



African American, Asian students on the decline in Montclair



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Since 2013, the number of African American students has declined by over seven percent. The Asian population has also declined by 5 percent.

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The overall number of students listed as African American and Asian has declined in Montclair schools in recent years, while the white student population has remained consistent and the Hispanic student population has seen a slight uptick, a trend that is reinforced by a new enrollment report for the 2018-19 school year.

The report shows that dating back to the 2013-14 school year, the number of African American students has declined by over 7 percent, the largest shift in demographics in the last six years. However, some of the decline could be linked with a decision by the school district to add a new category — multirace — to its enrollment reports. When that category was introduced for the 2017-18 school year, 7 percent of the student population declared themselves multiracial, with 25 percent of students listing themselves as African American. In the previous school year, when the multiracial option was not yet a category, the African American student population was at 29.2 percent, more than 4 points higher.

Of note, too, is that the decline in the African American numbers that took place in the 2017-18 school year, after the multi-race category was introduced, has not carried into the current school year. In the new 2018-19 enrollment report, the African American student population is again at 25 percent and the multiracial population is again at 7 percent.

But if some of the decline in the African American student numbers may have to do with the introduction of the multi-racial category in 2017-18, another factor seems to be in play as well: the changing demographics of Montclair.

According to U.S. Census records, the overall African American population in Montclair dropped 3 percentage points, to about 24 percent, over a period extending from 2010 to 2017. During that same period, the white population rose from 63 to 65 percent. The Hispanic population increased 3 percentage points, to about 10 percent, and the Asian share of the population dropped to about 3 percent.

Now consider the school enrollment numbers, which span from 2013-14, the oldest enrollment report available, to 2018-19. That is not an exact match with the 2010-17 span of the Census report, but is close enough to make a useful comparison. Start with the figures for white students. In the 2013-14 enrollment report, the share of students listed as white was 51 percent and that figure remains the same in the 2018-19 enrollment numbers, even though the white population in Montclair has moved upward a little bit in recent years, according to the Census numbers.

Meanwhile, the Hispanic student population has moved up from 9.5 percent in 2013-14 to 11 percent in the new enrollment figures, which closely matches the growth in the overall Hispanic population in those same Census figures. And the Asian student population? It is down to 5.5 percent in the latest enrollment report, which also matches the drop in the overall Asian numbers in the Census figures.

And then, most significantly, there are the African American student numbers. In the 2013-14 report, 32 percent of those enrolled identified as African American. By 2016-17, that figure had dropped to 29.2. The multi-race category had yet to be introduced on the enrollment report. That suggests that the decline in

African American students, at that point, was directly attributable to a decline in the overall African American population in Montclair. And that when the multirace category was introduced a year later, the decline in the number of students identifying as African American became even more pronounced.

“It is shocking to see this decline,” said James Harris, the vice president of the Montclair NAACP and chairman of the Education Committee of the NAACP. Harris points to the lack of rent control and high taxes as a driving force behind the fact that some African Americans are choosing to leave Montclair.

“New development may bring some affordable housing, but there is nothing to protect residents from these over-excessive increases. Parents then have to make that very hard decision of moving and pulling their kids out of the Montclair school district because they can’t afford to live here,” said Harris. “Who really cares about the decline of the African American population and diversity in Montclair? Do the developers, public officials, school officials?”

Harris said the Census and school-enrollment numbers “tell a narrative that the diversity that Montclair prides itself on is diminishing.”

There are other school numbers to consider as well. For instance, the number of free lunches that Montclair students receive has seen a 21 percent decline since 2015, with 883 students in the program in 2018. There has also been a decline since 2015 in the number of students who receive reduced-price lunches, although that number was slightly up this year.

“The decline in numbers for free and reduced lunches tells me the kids who qualify are leaving the district,” Harris said.

William Scott of the Housing Commission who has been pushing for rent stabilization, said that although complaints filed last year with Landlord/ Tenant Committee over exuberant rent increases topped 20, it’s hard to know how many people chose to leave rather than fight rent increases.

Meanwhile, the number of students who have transferred out of the Montclair school district to attend private schools has also declined. In 2015 at the height of a student exodus, 84 students transferred to private schools. In 2016, that number was 77 and in 2017 it was down to 66. At the same time, the number of students returning to Montclair after attending private institutions has increased — from 23 in 2015, to 61 in 2016 and 64 in 2017. The district did not offer demographics of the students in this category.

Christa Rapoport, the chairwoman of the Montclair Civil Rights Commission, noted that she gets inquiries from parents of color on whether their children should stay in Montclair schools or move to private institutions.

“My preference is that children remain in Montclair,” she said. “But the truth is, I see many times that African Americans are steered away from honors and AP classes. They don’t have the same opportunities as their non-black counterparts unless they are in special education or are geniuses. So sometimes the excellent student who can afford it moves onto private,” she said. “The achievement gap ignores this ‘bright flight.’”

The numbers imply that flight is now declining. But so are the overall numbers of African American students in

the district.



Montclair Local Voices: journeying through our community's diversity

Part One: Rosh Hashana



MELINA MACALL

Our new Local Voices columnist Melina Macall is a writer, researcher, community organizer and college lecturer focusing on issues around food access. She has lived in Montclair for 18 years and runs Boxed Organics, a local, organic food service, boxedorganicsnj.com. In this series she will discover and explore Montclair neighbors through food and culture. Macall is co-founder of The United Tastes of America, and the Syria Supper Club, which builds bridges across cultures and communities through dinners held in people's homes and prepared by recently resettled Syrian refugees. For more information visit TheUnitedTastesOfAmerica.org.



Apples dipped in honey are a traditional Rosh Hashana food. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

September is here and with it the start of the school year.

As parents and children adjust back into their routine of school days and homework, and scramble for last-minute items, replacing the worn backpack, sharpening pencils, purchasing new notebooks and binders, there is another group of people in Montclair making other preparations.

Along with the change of seasons heralded in September comes Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. The date for Rosh Hashana varies on the Gregorian calendar as the Jewish calendar is a lunar one.

Although Montclair public schools are closed for one day for Rosh Hashana it is, in fact, a two-day festival. Along with Yom Kippur, 10 days later, Rosh Hashana is the most important Jewish festival of the year. It marks the Jewish New Year and literally means "head of the year."

Tradition dictates that on Rosh Hashana our fates are written and on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, they are sealed.

Wishes for a good fate and a sweet year are reflected in the greetings exchanged and in the food prepared for special festive meals.

As people meet up for dinner or at synagogue "Shana tova umetukah" ("a good and sweet year") will be echoed back and forth.

"Leshana tova tikatev v'tichatem" ("May you be written and sealed for a good year") is said from Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur.

Traditional food for Rosh Hashana reflects these wishes:

Apple slices dipped in honey for a sweet year.

Apples and other food items which are round are also traditional, representing continuity.

Challah, typically a braided loaf, is round for Rosh Hashana. Pomegranates are eaten in the hopes that one will perform as many good deeds as there are seeds.

While there are too many recipes and foods to share here, the general rule of thumb is that traditional Rosh Hashana food will have a sweet and symbolic twist to it. There are two distinct subcultures of Judaism, the Ashkenazim with East European roots, and Sephardim, who have Spanish, Portuguese, North African and Middle Eastern roots. Food at the festive table reflects these roots and lends a very distinct flavor to the meals. Recipes will have been handed down from generation to generation and the continuity of tradition is there even as recipes are adapted by each new cook.

A typical Ashkenazi feast might include:

Chopped liver (coarse chicken or beef liver paté)

Gefilte fish (poached minced white fish) served with horseradish
Chicken soup with kneidlach (dumplings)
Roast honey chicken
Roast potatoes
Brisket
Tsimmes (sweet carrots with dumplings) cooked in honey

A typical Sephardi feast might include:

Keftes de prassa (leek fritters)
Empanada del cabasa (pumpkin empanada)
Roast chicken with dried fruit and almonds
Lubia (black-eyed peas with onion tomato and garlic, the beans signifying a hope for plenty)

And, on both tables, you will often find iterations of honey cake, fresh or dried dates, some kind of fish dish and a variant of chicken soup.

Recipes abound online and you can also buy many of these items, ready made, at local stores in and near Montclair.

Ten days later Jews all over the world gather for the most solemn and holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is a fast day and no food or drink will be consumed for 25 hours, from sunset of the night before until three stars are in the sky of the next day. The end of the fast is heralded by a final trumpeting of the shofar (a ram's horn) and at this moment the fate for the year is sealed. Families and friends gather for a break fast meal. Invariably, a table laden with delicacies is soon laid bare. It is a rare table that does not feature kugel, the ubiquitous, polarizing noodle pudding.

Shana tova, may we all have a good, sweet and peaceful year.