The New White Flight

In Silicon Valley, two high schools with outstanding academic reputations are losing white students as Asian students move in. Why?

By SUEIN HWANG
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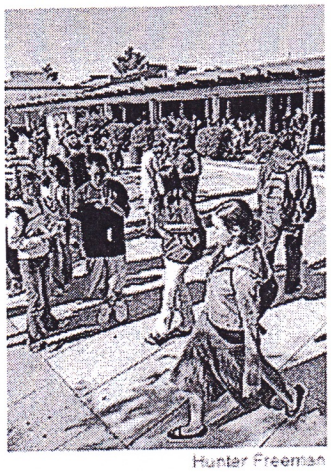
CUPERTINO, Calif. -- By most measures, Monta Vista High here and Lynbrook High, in nearby San Jose, are among the nation's top public high schools. Both boast stellar test scores, an array of advanced-placement classes and a track record of sending graduates from the affluent suburbs of Silicon Valley to prestigious colleges.

But locally, they're also known for something else: white flight. Over the past 10 years, the proportion of white students at Lynbrook has fallen by nearly half, to 25% of the student body. At Monta Vista, white students make up less than one-third of the population, down from 45% -- this in a town that's half white. Some white Cupertino parents are instead sending their children to private schools or moving them to other, whiter public schools. More commonly, young white families in Silicon Valley say they are avoiding Cupertino altogether.



Hunter Freeman

White students are far outnumbered by Asians at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, Calif.

Whites aren't quitting the schools because the schools are failing academically. Quite the contrary: Many white parents say they're leaving because the schools are too academically driven and too narrowly invested in subjects such as math and science at the expense of liberal arts and extracurriculars like sports and other personal interests.

The two schools, put another way that parents rarely articulate so bluntly, are too Asian.

Cathy Gatley, co-president of Monta Vista High School's parent-teacher association, recently dissuaded a family with a young child from moving to Cupertino because there are so few young white kids left in the public schools. "This may not sound good," she confides, "but their child may be the only Caucasian kid in the class." All of Ms. Gatley's four children have attended or are currently attending Monta Vista. One son, Andrew, 17 years old, took the high-school exit exam last summer and left the school to avoid the academic pressure. He is currently working in a pet-supply store. Ms. Gatley, who is white, says she probably wouldn't have moved to Cupertino if she had anticipated how much it would change.

In the 1960s, the term "white flight" emerged to describe the rapid exodus of whites from big cities into the suburbs, a process that often resulted in the economic degradation of the remaining community. Back then, the phenomenon was mostly believed to be sparked by the growth in the population of African-Americans, and to a lesser degree Hispanics, in some major cities.

Jane Doherty

But this modern incarnation is different. Across the country, Asian-Americans have by and large been successful and accepted into middle- and upper-class communities. Silicon Valley has kept Cupertino's economy stable, and the town is almost indistinguishable from many of the suburbs around it. The shrinking number of white students hasn't hurt the academic standards of Cupertino's schools -- in fact the opposite is true.

This time the effect is more subtle: Some Asians believe that the resulting lack of diversity creates an atmosphere that is too sheltering for their children, leaving then unprepared for life in a country that is only 4% Asian overall. Moreover, many Asians share some of their white counterpart's concerns. Both groups finger newer Asian immigrants for the schools' intense competitiveness.

Some whites fear that by avoiding schools with large Asian populations parents are short-changing their own children, giving them the idea that they can't compete with Asian kids. "My parents never let me think that because I'm Caucasian, I'm not going to succeed," says Jessie Hogin, a white Monta Vista graduate.

The white exodus clearly involves race-based presumptions, not all of which are positive. One example: Asian parents are too competitive. That sounds like racism to many of Cupertino's Asian residents, who resent the fact that their growing numbers and success are causing many white families to boycott the town altogether.

"It's a stereotype of Asian parents," says Pei-Pei Yow, a Hewlett-Packard Co. manager and Chinese-American community leader who sent two kids to Monta Vista. It's like other familiar biases, she says: "You can't say everybody from the South is a redneck."

Jane Doherty, a retirement-community administrator, chose to send her two boys elsewhere. When her family moved to Cupertino from Indiana over a decade ago, Ms. Doherty says her top priority was moving into a good public-school district. She paid no heed to a real-estate agent who told her of the town's burgeoning Asian population.

She says she began to reconsider after her elder son, Matthew, entered Kennedy, the middle school that feeds Monta Vista. As he played soccer, Ms. Doherty watched a line of cars across the street deposit Asian kids for after-school study. She also attended a Monta Vista parents' night and came away worrying about the school's focus on test scores and the big-name colleges its graduates attend.

"My sense is that at Monta Vista you're competing against the child beside you," she says. Ms. Doherty says she believes the issue stems more from recent immigrants than Asians as a whole. "Obviously, the concentration of Asian students is really high, and it does flavor the school," she says.

When Matthew, now a student at Notre Dame, finished middle school eight years ago, Ms. Doherty decided to send him to Bellarmine College Preparatory, a Jesuit school that she says has a culture that "values the whole child." It's also 55% white and 24% Asian. Her younger son, Kevin, followed suit.

Kevin Doherty, 17, says he's happy his mother made the switch. Many of his old friends at Kennedy aren't happy at Monta Vista, he says. "Kids at Bellarmine have a lot of pressure to do well, too, but they want to learn and do something they want to do."

While California has seen the most pronounced cases of suburban segregation, some of the developments in Cupertino are also starting to surface in other parts of the U.S. At Thomas S. Wootton High School in Rockville, Md., known flippantly to some locals as "Won Ton," roughly

35% of students are of Asian descent. People who don't know the school tend to make assumptions about its academics, says Principal Michael Doran. "Certain stereotypes come to mind -- 'those people are good at math,' " he says.

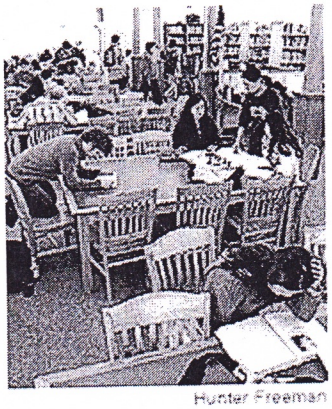
In Tenafly, N.J., a well-to-do bedroom community near New York, the local high school says it expects Asian students to make up about 36% of its total in the next five years, compared with 27% today. The district still attracts families of all backgrounds, but Asians are particularly intent that their kids work hard and excel, says Anat Eisenberg, a local Coldwell Banker real-estate agent. "Everybody is caught into this process of driving their kids." Lawrence Mayer, Tenafly High's vice principal, says he's never heard such concerns.

Perched on the western end of the Santa Clara valley, Cupertino was for many years a primarily rural area known for its many fruit orchards. The beginnings of the tech industry brought suburbanization, and Cupertino then became a very white, quintessentially middle-class town of mostly modest ranch homes, populated by engineers and their families. Apple Computer Inc. planted its headquarters there.

As the high-tech industry prospered, so did Cupertino. Today, the orchards are a memory, replaced by numerous shopping malls and subdivisions that are home to Silicon Valley's prosperous upper-middle class. While the architecture in Cupertino is largely the same as in neighboring communities, the town of about 50,000 people now boasts Indian restaurants, tutoring centers and Asian grocers. Parents say Cupertino's top schools have become more academically intense over the past 10 years.

Asian immigrants have surged into the town, granting it a reputation -- particularly among recent Chinese and South Asian immigrants -- as a Bay Area locale of choice. Cupertino is now 41% Asian, up from 24% in 1998.

Some students struggle in Cupertino's high schools who might not elsewhere. Monta Vista's Academic Performance Index, which compares the academic performance of California's schools, reached an all-time high of 924 out of 1,000 this year, making it one of the highest-scoring high schools in Northern California. Grades are so high that a 'B' average puts a student in the bottom third of a class.


Hunter Freeman
Students in the library at Lynbrook High School

"We have great students, which has a lot of upsides," says April Scott, Monta Vista's principal. "The downside is what the kids with a 3.0 GPA think of themselves."

Ms. Scott and her counterpart at Lynbrook know what's said about their schools being too competitive and dominated by Asians. "It's easy to buy into those kinds of comments because they're loaded and powerful," says Ms. Scott, who adds that they paint an inaccurate picture of Monta Vista. Ms. Scott says many athletic programs are thriving and points to the school's many extracurricular activities. She also points out that white students represented 20% of the school's 29 National Merit Semifinalists this year.

Judy Hogin, Jessie's mother and a Cupertino real-estate agent, believes the school was good for her daughter, who is now a freshman at the University of California at San Diego. "I know it's frustrating to some people who have moved away," says Ms. Hogin, who is white. Jessie, she says, "rose to the challenge."

On a recent autumn day at Lynbrook, crowds of students spilled out of classrooms for midmorning break. Against a sea of Asian faces, the few white students were easy to pick out. One boy sat on a wall, his lighter hair and skin making him stand out from dozens of others around him. In another corner, four white male students lounged at a picnic table.

At Cupertino's top schools, administrators, parents and students say white students end up in the stereotyped role often applied to other minority groups: the underachievers. In one 9th-grade algebra class, Lynbrook's lowest-level math class, the students are an eclectic mix of whites, Asians and other racial and ethnic groups.

"Take a good look," whispered Steve Rowley, superintendent of the Fremont Union High School District, which covers the city of Cupertino as well as portions of other neighboring cities. "This doesn't look like the other classes we're going to."

On the second floor, in advanced-placement chemistry, only a couple of the 32 students are white and the rest are Asian. Some white parents, and even some students, say they suspect teachers don't take white kids as seriously as Asians.

"Many of my Asian friends were convinced that if you were Asian, you had to confirm you were smart. If you were white, you had to prove it," says Arar Han, a Monta Vista graduate who recently co-edited "Asian American X," a book of coming-of-age essays by young Asian-Americans.

Ms. Gatley, the Monta Vista PTA president, is more blunt: "White kids are thought of as the dumb kids," she says.

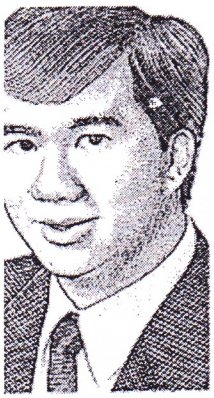
Cupertino's administrators and faculty, the majority of whom are white, adamantly say there's no discrimination against whites. The administrators say students of all races get along well. In fact, there's little evidence of any overt racial tension between students or between their parents.

Mr. Rowley, the school superintendent, however, concedes that a perception exists that's sometimes called "the white-boy syndrome." He describes it as: "Kids who are white feel themselves a distinct minority against a majority culture."

Mr. Rowley, who is white, enrolled his only son, Eddie, at Lynbrook. When Eddie started freshman geometry, the boy was frustrated to learn that many of the Asian students in his class had already taken the course in summer school, Mr. Rowley recalls. That gave them a big leg up.

To many of Cupertino's Asians, some of the assumptions made by white parents -- that Asians are excessively competitive and single-minded -- play into stereotypes. Top schools in nearby, whiter Palo Alto, which also have very high test scores, also feature heavy course loads, long hours of homework and overly stressed students, says Denise Pope, director of Stressed Out Students, a Stanford University program that has worked with schools in both Palo Alto and Cupertino. But whites don't seem to be avoiding those institutions, or making the same negative generalizations, Asian families note, suggesting that it's not academic competition that makes white parents uncomfortable but academic competition with Asian-Americans.

Some of Cupertino's Asian residents say they don't blame white families for leaving. After all, many of the town's Asians are fretting about the same issues. While acknowledging that the term Asian embraces a wide diversity of countries, cultures and languages, they say there's some truth to the criticisms levied against new immigrant parents, particularly those from countries such as China and India, who often put a lot of academic pressure on their children.



Mark Seto

Some parents and students say these various forces are creating an unhealthy cultural isolation in the schools. Monta Vista graduate Mark Seto says he wouldn't send his kids to his alma mater. "It was a sheltered little world that didn't bear a whole lot of resemblance to what the rest of the country is like," says Mr. Seto, a Chinese-American who recently graduated from Yale University. As a result, he says, "college wasn't an academic adjustment. It was a cultural adjustment."

Hung Wei, a Chinese-American living in Cupertino, has become an active campaigner in the community, encouraging Asian parents to be more aware of their children's emotional development. Ms. Wei, who is co-president of Monta Vista's PTA with Ms. Gatley, says her activism stems from the suicide of her daughter, Diana. Ms. Wei says life in Cupertino and at Monta Vista didn't prepare the young woman for life at New York University. Diana moved there in 2004 and jumped to her death from a Manhattan building two months later.

"We emphasize academics so much and protect our kids, I feel there's something lacking in our education," Ms. Wei says.

Cupertino schools are trying to address some of these issues. Monta Vista recently completed a series of seminars focused on such issues as helping parents communicate better with their kids, and Lynbrook last year revised its homework guidelines with the goal of eliminating excessive and unproductive assignments.

The moves haven't stemmed the flow of whites out of the schools. Four years ago, Lynn Rosener, a software consultant, transferred her elder son from Monta Vista to Homestead High, a Cupertino school with slightly lower test scores. At the new school, the white student body is declining at a slower rate than at Monta Vista and currently stands at 52% of the total. Friday-night football is a tradition, with big half-time shows and usually 1,000 people packing the stands. The school offers boys' volleyball, a sport at which Ms. Rosener's son was particularly talented. Monta Vista doesn't.

"It does help to have a lower Asian population," says Homestead PTA President Mary Anne Norling. "I don't think our parents are as uptight as if my kids went to Monta Vista."

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