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In Schools Across U.S., the Melting Pot Overflows

By [SAM DILLON](#)

STERLING, Va., Aug. 25 — Some 55 million youngsters are enrolling for classes in the nation's schools this fall, making this the largest group of students in America's history and, in ethnic terms, the most dazzlingly diverse since waves of European immigrants washed through the public schools a century ago.

Millions of baby boomers and foreign-born parents are enrolling their children, sending a demographic bulge through the schools that is driving a surge in classroom construction.

It is also causing thousands of districts to hire additional qualified teachers at a time when the Bush administration is trying to increase teacher qualifications across the board. Many school systems have begun recruiting overseas for instructors in hard-to-staff subjects like special education and advanced math.

The rising enrollments are most obvious in districts like this one west of Washington, in Loudoun County, one of the nation's fastest-growing school systems.

Thousands of government, technology and construction workers, many of them Hispanic, Asian and African-American, are streaming into new subdivisions within commuting distance of the Pentagon and the headquarters of America Online. They are transforming a school system that was once small and overwhelmingly white into one that is sprawling and increasingly cosmopolitan.

Thuy Nguyen, a 16-year-old junior at Park View High School in Sterling, has watched the recent transformation. She moved with her family to Virginia from Vietnam when she was 9 years old, and recalls that most of her fifth-grade classmates were white.

"I was new, afraid, and I didn't speak very well English," Ms. Nguyen said. "I didn't talk to anybody." Six years later she says making friends is easier.

"What I like about a diverse school is that you don't feel intimidated if there are other races," she said. "I'm jumping around, talking to the Caucasian clique and the Middle Eastern clique. I have friends from El Salvador, Mexico, Peru — one girl is half Korean and half Puerto Rican, she's cool — and from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan.

"There's a girl from Bangladesh; we tell each other everything. I also knew a Swedish guy. He happened to be very hot. So I talk to all the different groups. I don't want it to be, like, 'You're just in the Asian clique.'"

Kathy Hackney is Ms. Nguyen's tennis coach.

"My team looks like the League of Nations," Ms. Hackney said.

The Loudoun County Public Schools, where annual pay for starting teachers is \$40,986, has hired almost all the 650 new teachers it needs to fill its classrooms when school begins on Sept. 5, scores of them through agencies that recruit teachers in foreign countries, the superintendent, Edgar B. Hatrick, said.

But some rapidly growing districts across the nation are having trouble. The Clark County School District in Las Vegas, for instance, where teachers' starting salary is \$33,000, has hired 2,000 teachers. But with classes scheduled to start Wednesday, the district was still looking for 400 others, mostly to teach special education and math, said Pat Nelson, a spokeswoman.

The Plainfield Community Consolidated School District west of Chicago, which has grown to 26,000 students from 8,700 in 1998, had already hired 300 new teachers this year, said John Harper, the superintendent. But in one 36-hour period just days before the fall term resumed this past Wednesday, 500 new students enrolled for classes, Mr. Harper said, forcing the district to rearrange student schedules and hire more teachers.

"A summer's planning can fall apart when we suddenly have hundreds of new students," he said.

Most districts eventually find the teachers they need, but in extreme cases, some increase class sizes or call on substitutes until they hire a permanent teacher.

In projections published last year, the federal Department of Education said the nation's elementary and secondary enrollments would grow, on average, by about 200,000 students annually, reaching 56.7 million in 2014. Demographers say the current bulge moving through the nation's school systems owes to the children of the baby boom generation, which lasted from about 1946 to 1964, as well as to the children of immigrants. The enrollment trends would be uneven, regionally, with schools in the Northeast and Midwest losing students, on average, and those in the South and West growing, the department said.

The projections showed New York State's public school enrollment dropping 6 percent from 2002 to 2014, Connecticut's enrollment falling by 1 percent in the same period, and New Jersey's rising by 3.5 percent.

The department outlined the most spectacular growth for Nevada, where 2002 enrollment was projected to rise 28 percent by 2014, and for Texas, where it was charted to increase 16 percent in the same period.

The Frisco Independent School District, north of Dallas, has seen spectacular growth. In 1998, the system had eight schools with 4,500 students. When classes began Aug. 15, the district had 23,200 students in 34 schools.

"Our challenge has been to build schools fast enough," said Rick Reedy, the superintendent.

The first years of the 21st century have seen tremendous new classroom construction in many regions, with school districts spending some \$20 billion annually on capital projects, said Paul Abramson, who wrote a nationwide survey of school construction, published earlier this year.

Construction crews completed work on three schools just days before students reported to classes on Aug. 7 in the Flagler County School District north of Daytona Beach, Fla., where enrollment has doubled to 12,000 students since 1998. Bill Delbrugge, the superintendent, said he had e-mailed a plea for help in

completing the work.

Peter Palmer, a former teacher, said he and scores of other volunteers had assembled desks, hauled books and carried chairs for three days in a somewhat chaotic, but eventually triumphant, sprint to ready the new buildings for students.

The explosive recent growth has forced school officials into last-minute improvisations in Loudoun County, too. In 15 years, enrollment in the district has tripled, to 47,361 in 2005 from 14,633 in 1990; the number of Asian students has multiplied twelvefold and Hispanics seventeenfold. The district has built 38 schools since 1995, including Legacy Elementary in Ashburn, Va., which opened a year ago on a landscape that bulldozers were rapidly transforming from soybeans to suburbia.

As of last Tuesday the school had enrolled nearly 200 students beyond the 875 it was designed to accommodate.

“We’re in an overflow situation, unfortunately, so we’ll have to put you on a waiting list,” Corinne Mirch, a school secretary, told Luis Bermejo, a Mexican-born stonemason who said he moved to the district in 1996, and had come to the school office to enroll his 5-year-old daughter, Sofia, for kindergarten. Sofia would probably be assigned to another elementary school in Ashburn, Ms. Mirch said.

One of Legacy’s special education teachers for the fall term was recruited in the Philippines through a search firm based in Delaware, said Legacy’s principal, Robert W. Duckworth. The district recruited a Spanish teacher and an English as a Second Language teacher for Legacy in Colombia, through Visiting International Faculty, a group based in North Carolina.

The group is sponsoring about 95 foreign teachers in Loudoun County schools, as well as about 1,600 teachers in 1,000 other American schools. The State Department issues the foreign teachers three-year cultural exchange visas, said Ned Glascock, a spokesman for the group.

Because of its voracious demand for qualified new teachers and to broaden staff diversity, the Loudoun district has established a carefully orchestrated, year-round teacher recruiting effort. When the district identified a talented Navajo Indian teaching candidate, Melissa Wright, who was to graduate from college in Hawaii this past spring, several Loudoun County officials got a nice assignment: a February recruiting trip to Honolulu.

“I think you’re amazing — I want to offer you a job right now,” Ms. Wright quoted one district official as telling her.

In the weeks thereafter, former principals and others working for the district as “candidate care ambassadors” sent Ms. Wright dozens of e-mail messages encouraging her to sign on and offering her help with buying a car, finding a residence and other advice, she said.

Ms. Wright, who signed with the district in April, said she had been attracted to descriptions of Loudoun County as a magnet for international families and a place that nurtured cultural differences as schools across America are rapidly becoming more diverse.

Three decades ago, in 1973, 78 percent of the students attending the nation’s public schools were white

and 22 percent were minorities, a category including blacks, Hispanics, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and “other,” according to Education Department statistics. In 2004, the last year for which numbers were available, 57 percent of all public school students were white, while 43 percent were minorities.

The department does not project student racial and ethnic data for elementary and secondary schools, said Val Plisko, an associate commissioner at the National Center for Education Statistics.

But if trends continue as they have for 30 years, minority students appear likely to outnumber white students within a decade or so. In six states — California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico and Texas — they already do.

The nation’s public schools also brought together an extraordinary mix of students in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when they first earned their reputation as melting pots, said William J. Reese, a history professor at the [University of Wisconsin](#).

Early in the last century, Senator William P. Dillingham, a Vermont Republican, tried to measure diversity. He led a commission that studied the public schools during the 1908-9 year as part of his campaign to restrict the [immigration](#) of Catholics and Jews from Central and Southern Europe, categorizing students as native-born or foreign-born.

The commission found that in the few dozen largest cities, 42 percent of students were native-born, while 58 percent were foreign-born, Dr. Reese said. The commission made no effort to count students outside cities, he said.

Making comparisons between 21st-century schools and those operating in Senator Dillingham’s time is difficult because reporting practices have changed drastically.

“But,” Dr. Reese said, “we can say that today’s students are the most ethnically and racially diverse that the nation’s schools have educated in nearly a century.”

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