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Summer 2012

# Eastside/Westside.... The Changing Faces in Two Suburban School Districts

Kushlani de Soyza  
*Clark College*

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## Citation Details

de Soyza, Kushlani (2012). Eastside/Westside.... The Changing Faces in Two Suburban School Districts. Summer 2012 Metrocape, p. 6-12

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Members of the Bhutanese Club at David Douglas High School.

## *Eastside/Westside...* *The Changing Faces of Two Suburban School Districts*

*by Kushlani de Souza*

*Photographs courtesy of Sumitra Chhetri*

**S**umitra Chhetri has come a long way since she moved to Portland four years ago from a Bhutanese refugee camp in Nepal. Fresh off of her graduation from David Douglas High School, Chhetri will spend this summer working for the City of Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability as a Youth Planner, a job she's held for three years now.

Once her work with the City wraps

up, she'll head to Corvallis to start her freshman year at Oregon State University on a full-ride scholarship – she's leaning toward a career in international law, but she's keeping her options open. Her teachers at David Douglas will tell you: Chhetri is an outstanding student.

In the not-so-distant past, a student like Chhetri would have been a stand-out – not just for her accomplishments – but for her ethnicity. Over the last 20

**Percent Minority Students 1991-1992 and 2011-2012:  
Portland Public Schools, David Douglas,  
and Beaverton School Districts**

years, the David Douglas School District has undergone a dramatic change in its student population, shifting from an overwhelmingly white district to one that is increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse. Now, non-white students comprise more than half of the student body.

This “majority-minority” district – in which ethnic minorities outnumber their white classmates – was once the hallmark of urban districts, where ethnic-minority enclaves remained as white families moved out to the suburbs. Today, however, many of the districts at the edges of Portland’s metro area and suburbs around the nation are experiencing rapid diversification that comes with immigration and urban gentrification, among other factors.

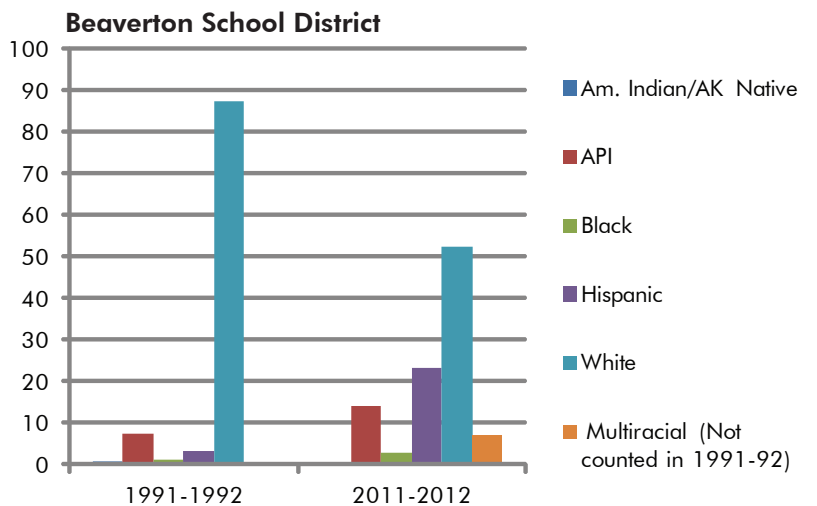
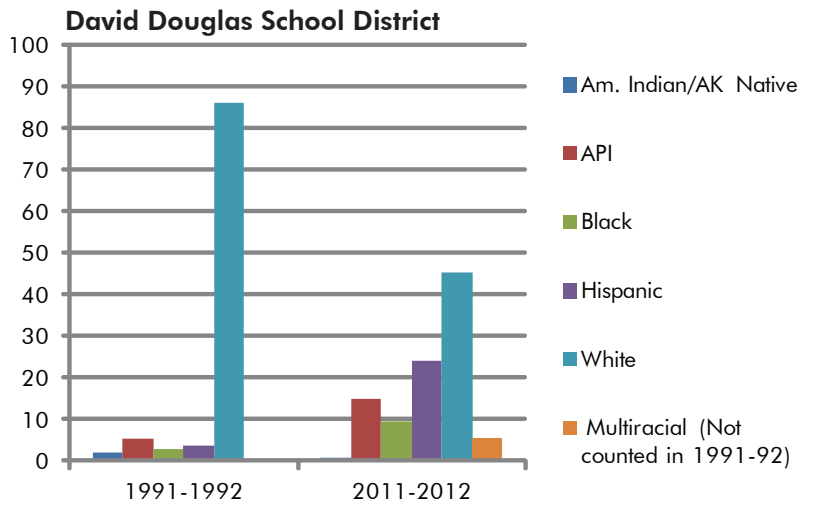
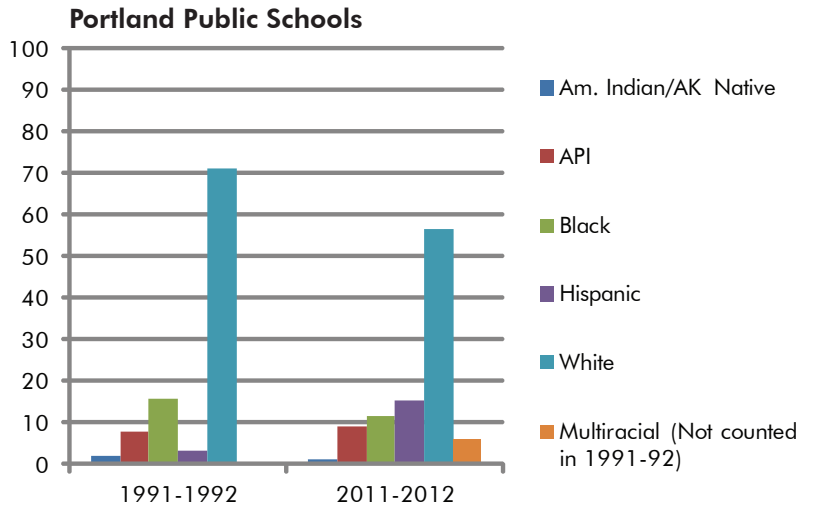
While diversity has become something of a buzzword in education, it often poses a real challenge to communities struggling to redefine themselves and reassess how limited resources will be allocated as budgets shrink and class sizes swell.

In this edition of *Metroscape*<sup>®</sup>, we take a look at how two area school districts – David Douglas on Portland’s east side and Beaverton on the west – are adjusting to the changes.

Twenty years ago, Portland Public Schools were among the state’s least homogenous (about 29% non-white in 1991-1992), while David Douglas and Beaverton were considerably whiter with minority populations of only about 14%.

In 2011-2012, Portland Public Schools’ minority population has grown to 44%, a statistic outpaced by David Douglas (now 55% minority) and Beaverton (now 47% minority).

As Beaverton School District’s equity



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics;  
Oregon Department of Education

## *Working with these kids has changed my life.*

— Anne Downing, David Douglas ESL teacher

coordinator, Sho Shigeoka provides professional development for faculty, staff and other Beaverton community members to create an environment in which students can be successful regardless of their ethnic backgrounds or other identity categories.

“The world is getting much flatter, and the reality is, we’re going to be interacting with people who are different than we are,” Shigeoka said. Instead of viewing immigrants or ethnic minorities as outsiders in the once homogenous community, “we have to recognize our multilingual and multicultural students as an asset, not a deficit.”

At David Douglas, Beaverton and Portland Public Schools, Hispanic students represent the largest ethnic minority group. The percentage of Hispanic students in Portland Public Schools has quadrupled in the last 20 years to 15%. At David Douglas and Beaverton, their numbers have risen even more: increasing six and seven times over to almost 25% in both districts.

Students of Asian/Pacific-Islander descent increased slightly to 9% in Portland, while their ranks nearly doubled (to 14%) in Beaverton and tripled (to 15%) in David Douglas. Black students are also represented in increasing numbers over the last two decades, up slightly to about 16% in Portland Public Schools, more than tripling to 9% in David Douglas and more than doubling to 2.9% in Beaverton.

Percentages of American Indians/Alaskan Natives seemed to drop slightly in all three districts to around 1%, but that decrease is likely related to current students being able to identify as multi-racial, an option not available to students back in 1991-1992.

Anne Downing, who teaches English as a Second Language at David Douglas,

began teaching in the district 10 years ago in the then-newly founded ESL program. Back then, the job entailed working with a small number of students who mostly spoke either Spanish or Russian. Now, she said, “I have more languages in my classroom than I have students, since some of my Southeast Asian students speak 3, 4 and 5 languages.”

David Douglas officials count 74 different languages spoken by their students (24% of whom are English Language Learners), while Beaverton’s district has tallied 90 languages and dialects spoken in their halls (16% of students are English Language Learners).

Downing describes being profoundly affected by the ethnic and cultural diversity at David Douglas: “Working with these kids has changed my life. I really think I’m so fortunate to live in such a diverse community and to have such a multicultural classroom.”

Rather than trying to teach new students a homogenized version of American culture, she said, “I’m teaching them English, and I find I can do that a lot more effectively when I try to learn from them about their experiences and their families.”

Nationally, increasing ethnic diversity in suburban districts are linked to minority birth rates that now outpace those of whites. But in Oregon, that demographic shift has not yet occurred, and despite increasing ethnic diversity, Oregon remains more homogenous than many other states with a 78% white population, according to U.S. Census data.

Here, the ethnic diversification in suburban schools is fueled more by immigration and urban gentrification, and it’s complicated by high rates of poverty among communities of color. The new ranks of ethnic minority and immigrant





**Bhutanese Club members at David Douglas High School in southeast Portland.**

students often face a host of challenges that come with low economic status, social and cultural marginalization, or language barriers – as school budgets are being slashed.

In June, Beaverton School District announced a 2012-13 budget that cuts 344 jobs, including 16 teachers and 33 assistants in ESL. David Douglas announced it will cut 43 jobs next year, on top of more than 100 cut in 2011-2012.

Recent graduate Sumitra Chhetri explains that many students are in a double-bind when it comes to dwindling resources. The tough economy affects their classroom experience and their ability to participate in after-school activities, which help students feel more confident about being part of the academic community.

“Teachers are working hard to help students,” Chhetri said, “but at the administrative level, they can’t always give teach-

ers or students the resources they need to succeed.”

Last year, she recalled, the high school cut the once-required Career Pathways program, which had enabled immigrant students to take classes with classmates with different backgrounds but similar professional goals: “It was a great opportunity for ESL students and English-speaking students to have interactions and learn about each other. But those classes no longer exist.”

Extracurriculars such as music and athletic activities can bridge cultural or language gaps through common interests, but, Chhetri said, “there are barriers like fees or even transportation. What if they aren’t able to take the bus? Who is going to drive students to those activities?”

Another gap that concerns educators, students and community members is the so-called achievement gap. Across a range

*Some of us have the best intentions, but we live in our own little world to the detriment of our students.*

— *Sho Shigeoka, Beaverton School District*

of academic achievement measures – including graduation rates, participation in advanced coursework, college attendance – minority youth fare worse than their white peers.

Language barriers and racial marginalization contribute to this gap, as does social class and poverty, which affect communities of color at higher rates than white groups. In Beaverton, 38% of the student population qualify for free and reduced lunch, while 79% of David Douglas students qualify for the program.

Instead of hand-wringing over these grim statistics or segregating underperforming groups, schools must find ways to reach minority and immigrant students and their families more effectively, Beaverton's Shigeoka said. "If we don't make significant changes in the way we teach, the whole community suffers in the long run," she said.

Beaverton School District, like David Douglas and other diversifying districts, has begun emphasizing culturally responsive teaching methods in their classrooms. Faculty and staff learn about how different cultural groups communicate and learn, and teachers are encouraged to develop culturally diverse curriculum that reflects their students' experiences.

"We have to raise adults' awareness around race, religion, language, gender expression, sexual orientation and other identity categories," Shigeoka said. "We really have to understand who exactly is in our classrooms. Some of us can have the best intentions, but we live in our own little world to the detriment of students."

Shigeoka gives the example of an African-American elementary student who was repeatedly suspended for talking back to his teacher; it turned out that his disciplinary problems were most frequent

on Mondays. What his white teacher didn't understand, Shigeoka explained, is that the child spent a great deal of time each weekend at his predominantly black church, where a call-and-response communication style was the norm.

"For adults to understand that there are different expectations around appropriate behavior is incredibly important," Shigeoka said. "We help all educators, including teachers, bus drivers, administrators and cafeteria managers, develop new skill sets: How can they adapt to these cultural differences?"

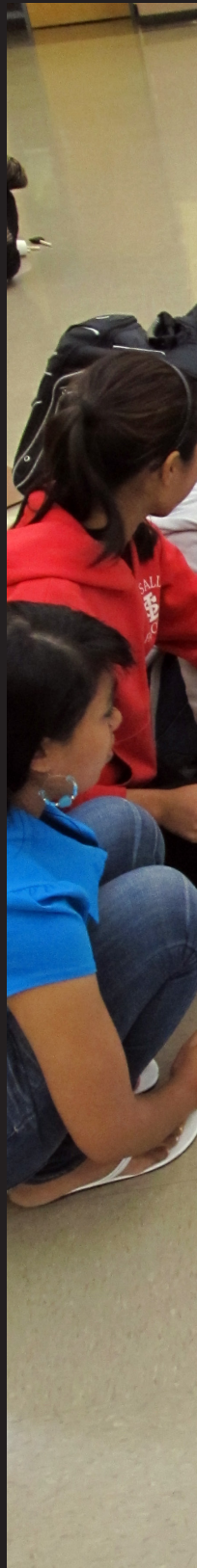
In addition to promoting culturally responsive teaching, area schools must diversify their predominantly white faculty and staff in the coming years, Beaverton's ESL director Wei-Wei Lou said.

"In a perfect world, our staff demographics would reflect our students' demographics. When students see role models (of similar ethnic backgrounds) in the classroom, they gain confidence and a feeling that they belong, that they can come back and make a difference," she said.

This sense of confidence is a key component of self-advocacy, which Beaverton and other diversifying districts have begun to emphasize with their students. "Students need to feel pride in their own culture, they need to see themselves as future leaders," Lou said.

Family outreach is another key to student success, David Douglas graduate Sumitra Chhetri said. Because minority and immigrant parents tend to attend fewer school functions than parents of white students, they are often falsely stereotyped as unconcerned with their children's educations.

Language barriers and transportation issues were among the reasons adults in







Chhetri's Bhutanese community were hesitant to come to school, but in many cases, she said, "many parents didn't feel comfortable coming to the school. They felt like outsiders."

Through the Bhutanese student club Chhetri helped found at David Douglas and a grant from the City of Portland, the school hosted a multicultural arts show featuring artwork from students of several different ethnic groups.

"We invited teachers and principals," she said. "Parents came to see their kids' work, and they felt proud and welcomed. There was interaction happening. Sometimes, not having a place to be together or a positive reason for meeting is a greater barrier than language."

This kind of community outreach depends on the allocation of scarce resources, Beaverton School District counselor Danica Jensen said: "There are families out there that feel disenfranchised, and the (educational) system is very difficult to navigate. But teachers are stretched very thin," often already spending hours off the clock trying to meet their students' needs.

In many cases, there's no funding for teachers to make home visits or to find interpreters for visits to non-English speaking immigrant communities.

David Douglas ESL teacher Anne Downing has also experienced these problems and has volunteered her time to venture out to her students' homes and make due without a translator.





An event sponsored by the Bhutanese Club at David Douglas High School.

“I found I can communicate with the parents, the aunts and uncles. We can draw pictures and speak through gestures – I can show them photos of my family on my phone. We can connect over family,” she said. “I want to communicate to them that I’m doing my best for their child. You can communicate that. It’s just not always with words.”

Downing acknowledges that not all teachers have the time to make these kinds of connections: “I’m a grandma now – no kids to pick up after day care. I wouldn’t have been able to do this when my son was in school.”

Beaverton has also developed another kind of community outreach: the Diversity Summit, an annual summer conference offering workshops on cultural awareness, LGBT issues, inclusion, and culturally responsive teaching methods.

The summit, in its 5th year, is open not only to faculty and staff, but the district’s community partners such as city employees, Parks and Recreation staff, and others – many of the adults who interact with

Beaverton’s students on and off campus.

“Overall, the district and community have welcomed newcomers, and the more we can help new neighbors understand one another, the more smoothly that transition will go,” Lou said.

Sumitra Chhetri agrees that cross-cultural connections among immigrant, ethnic minority, and white families in the district will go a long way toward breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions and creating a strong, multicultural and multilingual community.

Among the area’s ethnic minority and immigrant groups, she said: “There are lots of stories of success – not just failures. I want people to understand that all students are here to learn, they’re here to succeed and to give back. We all have something to contribute to our school and to the community.” **M**

*Freelance writer Kushlani de Souza teaches Women’s Studies at Clark College in Vancouver, WA, and co-produces APA Compass on Portland’s KBOO-FM community radio.*