at time of secession. It had been under a court-approved desegregation plan until 2009.

**Context:** Schools in 6 Memphis suburbs seceded from the Shelby County school district. One year before secession, the Memphis City school district merged with Shelby County Schools. After secession, the remaining district encompassed the city of Memphis and some unincorporated parts of Shelby County.

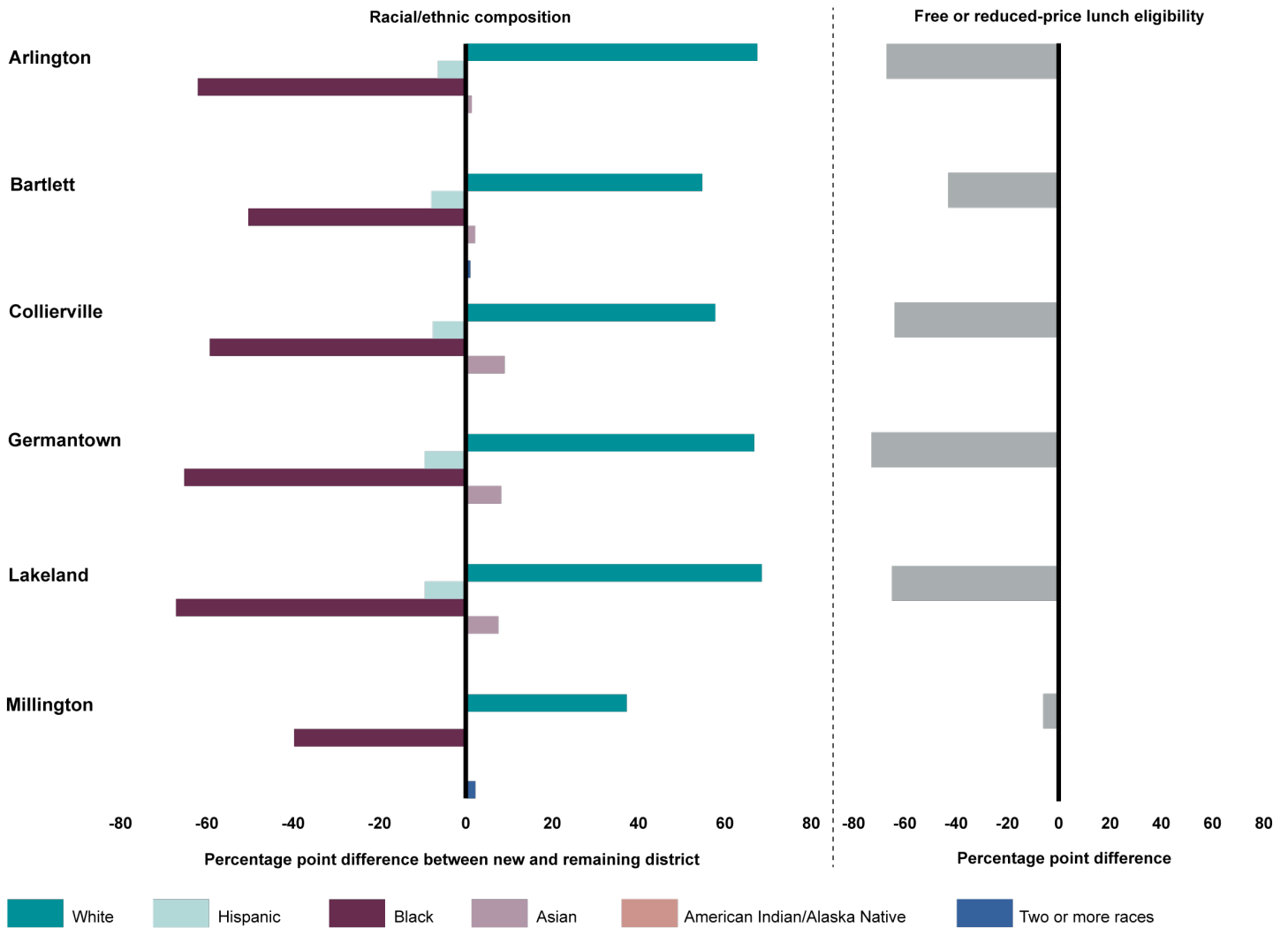
**Context:** Only the seceding towns voted on the secession.  
Tennessee law allows municipalities with a student population of at least 1,500 to secede with approval of a majority of the voters in the seceding municipality, according to a report on district secessions.<sup>a</sup>

Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20 | GAO-22-104737

<sup>a</sup>EdBuild, *Fractured: The Breakdown of America's School Districts* (June 2017).



**Figure 16: Percentage Point Differences in Racial/Ethnic Composition and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility between New and Remaining Districts in Tennessee, 1 Year after Secession**



Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

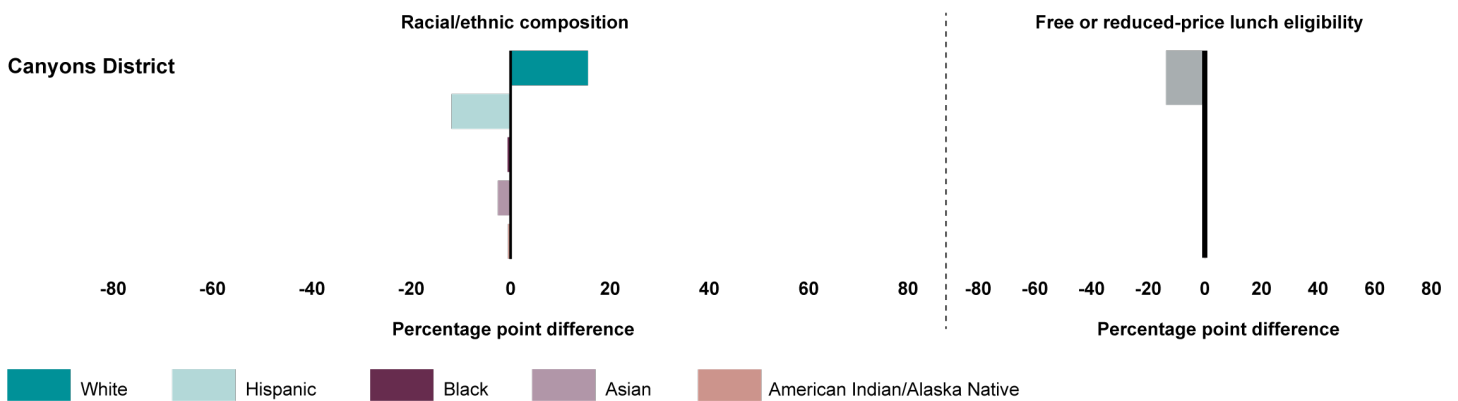
**Western region (Utah only).**

**Utah Overview:** (See fig. 17.)

<b>Number of secessions:</b>	1 secession from 2 districts
<b>Students affected:</b>	About 33,700 students
<b>Outcomes:</b>	New district was Whiter and wealthier than the remaining districts. Percentage of revenue from local sources was over 1/3 higher in the new district than in the remaining districts.
<b>Desegregation orders or plans:</b>	None identified
<b>Context:</b>	At the time of this secession, the district was able to secede with approval from voters in the proposed district, according to a financial report for the new district in the first year of operation. However, subsequent to the secession, Utah generally requires the appointment of an advisory committee to make recommendations and review data and information, including on the financial impact of the proposed secession on each existing school district. It also requires approval from voters of each existing school district affected by the proposed secession, among other things. Secession at the request of a city within the boundaries of a school district requires approval from voters of the proposed new district, and does not require the appointment of an advisory committee.

Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20 | GAO-22-104737

**Figure 17: Percentage Point Differences in Racial/Ethnic Composition and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility between New and Remaining District in Utah, 1 Year after Secession**



Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

**Northeast region.** There were 22 district secessions in three states. Seventeen of the new districts were Whiter than the original or remaining districts and five were less white; 19 were wealthier, two were poorer, and one was missing relevant information.

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**Maine Overview:** (See fig. 18.)

**Number of secessions:** 20 secessions from 15 districts

**Students affected:** About 10,000 students

**Average size of new districts:** About 500 students

**Outcomes:** Fifteen of the 20 new districts were Whiter than remaining districts and 5 of the 20 were less White and more Black, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Two or More Races. In 8 districts the difference in either direction was less than one percentage point.  
Eighteen of the 20 new districts were wealthier than the districts they seceded from and 2 of the 20 were poorer. Economic differences were larger than racial/ethnic differences.

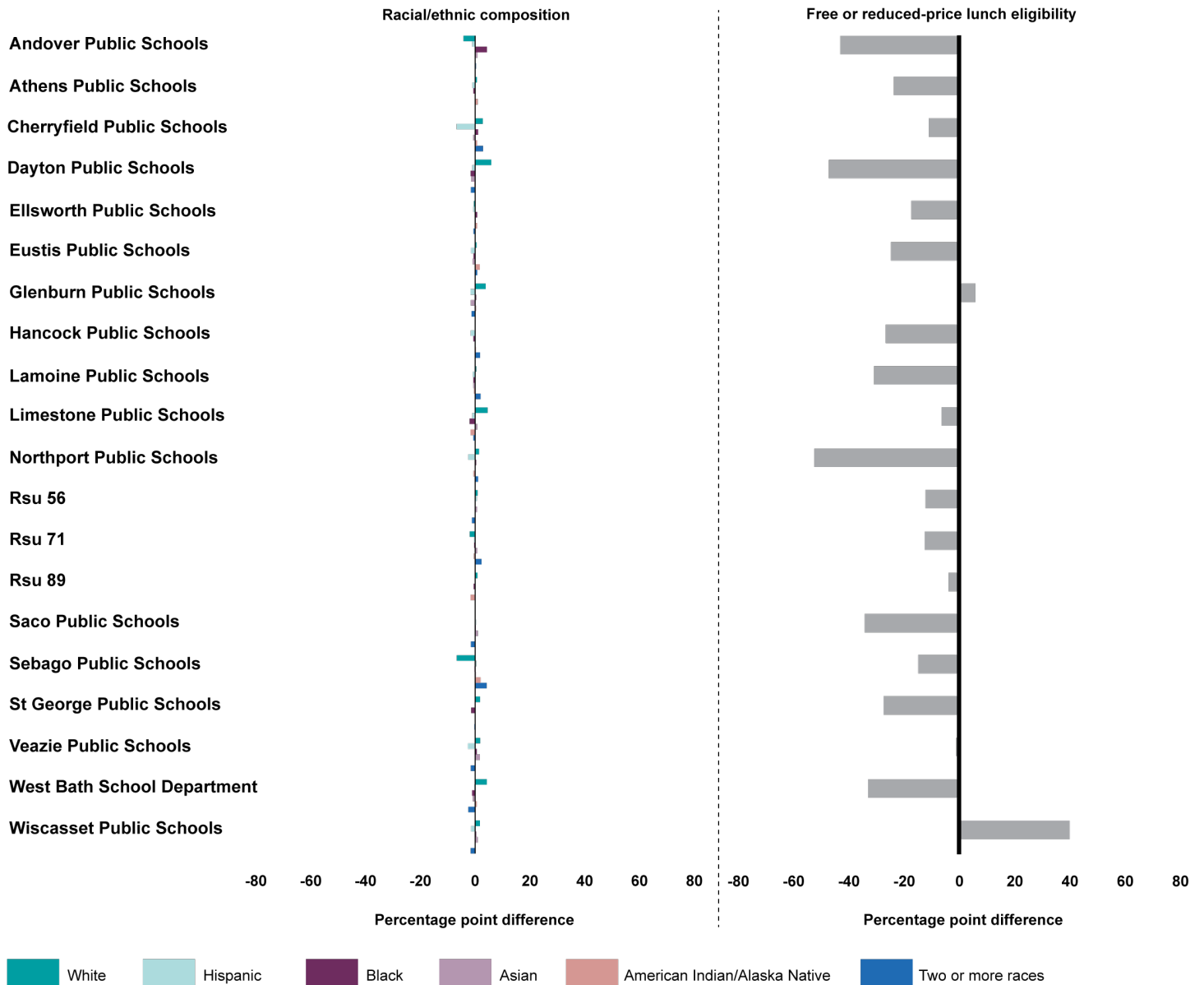
**Desegregation orders or plans:** None identified

**Context:** According to a report on district secessions, after an attempt to reorganize many of Maine's city and town school districts into regional districts, the state legislature began allowing municipalities to withdraw from regional districts after they had been in a part of the regional district for two and a half years. Withdrawal of a municipality from a regional district requires, among other things, a petition for a special election, approval from the Commissioner of Education, and approval of the voters in the municipality.<sup>a</sup>

Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20 | GAO-22-104737

<sup>a</sup>EdBuild, *Fractured: The Breakdown of America's School Districts* (June 2017).

**Figure 18: Percentage Point Differences in Racial/Ethnic Composition and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility between New and Remaining Districts in Maine, 1 Year after Secession**



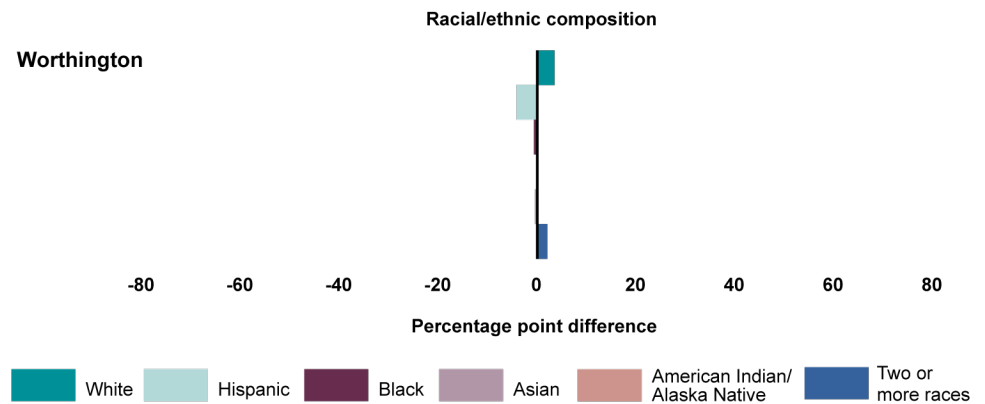
Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

**Massachusetts Overview:** (See fig. 19.)

<b>Number of secessions:</b>	1 secession from 1 district
<b>Students affected:</b>	About 50 students
<b>Outcomes:</b>	The percentage of White students was about 4 percentage points higher in the new district, compared to the remaining district. Information on eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch was unavailable for this district.
<b>Desegregation orders or plans:</b>	None identified
<b>Context:</b>	One town seceded from a regional district. The town did not obtain approval from the other towns in the regional district, so the town filed a petition with the legislature to withdraw from the district. An act to allow the town to withdraw from the district was enacted.

Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20 | GAO-22-104737

**Figure 19: Percentage Point Differences in Racial/Ethnic Composition between New and Remaining District in Massachusetts, 1 Year after Secession**



Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

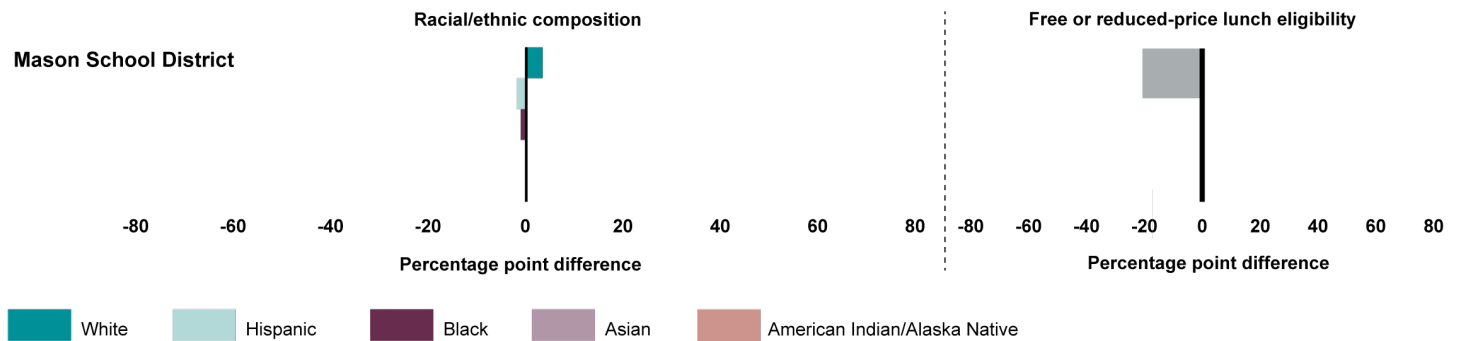
**New Hampshire Overview:** (See fig. 20.)

<b>Number of secessions:</b>	1 secession from 1 district
<b>Students affected:</b>	180 students
<b>Outcomes:</b>	The new district was Whiter and wealthier than the district it seceded from, with the new district's share of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch about 21 percentage points lower than that of the district it left.
<b>Desegregation orders or plans:</b>	None identified
<b>Context:</b>	Prior to secession, New Hampshire state law requires a feasibility study, approval from the State Board of Education, and approval from voters in the pre-existing district according to a report on district secessions. <sup>a</sup>

Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20 | GAO-22-104737

<sup>a</sup>EdBuild, Fractured: The Breakdown of America's School Districts (June 2017).

**Figure 20: Percentage Point Differences in Racial/Ethnic Composition and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility between New and Remaining District in New Hampshire, 1 Year after Secession**



Source: GAO analysis of Education's Common Core of Data 2009-10 to 2019-20. | GAO-22-104737

## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Departments of Education and Justice for review and comment. Education provided written technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

As agreed with your office, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Education, the Attorney General, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline M. Nowicki, Director  
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

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# Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

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This report examines the extent of (1) racial, ethnic, and economic division in K-12 public schools, and (2) district secession and any resulting socioeconomic and demographic shifts.

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## Analysis of Student Division along Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Lines

To examine the extent of division along racial/ethnic lines in K-12 public schools, we used demographic data from the Department of Education's Common Core of Data (CCD) covering school years 2014-15 to 2020-21, the most recent available data since we last reported on this topic in 2016.<sup>1</sup> CCD is a national dataset that annually collects information on all K-12 public schools and students in the U.S. CCD is administered by Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the U.S. NCES is one of 13 statistical agencies in the federal government, whose principal function is the collection, compilation, and analysis of data and the dissemination of information for statistical purposes. The data are supplied by state education agency officials to describe different aspects of their schools and school districts. These data include descriptive information about schools or districts and demographic information about the schools' and districts' students and staff, among other things.

To assess the reliability of these data, we reviewed technical documentation and interviewed relevant officials from Education. Based on this information, we determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes. Our analyses of Education's data in this report are intended to describe selected characteristics of schools; they should not be used to make conclusions about the presence or absence of unlawful discrimination, illegal segregation, or compliance with federal or state laws and regulations.

Using CCD data, we categorized schools based on the percentage of students of the same race/ethnicity attending a given school. We sorted schools into (1) "predominantly same-race/ethnicity" schools, which we defined to include those where one race/ethnicity makes up 75 percent or more of the student body; and (2) "almost-exclusively same-

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<sup>1</sup> See GAO, *K-12 Education: Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination*, [GAO-16-345](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 21, 2016. Publicly Released May 17, 2016).



race/ethnicity” schools, which we defined to include those where one race/ethnicity makes up 90 percent or more of the student body.<sup>2</sup>

Further, based on data that show higher rates of poverty exist among Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students, for some analyses we combined these students into one group and conducted additional analyses.<sup>3</sup> To further understand the extent of division along racial/ethnic lines, we examined whether any variation existed by region (Northeastern, Midwestern, Southern, and Western areas of the U.S.) and school type (traditional schools, magnet schools, and charter schools).

To examine the extent of economic division in K-12 public schools, we used two measures captured in the CCD as school-level proxies for poverty: free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) and community eligibility provision (CEP). Under FRPL, a student is generally eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch in school based on federal income eligibility guidelines tied to the federal poverty level and household size. CEP allows schools or a group of schools to expand access to free meals to all their students in low-income areas. For our analysis, schools that participated in CEP were categorized as CEP schools whether they reported data on rates of FRPL eligibility or not for school year 2020-21. We categorized schools as “poor” when 75 percent or more of their students were eligible for FRPL, or when schools opted to provide free lunch to all students through CEP. Finally, we used data on the geographic location for schools in the CCD to examine the location of schools divided along racial/ethnic lines and to examine the coexistence of different types of schools divided along racial/ethnic lines within and between school districts.

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## Analysis of Secession

To analyze district secessions and any resulting demographic shifts, we identified the number and location of districts that seceded from school year 2009-10 through school year 2019-20. Specifically, we analyzed data on schools and school districts from the CCD. We determined that the data from the CCD were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this

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<sup>2</sup>In our analyses, we included the following races/ethnicities: White, Hispanic, Black, Asian (including Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander), American Indian/Alaska Native, and multi-racial. While Hispanic is an ethnicity rather than a race, as defined in the CCD, the categories are mutually exclusive. As such, White and Black racial categories exclude White-Hispanic and Black-Hispanic students.

<sup>3</sup>2020 Census data also indicate that White and Asian American children have lower levels of poverty compared to Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students.

report by reviewing documentation about the systems used to produce the data and interviewing Education officials. Our analyses of Education's data in this report are intended to describe demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of school districts pre-and post-secession; they should not be used to make conclusions about the presence or absence of unlawful discrimination or illegal segregation or compliance with federal or state laws and regulations.

To identify districts that had seceded, we compiled a comprehensive list of potential district secessions. We began by compiling an initial list of districts that states had identified as new districts in their yearly submission to the CCD. We also added districts included in the CCD's district change file. The change file lists changes in school districts' boundaries from one year to the next.

We refined our comprehensive list of potential district secessions to include only those schools that had previously been part of other districts. Specifically, if no schools in a new district had been part of other districts in the prior year, then we excluded the district from our initial list. We also excluded districts that closed, specialized districts, charter districts, districts that had merged, and districts that formed because of grade span changes. We also reviewed state educational agency records, school district websites, and other records and reports about district secessions.

We used our final list of 36 secessions to compare the characteristics of the new and remaining districts and to identify and describe any demographic and socioeconomic changes that occurred from the secessions. We also reviewed relevant federal laws and interviewed relevant federal officials as well as researchers who had knowledge of or had researched key concepts under study.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2021 through June 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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# Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Jacqueline M. Nowicki, (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov).

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Sherri Doughty (Assistant Director), Lara Laufer and Sheranda Smith (Analysts in Charge), Charlotte Aaron, Gretel Clarke, and Aaron Karty made key contributions to this report. David Barish, Elizabeth Calderon, Holly Dye, Jean McSween, John Mingus, Meredith Moore, Mimi Nguyen, and Almeta Spencer also made contributions to this report.

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# Appendix III: Related GAO Products

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*K-12 Education: Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination.* [GAO-16-345](#). Washington, D.C.: April 21, 2016.

*K-12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities.* [GAO-18-258](#). Washington, D.C.: March 22, 2018.

*K-12 Education: Public High Schools with More Students in Poverty and Smaller Schools Provide Fewer Academic Offerings to Prepare for College.* [GAO-19-8](#). Washington, D.C.: October 11, 2018.

*Public School Choice: Limited Options Available for Many American Indian and Alaska Native Students.* [GAO-19-226](#). Washington, D.C.: January 24, 2019.

*K-12 Education: Certain Groups of Students Attend Alternative Schools in Greater Proportions Than They Do Other Schools.* [GAO-19-373](#). Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2019.

*K-12 Education: Students' Experiences with Bullying, Hate Speech, Hate Crimes, and Victimization in Schools.* [GAO-22-104341](#). Washington, D.C.: November 24, 2021.

*Trends Affecting Government and Society.* [GAO-22-3SP](#). Washington, D.C.: March 15, 2022.

*K-12 Education: An Estimated 1.1 Million Teachers Nationwide Had At Least One Student Who Never Showed Up for Class in the 2020-21 School Year.* [GAO-22-104581](#). Washington, D.C.: March 23, 2022. Reissued with Revisions on April 19, 2022.

*Pandemic Learning: As Students Struggled to Learn, Teachers Reported Few Strategies as Particularly Helpful to Mitigate Learning Loss.* [GAO-22-104487](#). Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2022.

*Pandemic Learning: Teachers Reported Many Obstacles for High-Poverty Students and English Learners As Well As Some Mitigating Strategies.* [GAO-22-105815](#). Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2022.

*Pandemic Learning: Less Academic Progress Overall, Student and Teacher Strain, and Implications for the Future.* [GAO-22-105816](#). Washington, DC: June 8, 2022.

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