

Marking 50 years since Milliken v. Bradley

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Lily Altavena, May 2025

What was decided in Milliken v. Bradley?

A 1974 U.S. Supreme Court decision that effectively barred districts from desegregating over district boundary lines.

Case came after a years-long battle over proposed attempted desegregation plans and fighting in court. Milliken case started in 1970, after the NAACP sued then-Michigan Gov. William Milliken over what the organization claimed was intentional segregation in Detroit's schools. While a lower court judge ordered Michigan education officials to draw up a desegregation plan involving Detroit and surrounding suburban school districts, the Supreme Court overturned that order, ruling 5-4 that "a federal court may not impose a multidistrict, area-wide remedy" to desegregate schools.

Looking for historical context to tell a modern story



(Detroit Free Press photo circa 2016)

What often gets lost in Detroit's desegregation story is that these efforts were driven in-part for resource equity. Districts like Detroit were funded inequitably, and advocates thought desegregated schools would see more resources.

Joyce Baugh: "The theory behind desegregation, back in the time of Milliken and since, it wasn't that Black kids needed to sit next to white kids and they would learn better... The idea is that the resources would flow."

Finding data... and leaving the house

Intent

Compare school district enrollment
from around the time of Milliken in
metro Detroit to now

How I did it

Emails with state librarians, a 3
hour (round-trip) drive and
several hours taking photos of
archival documents

80102
09-23-75

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
RACIAL ETHNIC CENSUS

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BAY CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

09-010

KAWKAWLIN WEST SCHOOL

5544

STUDENTS

PROF. INSTRUG. STAFF

PRE-K

K

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

SP

ED

NON-PUB

OTHER

20

56

48

33

4

2.5

153

97.5

6

100.0

157

6

TRI COUNTY CENTER

5999

STUDENTS

PROF. INSTRUG. STAFF

PRE-K

K

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

SP

ED

NON-PUB

OTHER

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

0

29

100.0

2

WESTERN HIGH SCHOOL

6257

STUDENTS

PROF. INSTRUG. STAFF

PRE-K

K

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

SP

ED

NON-PUB

OTHER

5

.2

0

0

1

0

15

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0

2031

99.0

88

100.0

2052

88

CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

09-010

TOTAL

STUDENTS

PROF. INSTRUG. STAFF

PRE-K

K

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

SP

ED

NON-PUB

OTHER

9

1340

1093

1088

1053

1075

1087

1154

1166

1207

1549

1585

1562

1386

252

327

44

.3

238

1.4

19

.1

752

4.4

15887

93.8

16940

699

0

13

1.9

0

8

1.1

678

97.0

Understanding the data today - leading with voices

K. Dara Hill: "It was like a Band-Aid, a remedy to the harm that was caused by Milliken v. Bradley.. And so although I lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood, I attended racially integrated citywide schools, which was really an amazing experience."

Racial changes in enrollment in Detroit schools from 1975 to 2024

While some suburban school districts in metro Detroit have become more diverse in the years since a U.S. Supreme Court decision that effectively barred districts from desegregating over city lines, Detroit and a handful of suburbs have become more divided by race since 1975, a Detroit Free Press analysis has found.

