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Educators say pushback against progress continues racial split in U.S.

BY ADAM GORLICK

Not long after a congressional panel warned the country was splitting into separate societies divided by race, the nation took notice. More money was pumped into urban schools. Opportunities once reserved for white students began opening to their black peers. New teachers were encouraged to take jobs in city schools.

That was 40 years ago, and the Kerner Commission Report helped breed a new political and social will to address issues like poverty, racism and education inequality. But educators and policy experts who gathered last week at Stanford said much of that will has eroded and, with it, many achievements that peaked in the country's schools by the mid-1970s.

"There was reduced segregation, teacher shortages were almost eliminated, urban education funding was as high or higher as other districts and college access was greater," said Linda Darling-Hammond, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor in the School of Education and co-director of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE).

"Most of these programs were eliminated or sharply reduced in the 1980s," she said. "We've had a pushback."

Darling-Hammond's comments came during a daylong forum sponsored by SCOPE and the nonprofit Eisenhower Foundation to mark the 40th anniversary of the Kerner Commission Report. The report, which was ordered by President Lyndon Johnson in response to the wave of civil disorder and race riots that roiled the country between 1963 and 1967, concluded: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."

Steps were taken to sew the racial split. Enforcement of integration policies sparked by the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* became tougher, and the number of white students in schools attended by black students steadily increased between 1970 and 1980.

In 1975, black and Latino students were attending college at the same rate as white students, Darling-Hammond said. That statistic has not been achieved since, she said.

"The policies put in place in the '60s and early '70s had a big effect on approaching equity," she said. "And we have a backsliding since that time."

As a result of President Ronald Reagan's repeal of several education policies in the 1980s, coupled with a 1991 Supreme Court decision that loosened school desegregation obligations, the percentage of white students attending school with black students dropped, said Gary Orfield, a professor at the University of California-Los Angeles Graduate School of Education.

In 1970, about 32 percent of white students were in the same schools as black students. By 2000, the figure was about 31 percent, according to Orfield's research.

"Most racial groups have little to no contact with their white peers," said Prudence Carter, an associate professor of education and co-director of SCOPE.

While America led the world in high school graduation rates in the 1970s, the country recently ranked 13th, in large part because achievement trends for minority students have dropped, Darling-Hammond said.

"White and Asian students are doing as well or better than the international average," she said. "But African Americans and Hispanics are scoring so much lower it brings the entire average down."

She said other countries have had "a very intensive, purposeful set of investments in ensuring that all kids are getting access to education," while America's school policies are "unstable and have not been consistent to move us forward."

The Eisenhower Foundation, which is preparing a 40-year update of the Kerner Commission Report, says the country's educational disparities are linked to funding disparities.

The wealthiest 10 percent of school districts spend nearly 10 times more than the poorest 10 percent of school districts, and there are more blacks than whites at under-funded schools, according to the update's preliminary findings, which give the country a grade of C+ for progress made in racial equality.

"You have an African American running for president," said Alan Curtis, Eisenhower's president and CEO. "You have a great increase in the African American and Latino middle class. That's important progress. But child poverty is higher than it was 40 years ago and inequality has skyrocketed. We're definitely somewhere in the C range, which is not a very good score."

