Hispanics one-fifth of K-12 students
By Hope Yen, Associated Press /USA Today
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WASHINGTON — Roughly one-fourth of the nation's kindergartners are Hispanic, evidence of an accelerating trend that now will see minority children become the majority by 2023.

Census data released Thursday also showed that Hispanics make up about one-fifth of all K-12 students. Hispanics' growth and changes in the youth population are certain to influence political debate, from jobs and immigration to the No Child Left Behind education, for years.

The ethnic shifts in school enrollment are most evident in the West. States such as Arizona, California and Nevada are seeing an influx of Hispanics due to immigration and higher birth rates.

Minority students in that region exceed non-Hispanic whites at the pre-college grade levels, with about 37% of the students Hispanic. Hispanics make up 54% of the students in New Mexico, 47% in California, 44% in Texas and 40% in Arizona.

In 2007, more than 40% of all students in K-12 were minorities — Hispanics, blacks, Asian-Americans and others. That's double the percentage of three decades ago.

In colleges, Hispanics made up 12% of full-time undergraduate and graduate students, 2% more than in 2006. Still, that is short of Hispanics' 15% representation in the total U.S. population.

"The future of our education system depends on how we can advance Hispanics through the ranks," said William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution in Washington. "In many cases it's going to be a challenge, because they are the children of immigrants, and their English is not as strong. Many have parents without a high school or college education."

Minorities are projected to become the majority of the overall U.S. population by 2042. For minority kids, that shift is seen coming in 2023, seven years earlier than the previous estimate, from 2004. The accelerated timetable is due to immigration among Hispanics and Asians, and declining birth rates among non-Hispanic whites.

Hispanics account for more than 23% of kindergartners in private and public schools, according to 2007 data. That is more than triple Hispanics' percentage in the 1970s, the height of white baby boom enrollment in elementary and high school.

More Hispanic kindergartners in 2007 were U.S.-born than foreign-born, assuring them of citizenship that will make them eligible to vote by 2020.

The changing demographics offer opportunity and political risks for Barack Obama, the nation's first African-American president, and emerging Republicans such as 37-year-old Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, the first Indian-American elected to statewide office.
Obama, who took two-thirds of the Hispanic vote, is channeling billions of federal dollars to improve schools, reduce the dropout rate and make college more affordable by increasing the maximum Pell Grant for low-income students to $5,550.

Yet his administration has been sketchy when it comes to improving classroom performance and overhauling the No Child Left Behind Act. It sets goals for schools so every student can read and do math on grade level by 2014.

The education law has major implications for both black and Hispanic students, including those who speak English as a second language, because they tend to lag whites in reading and math scores.

Obama has been largely quiet on immigration reform, which could pave the way for citizenship for nearly 12 million illegal immigrants. Last week, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said she was not notified when federal agents conducted an immigration raid in Bellingham, Wash.

Richard Fry, a senior researcher at the Pew Hispanic Center, said Hispanic growth cannot be ignored in policy debates for too long. While in recent elections Hispanics have only cast 6% of the total ballots, "Latinos' electoral power and participation levels clearly are going to grow," he said.

Other findings from the data:

• About 58% of children enrolled in grades K-12 are non-Hispanic whites, a group that represents 66% of the U.S. population. After Hispanics, blacks were the second-largest minority group enrolled in K-12 (15 percent), followed by Asians (4 percent).

• Fifty-three percent of Hispanic 4-year-olds were enrolled in nursery school, compared with 43% in 1997 and 21% in 1987.

The census data was based on the Current Population Survey. Data on U.S. regions and states came from the 2007 American Community Survey, the government's annual survey of about 3 million households.

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