



Equity by Design:

Understanding the Housing-School
Relationship: Achieving Integration in
Racially Changing Cities and Suburbs

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Understanding the Housing-School Relationship: Achieving Integration in Racially Changing Cities and Suburbs

One week after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The legislation banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, and national origin during the process of renting or buying a home. Despite the law's intent, when it came to actual enforcement it failed to address the discriminatory practices existent in the real estate market. Non-white homeseekers were, and in many cases still are, consistently shown fewer units, told less units are available, and are steered toward certain neighborhoods, resulting in residential segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993). This history of public and private housing discrimination has assisted in cementing racial housing segregation across U.S. cities. Moreover, the country's changing demography, rise in income inequality and wealthy enclaves, low-income suburbanization, and gentrification of the urban core have added new layers to the challenges associated with residential segregation (Spader, Rieger, Herbert, & Molinsky, 2018). Indeed, over 50 years after the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, residential segregation, and by extension school segregation, persists.

In most locales, where you live determines where you attend school. Unfortunately, this link between housing and education also means that where housing segregation exists, so does school segregation, creating a system of inequitable opportunity strongly connected to race and socioeconomic status (Bhargava, 2018; Wells, 2015). As such, any policy aimed at achieving truly integrated schools must take into consideration the demographic makeup of neighborhoods and housing policies that help or hinder residential integration (Mickelson,

2011). Indeed, housing policy is school policy. However, despite the well-established connection between the two, as well as growing calls by scholars and integration advocates, and even President Obama's Administration in its 2016 dear colleague letter jointly signed by the Secretaries of Housing, Education, and Transportation (Castro, King, & Foxx, 2016) that pressed these agencies to collectively work on addressing housing and school integration, policies tend to be created that address one issue or the other rather than how they interconnect (Tegeler & Herskind, 2018).

**Indeed, housing policy
is school policy.**

The research is clear regarding the connections between housing and school integration: integrated housing leads to integrated schooling, which results in positive short-term outcomes for students and long-term outcomes for adults. In the short-term, students who attend racially and economically diverse schools are more likely to perform better academically, have more cross-racial relationships and less feelings of prejudice or cross-racial fears, and have an overall better understanding of individuals from different backgrounds (Mickelson, 2011). In the long-term, these same students are more likely to have cross-racial relationships, are better prepared to work in a global economy, more likely to be civically involved and hold democratic values, and live in integrated neighborhoods as adults (Mickelson, 2011). Conversely, Black and Brown schools located in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods are more likely to have fewer

resources, inexperienced teachers, and less advanced course offerings (Wells, 2015). Resultantly, the conditions under which schools in segregated neighborhoods operate provide a way for families (who are predominately white) to rationalize purchasing homes in majority white neighborhoods, thus perpetuating the residential and school segregation cycle (Wells, 2015).

Understanding the housing-school relationship is particularly salient in a time when the majority of students in public schools are non-white, demographics in urban and suburban neighborhoods are changing, desegregation plans are being dismantled, and school choice is on the rise. The purpose of this brief is to provide information to parents, community members, and school district leaders and teachers about the relationship between housing policy and school policy. Specifically, this brief provides a succinct history of U.S. housing policy, discusses some current educational policies that impact housing segregation, and demonstrates how demographic changes occurring in suburban and urban areas impact school diversity. This brief is particularly helpful for school communities as they seek to create and maintain diverse schooling environments in changing geographic contexts.

The History of Housing Policy

Federal policies have shaped the metropolitan landscape of the U.S. through intentional segregated housing policies, including public housing, racial zoning (redlining), and the enforcement of restrictive covenants. Much of the composition of the metropolitan areas was established by public housing projects created during the Great Depression and World War II (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2017). Under the Public Works Administration (PWA), public housing was created for working and lower-middle class white families with the intention of providing shelter to those who could not find houses. While the PWA adopted the

neighborhood composition rule, meaning federal housing projects would reflect the racial composition of the neighborhood, the PWA also aided in segregating neighborhoods even where there was no previous pattern of segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2017).

Under the 1949 Housing Act, local authorities continued to build housing projects that were segregated. These segregated housing projects caused Black Americans to be isolated (Rothstein, 2017); the federal government—and by extension local governments—intentionally confined Black Americans to Black housing projects (Massey & Denton, 1993). Additionally, public housing for Black families was not maintained with the same level of quality as was housing for white families. Once the housing shortage eased in the U.S., public housing was regulated to be limited to lower-income people. Public housing has since suffered from a negative stigma and a deteriorating quality.



Low income housing project in New York City.

High-rise public housing projects continued to be built through the 1970s in predominantly Black neighborhoods. These mid-century government housing projects defined the neighborhoods racial makeup that continued for years. When the U.S. Supreme Court ordered cities like



Chicago to begin building public housing in white neighborhoods to prevent further racial isolation, the municipalities stopped building public housing all together (Rothstein, 2017). Unfortunately, the damage had already taken hold in American metropolitan areas.

Racial Zoning

After the Civil War and Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws in the South led hundreds of thousands of Black Americans to move North and West. As Black Americans migrated to other areas in the country, prejudices and discrimination also spread. Across the country, many municipalities, known as “Sundown Towns,” prevented Black Americans from residing in or being in their borders after dark (Rothstein, 2017). Cities with large Black populations, typically Southern or border states, adopted zoning rules separating residential areas for white and Black families (Dreier et al., 2004; Rothstein, 2017). Some towns lacked specific ordinances, but official planning documents designated Black areas, which were used to guide development (Rothstein, 2017).

Local and federal officials created segregated communities by reserving middle class neighborhoods for single-family homes (Dreier et al., 2004; Rothstein, 2017). This prevented families with lower-incomes of all races from residing in these neighborhoods. Areas where Black Americans lived were changed from residential to industrial zones. The industrial zones did not have the same prohibitions on businesses as the established white neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2017). Thus, when the Black neighborhoods were transformed into industrial zones, Black families were forced to live with businesses which polluted their environment as well as industries of disrepute (taverns, clubs, and brothels) (Rothstein, 2017). Although there were codes prohibiting single-family homes from being subdivided, homes in industrial zones could legally be subdivided. With Black Americans prevented from buying in

most areas, the overcrowded industrial zones were soon developing into slums (Dreier et al., 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993).

The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) later insured amortized mortgages but did not underwrite houses in industrial zones. Thereby the residences in these zones cost more than similar houses in white neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2017). Black homeowners had fewer resources for upkeep because so much of their income went to the higher housing payments. Black neighborhoods consequently were not maintained as well as the white neighborhoods and this further reinforced negative images. The federal government created a manual explaining why every municipality should develop a zoning ordinance in 1921. It included ideology that the races should not mingle (Massey & Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2017). The Real Estate Board also created a code of ethics explaining a realtor should never introduce a person of a race that would be detrimental to the value of the property in the neighborhood (Dreier et al., 2004; Rothstein, 2017). These zoning practices were to prevent the integration of people of Color into a white district.

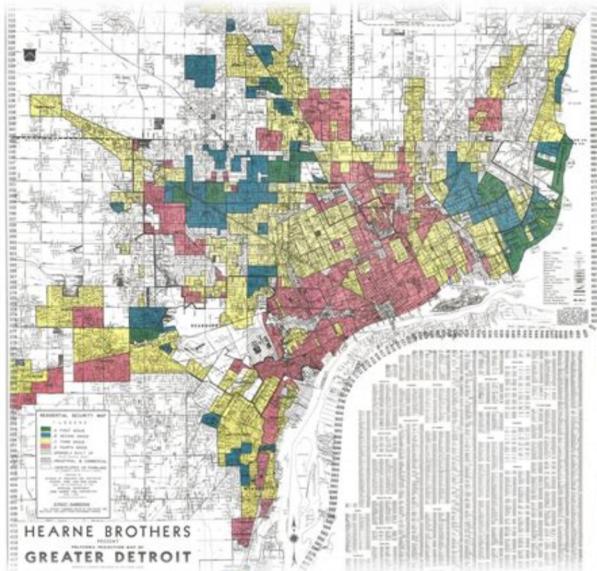
Restrictive Covenants

The government created segregated housing by enforcing private agreements which opposed integrative practices (Dreier et al., 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2017). Additionally, subdivision developers created community associations to which homeowners must belong, and which included a white-only clause. The local and federal government promoted and enforced these restrictive covenants. Courts evicted Black Americans from their purchased homes when the homes had restrictive covenants. Local governments even organized and supported neighborhood associations with racial restrictive clauses. It was not until 1948 when the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional for

states to enforce restrictive covenants, as this would be a violation of the equal protection clause (*Shelley V. Kraemer, 1948*). Despite the decision, federal agencies continued to practice and enforce segregation in bold resistance to the Court. Consequently, the 1968 Fair Housing Act outlawed restrictive covenants. The covenants still remain in many deeds, however, even though they lack legal authority.

Suburbanization

Black Americans could still move into a white neighborhood when segregation was only created using economic zoning without racial exclusions. The government, however, employed other mechanisms to segregate the



In the 1930s, property assessors graded American cities on a four-point scale, with the worst neighborhoods coded red, giving birth to the term "redlining."

CREDIT MAPPING INEQUALITY: REDLINING IN NEW DEAL AMERICA / CREATIVE COMMONS

metropolitan landscape (Dreier et al., 2004; Rothstein, 2017). A propaganda campaign promoted suburbanization persuading white families to move out of urban housing and into single-family homes. The government and its segregated policies then made it impossible for Blacks Americans to follow white Americans into suburbia. The Homeowners Loan Corporations

(HOLC) was created in 1933 to save houses about to default during the Great Depression (Rothstein, 2017). These loans were amortized which meant families could gain some equity in their homes as they made payments. The HOLC created color-coded maps and any neighborhood with Black residents were coded "red" and identified as the riskiest investment (Dreier et al., 2004; Rothstein, 2017). Redlining was purely racially driven, as even middle-class Black areas were coded red.

The FHA was created in 1934 to help middle class families purchase a home for the first time by insuring bank mortgages. The FHA offered no guarantees for mortgages to Black Americans or white homeowners leasing to Black Americans regardless of creditworthiness (Rothstein, 2017). The FHA also only offered these mortgages to white individuals buying homes in suburban areas (Dreier et al., 2004) effectively creating a segregated metropolis. Rothstein (2017) claims the FHA was particularly concerned with preventing school desegregation. The FHA financed entire subdivisions, which had a huge impact on segregation. As Rothstein (2017) writes, "Federal promotion of home ownership became inseparable from a policy of racial segregation" (p. 63). In this way, federal agencies created suburbanization, financially insured the homes, and established segregated neighborhoods, which would not change for some time.

White Flight and Blockbusting

Contrary to the belief underscoring redlining practices in the FHA and HOLC, integration in fact increased property values (Rothstein, 2017). The redlining established by the FHA meant Black families had few options for housing. Thus, Black families who wanted to escape overcrowded areas were willing to pay more than fair market values for homes. Some real estate agents created the phenomenon of white flight through the practice of blockbusting. Blockbusters purposely made white families fear Black families infiltrating their neighborhood



through unscrupulous techniques (Rothstein, 2017). These tactics caused white families who feared Black infiltration to sell their houses for cheaper than their value. Blockbusters then bought the houses for less money and sold to Black families for more money. Agents would sell the homes to Black Americans on installment plans since the FHA would not insure their mortgages. The costs were very high and sometimes the condition of the houses would worsen because there were less resources available to maintain them. This seemed to support the notion that when Black families moved into a neighborhood the conditions deteriorated and property values decreased. This further exacerbated white flight, wherein the white homeowners made a mass exodus to the suburbs leaving neighborhoods in the central parts of cities predominantly populated by Black individuals. The banks and institutions did not approve Black mortgages due to FHA policies, but the banks knowingly approved blockbuster purchases who were taking advantage of Black people in vulnerable positions. The practice of blockbusting was supported and condoned by the federal agency, leading to perpetual segregated neighborhoods, harmful white flight, and a further oppression of the Black community.

We highlight the history of housing policies in the U.S. to help illustrate how they continue to impact not only housing segregation but school segregation, as well as the link between the two. In the section below, we provide a brief overview on some current education policies that continue to play a role in housing segregation.

Education Policies that Impact Housing Segregation

After the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision was handed down, school districts across the country, voluntarily or by court order, began to desegregate their schools—schools

that were located in segregated neighborhoods. While school districts that implemented strong desegregation plans also experienced consistent residential integration, as support for desegregation began to diminish and districts moved back to neighborhood school assignment, schools resegregated (Bhargava, 2018). This is important to note as desegregation policy itself, absent comprehensive housing policy that addresses segregation, makes it challenging to achieve diverse schools (Wells, Duran, & White, 2011; Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2009). Indeed, as neighborhoods continue to be segregated, schools are resegregating. White students, the most isolated group in public schools, attend schools that are almost three quarters white while Black and Latino students are more likely to attend schools that are majority non-white (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014).

Along with the waning support for desegregation, other education policies have assisted in influencing housing patterns and thus maintaining segregated schools. The drawing of school district boundary lines and how students are assigned to schools not only directly impacts school segregation but also residential segregation (Tegeler & Hilton, 2018). Indeed, most segregation existent in public schools is a result of the boundary lines that place students into different school systems (Bischoff, 2008; Clotfelter, 2004; Owens, 2016). Additionally, a tactic that was predominately used in the South after *Brown* as a way to avoid desegregation and exert local control, school district secession, has seen a rebirth in recent years. The growth of school choice policies not designed to achieve diversity have also contributed to school segregation.

School District Boundaries

The drawing and redrawing of school district boundary lines is often a controversial undertaking in school communities. School

district boundary lines play a key role in where families choose to live and when these lines are altered, heated debates tend to follow. Indeed, families choose to move to neighborhoods based on the perceived quality and reputation of the nearby school, which tends to be based on status ideologies, demographics, and academic outcomes (Holme, 2002; Wells, 2015). “Good” and “bad” schools are often defined based on student demographics (Holme, 2002; Holme & Wells, 2008), which in turn can impact families’ decisions to move to less diverse neighborhoods. Wells (2015) fittingly argues, “race matters in homebuyers’ perception of place and thus how much they will pay to live on either side of a school district boundary line” (p. 10).

In large metropolitan areas that incorporate the city and county in its school system, some of these issues can be mitigated through student assignment policies that seek to diversify their schools (see e.g., Diem, Frankenberg, Cleary, & Ali, 2014). Yet, in more fragmented metropolitan areas that encapsulate multiple school districts, without any type of regional policy that brings districts together for the sake of diversity, the boundary lines become more hardened and tougher to cross (Holme & Finnigan, 2013; Holme, Finnigan, & Diem, 2016). Moreover, when new boundary lines are drawn that intentionally siphon off more affluent communities, educational opportunity, which is highly racialized, is directly impacted.

School District Secession

School district secession was a method used after *Brown* as a way to defy school desegregation (Wilson, 2016). Municipalities broke off from larger counties to create their own school systems that would exclude anyone living outside of the municipality (Siegel-Hawley, Diem, & Frankenberg, 2018). The argument for these secessions was that smaller school systems would provide more local control to the community and thus improve the quality of education for its students (Wilson, 2016). While

the U.S. Supreme Court ruled district secessions as impermissible if they hindered school desegregation (*Wright v. Council of City of Emporia*, 1972), this did not stop efforts to eventually halt the progress of desegregation. Today, predominately white and affluent communities are again turning to secession as a way to break away from county-wide school systems. According to a recent report (EdBuild, 2017), over 70 communities have pursued secession since 2000 with more than half being successful in such efforts. Moreover, many states allow secession to occur, which could result in an even higher number. Research on contemporary secession efforts in Memphis-Shelby County, TN, for example, show that the drawing of new boundary lines and creation of new districts across the metropolitan area has resulted in racially and economically distinct districts (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Diem, 2017).



School Choice

The design of school choice policies can play an integral role in fueling school segregation. When districts implement choice policies that do not seek to racially or socioeconomically balance the student population, or provide transportation to families so that school choice options are not limited to families with the means to participate,

segregation can persist (Holme, Frankenberg, Diem, & Welton, 2013). Further, districts that utilize open enrollment policies, whereby allowing students to choose among schools within their district, are likely to experience between-school segregation. This is evident in schools that have experienced demographic change as white and affluent families use open enrollment to transfer schools or all together move to neighborhoods with more affluent schools (Holme et al., 2013).

Charter schools, one of the most popular forms of school choice, have been found to be more segregated than traditional public schools



(Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011). Charter schools along with voucher programs tend to be implemented outside of district's desegregation efforts, and as such, are more likely lead to racial segregation in schools and not assist in addressing housing segregation (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2013).

Gentrification, Suburban Demographic Change, and School Diversity

Metropolitan areas across the U.S. have experienced dramatic demographic changes over the past several decades. Suburban areas

are now majority home to people of Color and have an increasing number of low-income and foreign-born residents (Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014). In many major cities, gentrification has taken shape displacing low-income people of Color who have long resided in these areas (Diem, Holme, Edwards, Haynes, & Epstein, 2019). These demographic shifts in metropolitan areas are also mirrored in public schools, and school districts play an integral role in responding to these changing dynamics. Research shows that responses to demographic changes in suburban areas have taken a race neutral approach, which can further perpetuate already present racial inequities (Welton, Diem, & Holme, 2015). In gentrifying contexts, responses have led to increased inequities via school choice policies that allow more students to transfer to preferred schools (Serbulo, 2017; Wilson, 2015). Moreover, while some districts are striving to create or maintain diversity in gentrifying locales, their efforts are often thwarted by desires to attract and meet the needs of gentrifying families (Diem et al., 2019).

Fortunately, a number of metropolitan areas are working to bring together education and housing stakeholders to address their community's changing demography and create housing-school integration agendas (see Tegeler & Herskind, 2018). For example, in Pasadena, California, the district has been working with the Pasadena Educational Foundation to provide more information to local realtors about their schools to help debunk any negative perceptions, which in turn can impact who chooses to live in the area. In St. Louis, Missouri, an intentionally diverse public charter school was established in a racially and economically diverse neighborhood that draws students from across the city. As gentrification increased in the school's neighborhood and the racial composition began to shift, the school took measures, including working with the community and passing legislation to ensure that the school gives preference to enrolling low

-income students and maintaining diversity (Tegeler & Herskind, 2018). These examples highlight how when housing and school segregation are thought of collectively, innovative solutions can be developed to address both.

Recommendations

In order to understand school segregation, it is crucial for communities to understand and be cognizant of its relationship to housing segregation *and* what can be done to combat the two. While there a number of policies and practices that can address the two, we offer a few below that we think communities can implement as a starting point.

Centering School Diversity in Student Assignment Policies

Amid changing demographics in our communities and school districts, it is crucial for school districts to put in place student assignment policies that center diversity. These plans need to ensure that school enrollment draws from diverse areas of the district, not just the school's neighborhood, so as to minimize potential racial and economic school segregation. Additionally, these policies can also incorporate magnet schools/programs, controlled choice, or inter-district programs to increase diversity (Diem & Pinto, 2017).

Engage in Community-wide Conversations about the Housing-School Relationship

Wells (2015) aptly states,

The irony is that we know from our scholarly research that White gentrifiers state that they choose the city over the suburbs in order to raise their children in more multicultural communities and enroll them in racially and socioeconomically diverse schools (p.

17).

Indeed, recent research on racial bias shows that among younger individuals, such bias has decreased dramatically over the past decade (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019). Yet, at the same time, young individuals are moving into neighborhoods that have been historically home to low-income people of Color and displacing them (Maciag, 2015). As such, a larger dialogue is needed within communities to discuss the ramifications of these actions and what policies can be implemented to avoid the displacement of families while also creating more diverse neighborhoods and schools. School districts and housing authorities need to be in communication with one another and work with community stakeholders (e.g., activists, nonprofits, families) and local and state level leaders to jointly strategize around integration.

Inclusionary Zoning

Inclusionary zoning refers to the practice of reserving a portion of housing in a new construction development for lower-income residents. This practice in high-market housing developments gives developers incentives such as allowing them to build more units in a property to offset the costs of selling or renting high-market units at lower rates to lower-income or moderate-income residents. Inclusionary zoning practices can be very diverse as municipalities design them uniquely for their jurisdictional needs. This practice is promising as it has revealed in places like Montgomery County, Maryland that students from lower-income families living in low-poverty neighborhoods and attending the residentially zoned low-poverty and high-achieving schools, saw gains in elementary math and reading tests (Schwartz, 2013). Schwartz (2010) also found the positive effects on student performance accrued over time; these gains were evident when the children living in public housing attended the most economically advantaged schools. This is one policy of many that could

help to improve the academic and other opportunity gaps (Milner, 2010) by utilizing housing policy to allow families to leave segregated neighborhoods and find opportunities in integrated schools.



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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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