

HIS 495- Rhode Island: Applied History & Policy

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Location and Inequitable Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- An inequitable distribution of resources within American public schools leads to failing urban districts and perpetuates a cycle of disinvestment, dysfunction, and poverty in non-white communities.
- Past attempts at progressive school reform is stymied by an ahistorical understanding of segregation. The essential connection between public school finance and real estate policy is routinely obfuscated in both legislation and jurisprudence. Investigations of federal housing policy reveal racist regulations, and examinations of integration attempts reveal discriminatory policy and an unwillingness to incur the anger of affluent white populations.
- In the context of the Federal Housing Administration's own discriminatory mortgage lending practices, tacit acceptance of residential segregation in cities and states across the country, and the willingness of affluent citizens to prioritize personal wealth over the common good, it is impossible for public school funding to be anything but inequitable.
- To remedy centuries of inequity, it is necessary to address the intersecting issues of race, real estate policy, and public school funding. Impoverished school districts suffer from lack of resources. This deficit is not just in education, but in social services, housing, and public amenities as well. To compensate for American disinvestment in social wellbeing, successful policy reform needs to go beyond simple compensatory funding by providing robust resources to low-income communities.
- Community school programs are a promising option, offer social support beyond the classroom to both students and community members, and help to equalize resources between low-income and the more affluent districts. But, community schools are insufficient on their own to combat the inequality at the heart of public school funding. A more comprehensive approach is necessary, one that permanently resolves the issue of racial segregation in schools by resolving discrimination in real estate policy and practice.
- Failure to account for residential segregation led to decades of ineffective school reform. Remedies for dysfunctional urban school systems depend not just on educational reform, but a complete overhaul of housing policy, and with it resource allocation. Legislation routinely failed to eliminate racist real estate sales and mortgage lending practices, in fact laws at the local, state, and federal level frequently endorse it.
- Immediate action must be taken to remedy racist educational funding disparities, and this requires the implementation of regional school districts. These districts will consolidate artificially separated regions, and produce a shared tax base that will link the success of wealthy citizens to that of their impoverished neighbors. However, as the evidence in this paper shows, reaction to mandated integration, whether by bussing or district expansion, reliably triggers white flight which has stymied attempts at reform for decades. Achieving truly successful school reform requires implementation of long-overdue fair

housing policy. Inclusionary zoning legislation will disrupt centuries of racist real estate policy by ensuring a diverse community in which race and income level will no longer dictate one's access to quality education. Equitable real estate zoning will ensure that low-income residents, currently isolated in the city's ailing urban neighborhoods, will gain entry to high-functioning school systems, allowing poor children to escape the endless cycle of poverty that has long consumed them.

INTRODUCTION

American public education has failed. The divide between low-income students of color and their affluent, mostly white peers has grown over the past few decades, putting the lie to claims of an integrated and equal system of education. Schools in Providence, Rhode Island suffer from the same dysfunction as urban schools throughout the country. Non-white students, particularly Black Americans, are isolated in under-resourced neighborhoods with failing schools, while their white peers attend well-performing schools in wealthier suburban districts. This urban-suburban divide did not develop naturally. Rather, it is a result of centuries of racially antagonistic public policy. This paper will show the effect of such policy on public education funding, and reveal the unexpected ways in which access to real estate dictates the quality of education one can expect for one's children.

POLICY CONTEXT

The American public school system was problematic from the start. Socioeconomic status and gender were early and sizable barriers to a quality education, but it is race that remains the deciding factor in a student's access to quality education. American public school funding systems depend largely on local real estate values. While affluent neighborhoods boast well-resourced schools, and as a result better performing students, schools in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty, though they require

greater resources than their wealthy neighbors, suffer from chronic disinvestment. Official U.S. public policy reliably isolates non-white residents in poorly resourced, under-valued, urban neighborhoods, and endorses the hoarding of resources in suburban districts, which thrive at the expense of their urban counterparts. Americans, in both private sentiment and public policy, display a specific hostility towards their Black brethren. Slavery, Jim Crow laws, restricting housing covenants, and the practice of redlining all functioned to bar Black Americans from access to property and wealth. When examined in this context, the long-established practice of using local property taxes as the primary source of funding for public schools is unfair, immoral, economically illogical, and a likely violation of civil rights. The link between race, real estate, education policy is one of the greatest injustices in American history.

In what is likely the best-known example of education-related jurisprudence, *Brown v. Board of Education* found in 1954 that racially separate educational facilities were inherently unequal. This Supreme Court decision overturned the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling which allowed for segregated public services.¹ *Plessy* itself was argued on the basis of a Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling from fifty years prior which found that individual school systems had the constitutional authority to maintain segregated schools.² *Brown v. Board* reversed these inequitable decisions, but, the court failed to prescribe or enforce a remedy, and school integration was widely resisted.

Less than a decade earlier, the Supreme Court case, *Shelley v. Kraemer*, attempted to remedy residential segregation by declaring racial restrictive housing covenants unconstitutional, the private practice of discrimination in real estate continued. Residential segregation created by 19th century real estate covenants was only bolstered by New Deal policies. Roosevelt's Federal Housing Administration (FHA), while it succeeded in making the purchase of a home viable for millions of white Americans, actually stymied Black attempts at homeownership.³ Under the

authority of the FHA, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) created a set of maps designating Black and immigrant neighborhoods as a dangerous investment.⁴ The practice of redlining ensured that Black neighborhoods and their schools remained racially isolated.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed in the interest of eradicating racial discrimination in public accommodation, education, and voting registration, but enforcement was weak.⁵ A year later, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), provided federal money for schools with a large population of low-income students.⁶ Shortly thereafter, Massachusetts passed the Racial Imbalance Act of 1965, leading to the nation's first busing mandate. Rhode Island followed the example of its northern neighbor in 1967, when Providence became the first of the state's districts to employ an integrative busing policy.⁷ In 1971, the Supreme Court, in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, affirmed that busing mandates for the purposes of desegregation were indeed constitutional.⁸

Political sentiment turned increasingly conservative in the 1970s and 1980s. Associate Professor at the University of Virginia Law School, James E. Ryan argues that an important shift in approaches to public education law and policy occurred in this period. As the desegregationist approach crumbled under social dissent, education reformers coalesced around demands for equal funding of separate facilities.⁹ Two Supreme Court cases cemented this shift. In 1973, *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, found that school funding inequities were not a constitutional violation.¹⁰ One year later, *Milliken v. Bradley* effectively halted efforts for cross-district integration.¹¹ As a result, American schools remain overwhelmingly segregated by race, leaving students of color with inferior facilities and insufficient resources. Congressional legislative remedies have had little impact. Title I, a provision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, provides funding for schools with a high percentage of low-income students, but even with increased funding, students in racially segregated schools continue

to underperform as compared to their non-urban counterparts.

Federally-sanctioned residential segregation created racially isolated schools. In order to provide truly equitable public education, public policy dealing with both school funding and housing and real estate must be reformed. Until low-income, non-white Americans have access to the housing and schools of high-wealth communities, equitable public education is impossible. The current dysfunction in American schools is the result of weak legislation allowing individual preference to preempt sound public policy.

Policy Issue

American public education is systemically inequitable. Racially antagonistic public policy assures that Black Americans are coerced into under-resourced urban neighborhoods, while their white peers dominate wealthier suburban populations. The resource divide between these two populations is stark, and produces extreme differences in academic performance, with poor, non-white students trailing far behind their wealthier, majority white peers. White resistance to integration plans and progressive taxing schemes is the hallmark of American educational reform. Compensatory funding emerged as one of the few reform policies supported by the courts and populace alike. Unfortunately, increased funding does not result in improved academic outcomes for low-income students. To discourage the hoarding of wealth and resources in more prosperous school districts, a new approach must be taken. The battle against educational inequality must be fought on two fronts. First, local, town and city school districts, the main source of funding inequity, must be reconfigured so that the success of well-resourced schools is tied to that of their lower-income neighbors. Regional or state-wide school districts will serve to distribute resources more fairly between schools. Secondly, affordable housing policies are essential to undo decades of government-encouraged racial segregation. Together, these reforms will equalize resources

across populations, as racially, economically and regionally diverse communities replace segregated schools and neighborhoods.

Literature Review Summary

While the literature on public school policy is extensive, it is easy to identify a common thread. Whether the topic is poverty, privatization, access to early learning programs, or interdistrict bussing, most school reform issues stem from ownership of private property and community wealth. The best policy reports identify this relationship and make recommendations for progressive policy capable of overcoming systemic funding inequity, with the goal of delivering to low-income students the resources they need to compete with their affluent peers.

The surest sign of a high achieving school is neighborhood affluence. The reason for this is obvious; wealthier communities have access to better resources, while lower-income neighborhoods suffer from reduced investment. This link between community wealth and quality of public education is made clear in *Sharing the Wealth: How Regional Finance and Desegregation Plans Can Enhance Educational Equity*, wherein the authors argue that school reform policy must focus on racial and socioeconomic segregation between school districts, and not among the schools inside them.¹² The paper prescribes a voluntary desegregation plan that crosses district boundaries, bolstered by an equitable sharing of resources including taxes and educational facilities. The authors maintain that school systems which have attempted some version of interdistrict integration show evidence of higher academic achievement for students from under resourced communities in integrated schools compared to their low-income, nonintegrated peers.¹³

Location, Location, Location: The Role Neighborhoods Play in Family Wealth and Well-Being supports this assertion. Thomas, *et al.*, examines the relationship between personal wealth, housing segregation, and racially isolated schools. The authors identify two types of

neighborhoods: “high opportunity” and “low opportunity,” asserting that racial segregation by real estate is encouraged by public policy.¹⁴ To remedy this uneven distribution of resources, the authors suggest progressive legislation that supports housing equity by making high opportunity neighborhoods accessible to low-income families through inclusionary zoning policies.

In *Diverse Housing, Diverse Schooling: How Policy Can Stabilize Racial Demographic Change in Cities and Suburbs*, Amy Stuart Wells also examines the relationship between neighborhood real estate values and a student’s access to quality education, and she concludes that racially-segregated housing leads to substandard school systems. Wells, however, is encouraged by the opportunity for more equitable school funding systems arising from current U.S. population shifts between urban and suburban districts. She maintains that progressive public policy regarding affordable housing is essential to curtail racially-isolated schools, and proposes “scattering” affordable housing in both urban and suburban areas, so that no one district becomes more or less desirable than others.¹⁵

In *Investing for Student Success: Lessons from State School Finance Reforms*, Linda Darling-Hammond argues for progressive funding systems to mitigate the inequity caused by racially-driven real estate values, asserting that low-income public school districts require not equal, but greater per-pupil funding than more affluent districts.¹⁶ Anna Maier, *et al.*, take a different approach. *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy* seeks to remedy the effects of racial isolation on public school systems with the establishment of community schools. The authors suggest that such schools, which allocate resources for community health and social services, will compensate for resources not available to residents of low-income neighborhoods without requiring extra-district bussing, commandeering of resources, or the introduction of less-regulated nonpublic educational facilities.¹⁷

Community wealth, as understood by local real estate values, is currently the deciding factor in the quality of an American child's education. Those who cannot afford to live in affluent, suburban populations rarely have access to the same opportunities available to their wealthier peers. Policy that focuses on residential segregation attempts to desegregate neighborhoods across districts by providing affordable, desirable housing in both urban and suburban areas. Policy that focuses on resource equity challenges existing school district divisions, suggesting that regional districts can result in more equal access to quality education. Ultimately, a combination of both approaches will be necessary to undo decades of bad policy.

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

It may seem counterintuitive to include property law and housing policy in a paper on school equity, but the link between real estate values and education history is strong. The concepts of race, property, and wealth are inseparable in American history. Property confers upon its owner both institutional power and generational wealth, and from the start, American policy reserves such wealth for a particular segment of the population. Inclusion in that category expanded and contracted over time, but Black Americans were persistently and intentionally excluded. Chronic exclusion from holding property guarantees that Black Americans remain relegated to dysfunctional schools and neighborhoods.

Education came early to the colonies, it was a priority. Protestantism required literacy, and schooling was a way to ensure popular morality. To this end, Massachusetts instituted the first education legislation of the Anglo- American colonies: the Massachusetts Education Laws of 1642 and 1647. The later act, known as the "Old Deluder Satan Law," mandated that any town with more than fifty inhabitants retain a schoolteacher.¹⁸ The mandate was in reaction to the failings of individual families to educate their children, and it was an acknowledgement of the communal nature of responsibility for education.

This law also set expectations that schools were to be controlled at a local level.¹⁹

Colonist's Reformation-inspired attempts at universal education were responsible for our modern tax-based school funding system, though truly tax-dependent schools did not appear until late in the 19th century.²⁰ New England colonists brought English property law with them to the provinces, and the cultural chasm between settlers and Indigenous Americans allowed colonists to accumulate land in ways both legal and morally dubious. In fact, provincial Americans' lust for land was so great, it triggered a revolution by inflaming the anti-imperial sentiments of colonists indignant at being barred from land west of the Appalachians.²¹

African Americans in this period were almost completely barred from holding property or power. White males amassed Indigenous land, while African Americans were held as property. Both Indigenous and Africans were prevented from accumulating wealth. This early domination in economics and real estate cemented a hold on power for elite white males, and ensured inequality still felt today.

The 19th century brought a tremendous amount of social change. Extension of suffrage to working and poor white males in the first quarter of the century highlighted the need for public schools, as a free universal education was the only realistic delivery system for the mass literacy that participating in the franchise required.²² Reformers pushed for local property taxes to support this system, but elites remained resistant, equating being taxed to educate someone else's child with "confiscatory policy."²³ In Rhode Island, the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers was successful in lobbying for the 1800 Rhode Island Free School Law. Though their success in 1800 was repealed, the City of Providence retained its public schools, but did not employ local taxes as a funding source until much later.²⁴ While Massachusetts mandated local tax collection for public schools in 1827, Rhode Island did not abolish rate bills (tuition payments) until 1868.²⁵

By the middle of the 19th century, American youth enrollment rates surpassed those of the

rest of the world's nations.²⁶ For Black Americans, the situation was less promising. Schools remained racially segregated, and litigation not only failed to provide remedy, but legally sanctioned discrimination. In the landmark case *Roberts v. Boston*, the Massachusetts Supreme Court decided that individual school systems must decide on segregation independently.²⁷ The *Roberts* decision was later cited in the landmark Supreme Court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which permitted public facilities to be racially segregated provided the accommodations were equal in quality.²⁸ The inherently unequal nature of separate facilities was the subject of popular dissent and future litigation.

Rhode Island was not immune to the growing racial intolerance in the North. In Providence, white animosity towards Black freemen resulted in mob riots that destroyed the primarily Black neighborhoods of Hard Scrabble and Snow Town, in 1824 and 1831 respectively.²⁹ The targeting of Black homes and businesses had a purpose beyond violence. Property ownership was essential to American liberty. Tellingly, the country's first civil rights bill connected the condition of being a citizen to the right to own property: "That all persons born in the United States...without regard to any previous condition of slavery...shall have the same right...[to] inherit, purchase, lease, sell, hold, and convey real and personal property...as is enjoyed by white citizens."³⁰

Even the ratification of the Reconstruction Amendments was not sufficient to protect Black liberty. The century ended badly for African American jurisprudence, with the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision inaugurating a "separate but equal" doctrine that remained in place until it was overturned in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling of 1954.³¹

The Progressive Era saw an enormous expansion of public education. Reliance on property taxes increased to keep up with the needs of an expanding population and the institution of compulsory education.³² The percentage of property tax used to fund public education rose steadily throughout this era until the 1930s, but the Great Depression was

disastrous for American public schools. Threatened with the collapse of local governments and their school districts, states began instituting tax limitation legislation, and school systems became increasingly reliant on state aid to survive.³³ This had some benefits as increased reliance on state funding reduced local tax burdens and helped to remedy some financial disparity between school districts.³⁴

Black Americans in the 1930s shouldered a disproportionate share of economic pain. Black unemployment rates rose as high as fifty percent, as White Americans demanded once undesirable jobs to which African Americans were relegated.³⁵ Early New Deal policy did little to help Black Americans.³⁶ The practices of Roosevelt's Federal Housing Administration (FHA) were racially inequitable from the start, guaranteeing mortgages for middle-income white Americans, but largely leaving Black buyers out.³⁷ The creation of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), a government-sponsored corporation responsible for the practice of redlining, cemented the Black American's lower status and limited access to the real estate market. Redlining, the practice of color-coding maps to designate a neighborhood's desirability and investment risk, was directly linked to race. HOLC maps routinely assigned the lowest ratings to non-white neighborhoods, and thereby actively encouraged banks to deny mortgages to Black and immigrant communities.³⁸

Post-war American culture centered on homeownership as an expression of cultural belonging and the visible mark of American success to which African Americans demanded inclusion.³⁹ The Supreme Court endorsed their cause in the 1948 case, *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which found the use of racially restrictive housing covenants unconstitutional. Though this decision was to theoretically end residential segregation, Black neighborhoods and their schools remained racially isolated. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* declared in 1954 that school facilities separated by race were inherently unequal, but this decision failed to provide or enforce a remedy. The American tradition of local control over schools allowed a general resistance to

integration which served to stymie most attempts at desegregation.

The 1960s presented a renewed and contradictory focus on poverty and racial discrimination in America. President B. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society birthed a number of progressive programs, but Black Americans continued to be barred from access to the same economic and educational opportunities available to Whites. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was followed by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which provided federal money for schools with a large population of low-income students.⁴⁰ The 1964 Civil Rights Act emboldened Black parents and activists to test the limits of Boston's segregated school system. In response to integrationalist agitation and a report on educational discrimination commissioned by the governor, Massachusetts passed the 1965 Racial Imbalance Act, which led to New England's first occurrence of integratory busing. Providence, too, faced a busing mandate, and became the first Rhode Island city to integrate schools in 1967.⁴¹ Both cities experienced public dissent over the reforms, though manifestations of resistance differed. In Providence, the change provoked a six-week boycott by African American families upset by the inequity of a one-sided busing plan.⁴² In Boston, white parents resisted, at times violently, sending their children into majority Black schools. Compulsory busing was supported by the Supreme Court, and the 1971 ruling on *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, found that busing for the purposes of racial integration was in fact constitutional.

Property was a significant factor in this unrest. Black Americans, compelled through decades of public policy to congregate in racially isolated neighborhoods with undervalued homes and a lack of resources, found themselves with a tax base inadequate to support a school system. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 prohibited racial discrimination in housing, but African Americans continued to be denied access into the American real estate market, and the legislation went largely unenforced.⁴³ Instead, areas such as the Watts neighborhood in South Central Los

Angeles, and the city of Memphis, Tennessee became sites of disinvestment, poverty and over-policing, provoking a series of violent racial uprisings in the 1960s. In response, Johnson convened the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in 1967. Their investigation produced the *Kerner Report*, which found that police brutality, unemployment, substandard housing, and lack of access to education were deeply held grievances among the Black population. The report warned of a widening opportunity gap between races: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."⁴⁴ Their prediction held true. White flight to the suburbs accelerated, and a deindustrializing city meant that low-wage service work replaced well-paying manufacturing jobs.⁴⁵ Urban neighborhoods were left bereft of jobs, social services, and a tax base robust enough to fund a quality public school system.⁴⁶

The 1970s started a conservative shift in government policy which continued into the 1980s, though it was somewhat blunted by progressive momentum from earlier decades. A crucial blow to American education equity occurred when President Nixon publicly assured American suburbanites that they were not financially responsible for their less affluent neighbors.⁴⁷ Likewise, the judicial branch in this period was not friendly to school integration. The 1973 Supreme Court case *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez Texas* considered whether a school funding system based on local property tax led to wealth-based discrimination. The *San Antonio* decision held that Texas district funding schemes were constitutional, negating claims of a right to education. Shortly thereafter, *Milliken v. Bradley* found that mandated integration across school district borders was unconstitutional. These decisions reoriented education reform policy towards compensatory funding instead of the integratory actions demanded in earlier decades.⁴⁸

The following decades delivered a further retreat from social support. President Ronald Reagan attempted to cut welfare programs, but

was stymied by Congress.⁴⁹ The administration's war on drugs, however, devastated Black communities. It sent Black males to prison in record numbers, and increased economic dysfunction in the communities they left behind.⁵⁰ Racially isolated schools continued to be the subject of lawsuits. In 1985, the New Jersey State Supreme Court case *Abbott v. Burke* found urban communities were receiving an unconstitutionally substandard education. As remedy, the courts mandated the organization of "Abbott" districts, which were to be funded at levels equal to the state's wealthiest districts.

The last decade of the 20th century was not supportive of public education. Welfare programs were rolled back, as public policy was subordinated to the needs of real estate and finance.⁵¹ School choice rhetoric gained currency during the Clinton administration, as the U.S. increasingly relied on private enterprise to deliver public services.⁵² In 1995, the Supreme Court overturned a district court mandate requiring Missouri to provide remedial funding to correct for inequities of segregated schools. This blow to integration reforms was somewhat offset by *Sheff v. O'Neill* and the *Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) v. State of New York* cases, in which both courts found low-quality education to be a violation of their respective state constitutions.

Educational inadequacy is a complaint in recent Rhode Island education litigation as well. In 1995, and again in 2012, the cities of Pawtucket and Woonsocket sued the state in Superior Court, asserting that reliance on property tax funding systems discriminated against students residing in low-income school districts. The Rhode Island Supreme Court disagreed, stating that the education clause of the Rhode Island Constitution, "confers no such right, nor does it guarantee an equal, adequate, and meaningful education."⁵³

The argument over whether students have a constitutional right to education remains controversial and undecided, but the practice of funding schools using local property values was proven to be a failure. The U.S.'s vast history of racially-intolerant public policy ensured that a disproportionate number of Black Americans live

in municipalities with low property wealth, and that a historic lack of access to real estate served to cement their place at the bottom of a social and economic hierarchy. This results in under resourced schools and underperforming students.

Historiographical Summary

Scholarship on late 19th and early 20th century public education in Rhode Island offers a very detailed view of the creation and evolution of an American public school system.⁵⁴ Writing on the subject fails, however, to fully address the essential role played by race in Rhode Island education policy, and literature examining the more recent history of Providence schools is scarce. Recent investigations into the state of education in the capital city revealed a school system struggling with systemic dysfunction, persistent student underachievement, and chronically demoralized teachers.⁵⁵ The source of these deficiencies is hard to diagnose, as diverse and conflicting scholarship demonstrates, but common themes are apparent. Though gender and socioeconomic status both influenced the development and maintenance of inequitable access to quality education, no study of American public schooling can be undertaken without an interrogation of the role of race in education. The demand for, and failure to achieve, racial integration was integral to the formation of U.S. public school systems, and a broader examination of American education policy, race history, and private property ownership will illuminate the local connection between race, public schools, and inequality.

There is robust historical scholarship examining segregation in public schools. Though none of it focuses on Rhode Island, much can be learned from our neighbors. Carlton Mabey examines Garrisonian abolitionist William C. Nell's campaign to integrate Boston's public schools in "A Negro Boycott to Integrate Boston Schools. Nell's black taxpayer boycott of segregated education facilities highlights a strategy more often associated with white school districts resisting integration."⁵⁶

Hilary Moss also focuses on Boston's struggle over integration, highlighting instead black opposition to desegregation. The most intriguing aspect of her article, "The Tarring and Feathering of Thomas Paul Smith: Common Schools, Revolutionary Memory, and the Crisis of Black Citizenship in Antebellum Boston," is her understanding of the fight to integrate Boston common schools as part of African Americans' struggle against the creep of disenfranchisement, as black Americans increasingly became aware of the need to assert an American identity in the defense of their political liberty.⁵⁷

This sentiment is echoed in Andrew Wise's "The House I Live In: Race, Class, and African American Suburban Dreams in the Postwar United States," in which Wise asserts that the Black American's struggle to control and benefit from space (in this case the private suburban household) was crucial to their cultural identity. Though federal housing policy was integral to the cultivation of segregated neighborhoods, and as a result segregated schools, Weiss argued that it was white racial hostility that cemented the process.⁵⁸

Alice O'Connor also cites racist government policy in her examination of American sociological thought on urban poverty, "Race and Class in Chicago-School Sociology: the Underclass Concept in Historical Perspective." O'Connor reveals that, despite research asserting that urban dysfunction was largely due to state-sanctioned segregation, sociologists continued to blame black cultural decay on fatherless households and welfare dependency.⁵⁹

Though not about race, Etan Newman's work, "For Whose Benefit?: Social Control and the Construction of Providence's Dexter Asylum," provides an essential perspective on the shifting conceptions of poverty that encouraged such an assessment. Once considered a temporary situation demanding a communal remedy, poverty in a post-industrial America was transformed by social policy into a personal moral failing.⁶⁰

Scholarship on the historical intersection of race, property, and public school policy in Rhode Island is lacking. For a comprehensive

understanding of the complicated and contradictory nature of universal education in the Ocean State, we must look to neighboring states with similar historical circumstances. Though they occurred outside our borders, events like desegregation struggles in Northern New England cities and post-war housing discrimination in the mid-West can inform lapses in the recorded history of Rhode Island.

Comparisons, Analogues, and Parallels



Defeat Proposition 14 Rally, Los Angeles 1964, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Proposition 14

In November of 1964, a majority of Californians voted in support of discrimination in the state's housing market with the passage of Proposition 14. This ballot initiative overturned progressive housing legislation, and, in the words of California Governor Edmund G. Brown, enshrined into the Californian Constitution "a provision for discrimination of which not even Mississippi or Alabama can boast."⁶¹ At issue were racially restrictive housing covenants which permitted Californians to refuse rental or sales of their property to "alien races" and "non Caucasians."⁶² In Los Angeles, the use of these covenants in the late 19th century pushed African Americans into a single area, creating the remarkably segregated city that remains to this day.

Private real estate in the 1960s was distinctive in remaining untouched by anti-discrimination legislation. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* banned segregation in schools in 1954, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was intended to secure access to the franchise. In 1959, California's Fair Employment Practices Act prohibited discrimination in employment, while the Unruh Civil Rights Act was passed to protect Angelinos⁶³ from bias due to race, sex, age, sexual orientation, citizenship, and medical, immigration, and marriage status, in "business establishments of every kind," but neither included housing protections.⁶⁴ The same year, the Hawkins Act made discrimination based on race, religion, color, national origin or ancestry illegal in Californian public housing, but did not cover private property rental or sales.⁶⁵ The Civil Rights Act of 1964 also banned discrimination in programs that received federal funding, but exempted mortgage insurance programs.⁶⁶ It wasn't until 1968 that federal legislation banned discrimination in residential property rental and sales.

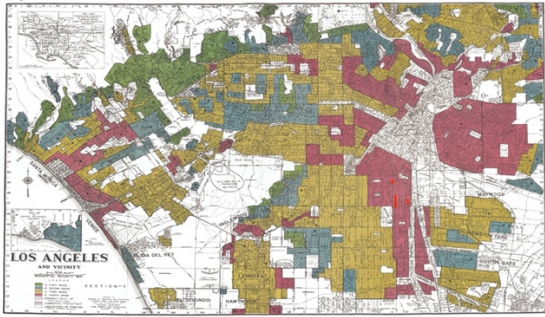
The piece of housing legislation that disrupted this trend, the Rumford Fair Housing Act, was passed in 1963, and it was met with immediate resistance from real estate interests, conservative politicians, and a sizable group of ordinary Californians. The campaign to overturn the Act resulted in the ballot initiative Proposition 14, a constitutional amendment that prohibited the state from "denying, limiting, or abridging the right of any person to decline to sell, lease, or rent residential real property to any person as he chooses."⁶⁷

Proposition 14 passed with a margin of more than two million votes.⁶⁸ Over 70% of voters in Los Angeles agreed that residential discrimination was in their best interests.⁶⁹ Proposition 14 was immediately challenged at the state level, and in the 1967 case *Reitman v. Mulkey*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that restrictive housing covenants were unconstitutional, and were not legally enforceable.⁷⁰ But the damage was done. The

passage of this amendment was the last straw for frustrated Black Angelenos; ¹ Californian's support Proposition 14 was identified as a root cause of the Watts race riots of 1965.⁷¹

Proposition 14 may seem a rather shocking public display of bigotry, but its passage makes perfect sense when placed in historical context. To understand how this piece of legislation originated, it is necessary to examine California's real estate history, and there is no better city with which to frame this history than Los Angeles.

The completion of the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific railroads turned Los Angeles from a frontier outpost to a metropolis.⁷² The city gained a reputation for being relatively free of anti-Black violence, and so it became a locus of immigration for Blacks fleeing the Jim Crow South. But racial animosity preceded them. African American migrants settled along Central Avenue, in a section of the city referred to as "mud town" (now called Watts) just twelve miles south of the site of the 1871 Los Angeles Riots, in which a violent, anti-Chinese massacre left more than seventeen dead.⁷³ It was racially restrictive covenants, which appeared as early as the 1890s but were routinely employed by the 1910s and 1920s, that restricted Black settlement.⁷⁴ African Americans were barred from purchasing or renting property in all but a few areas of Los Angeles. A 1939 Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) map both illuminated and aggravated the problem. HOLC, a New Deal creation, was tasked with expanding homeownership across the country. Their maps were color-coded guides to aid banks extending mortgages. Areas shaded red were considered too risky for investment. A neighborhood's status on the HOLC maps was directly linked to its racial makeup. Black neighborhoods were routinely given the lowest ratings, which forced Black Americans, who were barred from buying or renting in most neighborhoods by restrictive covenants, to purchase homes on predatory secondary markets. As a result, Black Angelinos congregated along Central Avenue, in the Watts area of the city.



Home Owners' Loan Corporation Map, Los Angeles 1939.

During the “Second Great Migration,” a massive wave of Black Americans traveled to Los Angeles to take advantage of industrial jobs necessitated by World War II.⁷⁵ The reliable, working-class wages they earned allowed Black Californians to purchase homes, but restrictive covenants again barred them from 95% of the neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Black Americans too desired the ostensibly peaceful life of the suburbs. In Los Angeles, they began moving from the hyper-segregated Watts neighborhood into the adjacent white, middle-class neighborhood of Compton to achieve it. Though Compton City Council “sanctioned the maintenance of Compton's whiteness repeatedly,” many local whites defied historical trends; the arrival of African Americans did not prompt a mass exodus. In fact, throughout the 1950s, and the beginning of the 1960s, the area remained fairly diverse.⁷⁶

This was not the case in the other neighborhoods to which Black Americans attempted to gain access. The wealthy Los Angeles neighborhood of West Adams Heights became the center of restrictive covenant litigation in the 1940s, as successful Black Americans moved into its well-appointed homes. Prior to the formation of Beverly Hills, West Adams was the wealthiest area in Los Angeles, with close ties to the movie industry. The economic collapse of the Great Depression caused many West Adams homeowners to sell their property, and in their financial desperation, property owners were only too happy to sell to African American buyers. As wealthy Blacks moved in, West Adams (renamed Sugar Hill as an homage to the Harlem neighborhood) became a symbol of Black success.

White residents of West Adams, who interpreted the arrival of African Americans as a threat to their property values and school quality, responded to Black infiltration with lawsuits.⁷⁷ During the Sugar Hill Trial of 1945 in Los Angeles Superior Court, white plaintiffs argued that Black homeowners were in violation of local restrictive covenants, and consequently they must surrender their properties immediately. The attorney representing the fifty-seven Black families of West Adams, the NAACP's Loren Miller, maintained that restrictive covenants were in violation of both the California Constitution and the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution. The judge agreed, delivering the first ruling in American history that found racially restrictive covenants violated the 14th Amendment. Three years later, Miller, alongside future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, represented another Black family threatened by restrictive covenants in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Shelley v. Kraemer*. This case too was decided for the defendants, as the court ruled restrictive covenants unenforceable. Though Miller was successful in both cases, the rulings did little to halt discrimination in private residential property sales and rentals. It was government action, not the agreements between private citizens, that was deemed a constitutional violation.⁷⁸ A final insult for Sugar Hill was delivered in 1963, when the Santa Monica Freeway was constructed. The highway's path bisected the neighborhood, destroying dozens of Black-owned properties and displacing residents in the process.



Santa Monica Freeway construction 1963, courtesy of the University of Southern California Libraries

It was at this time the California Assembly passed the Rumford Fair Housing Act, prohibiting discrimination by “race, color, religion, natural origin, or ancestry” in sales and rental of private real estate.⁷⁹ The Act was opposed by the California Chamber of Commerce and the real estate and construction industries.⁸⁰ Immediately after the Rumford Act passed, opposition groups started an initiative campaign to overturn it, employing the campaign slogan “a man’s home is his castle.”⁸¹ The ballot initiative that resulted, Proposition 14, contended that intentional discrimination was within a property owner’s constitutional rights. Additionally, the proposition was crafted to preclude any attempts at future anti-discriminatory legislation in private real estate.⁸²

The campaign for Proposition 14 was organized by California real estate interests, endorsed by the *Los Angeles Times*, and supported by conservative politicians, among them Senator Barry Goldwater, and nascent candidate for Californian governor, Ronald Reagan.⁸³ It was opposed by the Californian Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO, the State Bar, and the *San Francisco Examiner* and *San Francisco Chronicle*.⁸⁴ Proponents of the proposition claimed that the Fair Housing Act was government overreach, and an abridgment of private property rights. Dubbing the proposed amendment the “California Fair Housing

Initiative,” proponents of Proposition 14 referred to “forced housing” in an attempt to sway public sentiment.⁸⁵ Those who spoke against Proposition 14 did so from a civil rights perspective, arguing that restrictive covenants stymie one’s right to equal protection under the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Interestingly, voter attitudes skewed by educational attainment, with the well-educated most likely to vote against the proposition.⁸⁶

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled Proposition 14 unconstitutional in May of 1967, finding that the amendment was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of U.S. Constitution because it required state action that was tantamount to discrimination.⁸⁷ But the consequences of its passage were already felt. In reaction to California’s overturning of the Rumford Fair Housing Act, the federal government froze funds meant for urban renewal projects.⁸⁸ Housing discrimination challenges already underway in California courts were delayed or abandoned when the passing of Proposition 14 rendered them moot.⁸⁹ Finally, anger over the overwhelming support Californians displayed for Prop 14 contributed to the Watts Uprising.⁹⁰

The Watts Riots were a Black civilian uprising triggered by police violence, but predicated on deplorable living conditions created by racial segregation. The unrest lasted six days, left thirty-four dead, and caused \$200 million in property damage. It is worth noting that the destruction was limited to businesses and property owned by white absentee landlords, while public facilities such as schools and libraries were spared.⁹¹ California Governor Edmund Brown appointed a commission to study the violence, resulting in the report “Violence in the City—an End or a Beginning?” Though the findings of the report were contested, the committee and its critics alike found common grievances lay at the root of the violence.⁹² After decades of disinvestment, housing in the Watts neighborhood was appreciably inferior to the rest of Los Angeles, while the population density was much higher (an average of 4.3 persons per household compared to a county average of 2.94).⁹³ Residents’ resentment was further aggravated by the

repeated refusal of California voters to approve funding for public housing, by the insufficient extension of public services, and by the disparity of resources allocated to schools in South Central Los Angeles.⁹⁴

The Watts Uprising finally triggered the white flight Compton had heretofore resisted. As whites left, they took their businesses with them. By the end of the 1960s, Compton's business district and industrial base was nearly empty. In fact, only a single industrial plant remained in the area in 1965.⁹⁵ The rapidly increasing racial isolation alongside urban deindustrialization taking place nation-wide, left Compton bereft of resources and vulnerable to crime and social dysfunction.



Compton Boulevard in 1954 and 1982, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library

California Proposition 14 was not just an outdated specimen of legislative bigotry. It

remains a perfect example of the complicated and contradictory history of American residential segregation by race. Californian residents at the time did not seem to be any more discriminatory than those in North-Western and East Coast communities. In fact, a Gallup poll found that 17% of non-Californians admitted plans to relocate, if a Black family moved into their neighborhood, while Californians acknowledged a similar conclusion at a rate of 13%.⁹⁶ The saga of Proposition 14 illuminated the tendency for U.S. public policy and social practice to center property ownership as the most important of civil rights. Despite numerous legislation to the contrary, an American's right to control private real estate is frequently understood to supersede their duty to the public good. The consequences of this attitude are profound. In the United States, neighborhood location dictates social standing, socio-economic status, access to resources, job opportunities, and treatment by the legal system. Public schools are intrinsically linked to local real estate markets, and non-white students are overwhelmingly isolated in underperforming schools in under-resourced districts. The passage of Proposition 14 illuminates the intersection of centuries-old real estate policy, chronic public school dysfunction, and contentious race relations, while its reversal puts the lie to assertions that racial segregation, in housing, business, or schools, is at the whim of individual preference, and outside of government control. As sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy A. Denton maintain in their book *American Apartheid*, "the fundamental dilemma of white America is that, though it truly believes that housing markets need to be fair and open, it equally truly does not want to live with black people."⁹⁷

Shelby County Secessions

In 2010, the Memphis School Board voted 5-to-4 to surrender the Memphis public school charter and relinquish their authority over the city's schools. This decision, perverse though it may seem, was in fact made in the interest of protecting their ailing urban school system. With

this surrender, the council sought to preempt the creation of a “special district” planned by largely white, affluent districts within Shelby County. Impoverished Memphis schools shared a tax-base with Shelby County, and the suburban redistricting scheme threatened to not only eliminate essential contributions to school funding, but to permanentize district boundaries and prevent future attempts at consolidation. The Tennessee legislature rebuked earlier efforts at achieving special district status in 1982 with a statewide ban on new district creation. But, Republican control of the state legislature and governorship, bolstered by the rise of the fiscally conservative Tea Party movement, emboldened secession-minded suburban municipalities. The defensive surrender of the Memphis charter transferred authority and financial responsibility for the city’s schools to Shelby County. The battle was not won. District consolidation triggered a slew of lawsuits, new legislation, and the overturning of the special district ban. As a result, six suburbs broke away from Shelby County in 2013, taking with them a robust tax base and leaving behind a racially isolated and impoverished school district.

The Shelby County school district battle began 2008, but must be understood within the context of historical tensions along the area’s urban and suburban borders. Since its incorporation in 1826, the city of Memphis used annexation to expand its footprint and broaden its tax base, absorbing more than 280 square miles in over thirty annexations.⁹⁸ This expansion, had unintended consequences; it prompted Memphis’s white residents, along with their taxable revenue, to embark on a decades-long evacuation to the suburbs, leaving Memphis overwhelmingly Black and significantly impoverished.⁹⁹ Federal desegregation orders of the 1950s did little to inspire action from the Memphis Board of Education, and early efforts to integrate schools were purposely insufficient and intentionally ineffectual, leaving Memphis schools as segregated in 1960 as they were prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*.¹⁰⁰ When, in 1961, a NAACP lawsuit seemed likely to rule against the city, the Board preempted expected court action

by quietly launching a small integration program. Local press outlets, agreeing to a request from the school board, withheld coverage of thirteen Black students as they began to attend previously all-white Memphis schools.¹⁰¹ Though it was free from public dissent, the remedy was ruled insufficient, as district courts demanded a more comprehensive desegregation program. The school board responded with a scheme to integrate all public schools in Memphis by 1971, but the effectiveness of this program was blunted by the introduction of the Pupil Assignment Law, a “free-transfer” rule which was designed to allow white parents to shift their children out of majority Black schools, while routinely denying the same for the majority of Black applicants: a direct violation to the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling.¹⁰² In 1970, the U.S. Supreme Court weighed in, ruling that the federal district court had failed to mandate immediate integrative action.¹⁰³ In response to the court’s ruling, Memphis embarked on an integratory busing program in 1973.¹⁰⁴

The Memphis desegregation program was notable for being free of the violence associated with most integration attempts of the period.¹⁰⁵ But, opposition to desegregation busing manifested in other ways. In response to the mandate, over thirty thousand students left the Memphis system for private schools.¹⁰⁶ White flight left behind a sizable tax burden for the city’s shrinking, racially isolated population.¹⁰⁷ By 2000, Memphis boasted residential segregation rates second only to Detroit.¹⁰⁸ The resulting collapse of public services and infrastructure, rise in crime rates and unemployment, and increase in taxes were later cited by suburban municipalities as reasons to oppose district consolidation plans.¹⁰⁹

In 2011, urban voters approved the Memphis School District merger in a city-wide referendum, placing their schools under the administrative authority of the Shelby County School Board.¹¹⁰ Legislature introduced by suburban state representatives failed to halt the consolidation.¹¹¹ Tennessee lawmakers approved a bill that created the Transition Planning Commission, a body tasked with overseeing the merger, and the new city-county district began

operating in 2013.¹¹² However, the bill bore a fatal flaw; it removed the 1982 statewide ban on special school district creation.¹¹³ Suburban municipalities immediately moved to form new districts, overwhelmingly supported by popular referenda, and by 2014, just one year after consolidation, six new school districts emerged adjacent to the Memphis border.¹¹⁴ The Shelby County School District plan was created with the intent of securing an integrated student population and equitable access to resources for urban schools. Instead, it resulted in a student population that was overwhelmingly Black and low-income, while the new districts were composed of majority white, comparatively affluent residents.¹¹⁵

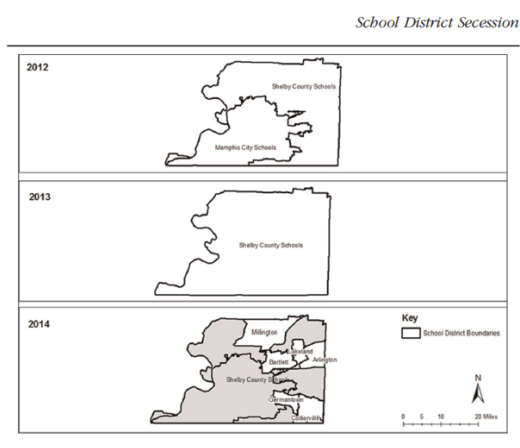


Figure 1. School district boundary lines, Shelby County, 2012–2014.

The Memphis School Board vote on dissolution was contentious. Arguments in support of the merger centered on the interrelated goals of relieving financial distress and improving educational quality.¹¹⁶ Memphis residents, as evidenced by the results of the city referendum, were overwhelmingly supportive, though dissenters expressed concern about loss of authority over neighborhood schools. Notably, a number of the city's Black religious leaders opposed the plan, arguing that its divisive nature, similar to earlier busing mandates, threatened to do more harm than good. Outside of Memphis, sentiment was more consistent. Suburban residents opposed the plan, along with Republican state lawmakers, and one Memphis teachers' union.¹¹⁷ The arguments against

consolidation invoked a concern for local control of schools.¹¹⁸ The Shelby County School Board was entirely white, though almost half of suburban students were minorities.¹¹⁹ A merger, and the attendant district wide elections, threatened the board members' authority. Opponents of the surrender warned of inept administration within the Memphis school system, sowing fears that such dysfunction was likely to spread to schools in the consolidated district. David Pickler, chairman of the county school board made the argument plain: "The same people who are running Memphis city schools could very likely be running a unified Shelby County school board."¹²⁰ These demands for local autonomy and the preservation of educational quality succeeded in obfuscating the racially exclusionary nature of secessionist policies.¹²¹

The results of the merger and attendant secessions was best seen in student demographics. In 1960, Memphis students were 63% white, but by 2005 Caucasians made up little more than 30% of school enrollments.¹²² During the district merger, Shelby County had a Black student population of 67.6%, with nearly 69% of its students requiring free or reduced lunch. Suburban secessions left the district with a Black population of 78.4%. Nearly 80% of these students relied on free or reduced lunch programs. Tennessee's new suburban districts were overwhelmingly white, with Black student populations as low as 8.2% in the nascent Lakeland, 12.3% in Germantown, and 16% in Arlington. The need for free or reduced price lunches was greatly reduced in these new school systems as well: 14.7%, 9.6%, and 13.9% respectively.¹²³

Table 2
School District Enrollment by Race and Free or
Reduced-Price Lunch Status, 2013–2015

School District	Total	White	Black	Latino	Asian	FRL
<u>2012–2013 (Pre-merger)</u>						
Memphis City	106,991	7.1	81.7	9.6	1.4	84.3
Shelby County	46,601	50.5	38.1	5.4	5.3	36.9
<u>2013–2014 (Merger)</u>						
Shelby County	149,928	20.2	67.6	9.2	2.7	68.9
<u>2014–2015 (De-merger)</u>						
Arlington	4,907	74.8	16.0	5.3	3.5	13.9
Bartlett	8,529	62.7	27.5	5.0	3.8	36.3
Collierville	7,939	67.1	17.5	0.4	10.7	15.0
Germantown	5,744	73.4	12.3	3.1	10.6	9.6
Lakeland	851	79.3	8.2	2.6	8.9	14.7
Millington	2,771	46.7	38.8	11.3	2.0	75.2
Shelby County	116,059	8.1	78.4	11.3	1.8	79.8

Source: Tennessee Department of Education data 2012–2013 to 2014–2015. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/data/data-downloads.html>.

The effects of the secessions were dire. Shelby County was forced to cut its budget by 20%, laying off nearly one thousand teachers by 2015.¹²⁴ The repeal of the Tennessee special school district ban encouraged further secession attempts in the state, and the exceptionally weak laws regarding secession left already disadvantaged communities vulnerable to the whims of their more affluent neighbors.¹²⁵

Lessons from Shelby County are applicable in Rhode Island. In the Ocean State, schools that are part of a regional school district can legally secede by simply withdrawing from their home district. At present, the majority of school systems in Rhode Island are municipally based, but a county-wide district is one of the most promising options for remedying the inequities and dysfunction in the Providence Public School System. Legally permissive secession policies all but guarantee that an attempt to form a regionalized district including Providence schools will be followed by suburban secession. The American obsession with local control over schools, paired with its reliance on problematic school funding models, leaves public urban education in permeant precarity. Until a new system is devised, the individual choices of affluent, white parents will continue to have a collective impact on the lives of less-advantaged students.

The Boston Desegregation Crisis

Though almost exclusively referred to as a ‘busing crisis,’ Boston’s three-decade-long mandated school integration period is more accurately understood as a ‘segregation crisis.’

Historian Matthew Delmont argues that both national news media and historians of the period did the public a disservice by placing white grievance at the center, while ignoring the enormous amount of Black activism which preceded it.¹²⁶ White resistance to school integration, intentionally obfuscated by ‘busing’ rhetoric, culminated in violent dissent, declining public school enrollment, and white flight to the suburbs is well documented. A less examined aspect of the Boston segregation crisis is legislation that, while ostensibly seeking to remedy racial discrimination in public schools, functionally preserved segregation in the North through semantic manipulation. Politicians and anti-integration activists alike found the distinction between intentional, or *de jure*, segregation and “natural,” or *de facto*, segregation to be helpful in shifting focus away from discrimination in Northern schools. Legislators obliged by demanding remedy for only the former offense, and opposition to ‘busing’ became a palatable way for white Americans to resist integration.

Black Bostonians sought access to equitable education long before the ‘busing’ crisis. Schools for African American children were established in Boston in 1798. They were exclusively Black, and attendance was by private subscription.¹²⁷ In 1815, Black schools were absorbed by the Boston General School Committee, which opened additional schools throughout the city, but each remained racially segregated.¹²⁸ In 1845, the Massachusetts state legislature passed the Equal Education Act of 1845, which granted that “Any child, unlawfully excluded from public school instruction in this Commonwealth, shall recover damages therefore.”¹²⁹ In 1849, Benjamin F. Roberts sued the Massachusetts General School Committee, asserting that his daughter was being deprived of her right to education in violation of the 1845 act. Five-year-old Sarah Roberts was refused admittance to a nearby, whites-only school, and was instead forced to travel a greater distance to attend one of Boston’s segregated facilities. The Massachusetts Superior Court ruled for the school committee, finding that the committee had authority to operate segregated

facilities, provided there was an equality of resources between schools (there was not).¹³⁰ The court's opinion presented an argument that was used in both future desegregation rulings and in popular dissent, that racial discrimination "if it exists, is not created by law, and probably cannot be changed by law."¹³¹ The *Roberts* ruling was made moot by a 1855 state law prohibiting local school committees from operating segregated schools, but the use of the "natural" segregation defense persisted.¹³² *Roberts v. City of Boston* was heavily cited in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which produced the separate but equal doctrine that persisted until it was effectively overturned by *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* in 1954.¹³³

The *Brown* ruling left segregation remedies up to states, who ceded authority to local school boards and commissions. In Boston, the six member Boston School Committee (BSC) wielded an enormous amount of power over city schools. BSC resolutely denied any suggestion of school segregation, stymying any progress toward integration.¹³⁴ Black students in Boston were forced to attend schools so dilapidated, they were condemned for health and safety violations.¹³⁵ Students in these schools were relegated to outdated curriculum and openly racist course materials. Their teachers were less experienced, and educator turnover was far in excess of that in Boston's white schools.¹³⁶

After years of seeking remedy through official channels, Black parents organized a "Stay-Out-For-Freedom" school boycott. In June of 1963, 3,000 Black students deserted their schools, and instead participated in "Freedom Workshops" organized by activists. An issue particularly galling to Black Bostonians was a 1963 "open enrollment" plan, which allowed any child to transfer to a school with open seats, provided the parent supplied transportation. This policy allowed white students to leave neighborhood schools with diversifying student populations, but the transportation requirement was onerous for the majority of Black parents.¹³⁷ Effectively, open enrollment allowed affluence and individual preference to circumvent civil rights legislation. A second Freedom boycott in

1964 was a testament to the movement's momentum. Nearly 20,000 students participated, almost 20% of Boston public school students. This massive social movement, however, was ignored by the media, which focused instead on white opposition to desegregation couched in 'neighborhood school' and 'forced busing' rhetoric.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a key piece of federal legislation dealing with school segregation. Its formation was heavily influenced by integratory busing programs in New York City, which predated Boston's struggle by nearly a decade. During the 1950s, rumors of busing between Harlem and Staten Island drove white New Yorkers to dissent. The approach that New Yorkers used to halt these integration efforts focused on local control of neighborhood schools, and activists seized on the rhetoric of busing as a way to preempt accusations of racism. This successful approach was later co-opted by Boston opponents to integration. The New York anti-busing protests strongly influenced the writing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Public pressure on Northern legislators led to the insertion of Title IV, §401(b), which sought to prevent true action on segregation in the North by highlighting a distinction between southern (*de jure*) and northern (*de facto*) manifestations of segregation. Subsection 'b' effectively cemented racial isolation in northern schools by defining desegregation as "the assignment of students to public schools and within such schools without regard to their race, color, religion, or national origin, but 'desegregation' shall not mean the assignment of students to public schools in order to overcome racial imbalance."¹³⁸

Back in Massachusetts, the tenacity of Black protest at last prompted action on the part of Governor Endicott Peabody, who established the Advisory Committee of Racial Imbalance and Education, better known as the Kiernan Commission, to investigate discrimination in Massachusetts schools. The commission released the *Kiernan Report* in April 1965. While the report did not assign fault to BSC, it did support the assertions of Black Bostonians, finding that a

majority of nonwhite students in Boston attended schools with an overwhelmingly non-white population, while white students attended schools that were almost entirely white.¹³⁹ The report recommended that the state pass legislation prohibiting racially imbalanced school districts, which it defined as any school having a non-white student population greater than 50%.¹⁴⁰ The report asserted that racially imbalanced schools were harmful to Black and white students alike, and its remedies for Boston schools included the construction of new schools, the closing of others, and an overhaul of racially-insensitive curriculum.¹⁴¹ The committee recommended granting the Commissioner of Education power to withhold state aid to those districts that resisted the elimination of racial imbalance.¹⁴² It also encouraged changes to the open enrollment system to turn the policy from a tool of segregation to one of inclusion.¹⁴³

The BSC, chaired by Louise Day Hicks, vehemently opposed the findings of the Kiernan Commission, seizing on the cross-district busing recommendation—just one of many policy suggestions offered by the report—as unfair and undemocratic. Brandeis professor Lawrence Fuchs, a member of the Kiernan Commission, identified the bad faith nature of BSC’s argument. “Mrs. Hicks’ temerity is totally insulting. She doesn’t want to discuss the recommendation, she simply seized on the transfers as one issue.”¹⁴⁴ The BSC immediately voted 3-2 to ban “any further busing of children in any form for any reason under any conditions”¹⁴⁵ School officials warned that BSC intransigence might lead to further overcrowding in Black schools, necessitating double sessions (multiple shifts wherein students have only part-time access to educational facilities).¹⁴⁶

The Kiernan Commission’s findings, along with unceasing Black activism, compelled legislators to pass the Racial Imbalance Act (RIA) on August 18, 1965. The Act mandated that local school boards ensure that non-white enrollment in any school did not exceed 50%.¹⁴⁷ The RIA might have closed the *de facto* loophole within the Civil Rights Act, but the law contained a provision against “forced” busing:

No school committee or regional school district committee shall be required as part of its plan to transport any pupil to any school outside its jurisdiction or to any school outside the school district established for his neighborhood, if the parent or guardian of such pupil files written objection thereto with such school committee.¹⁴⁸

A drawn-out and contentious legal battle culminated in a ruling by Federal Judge W. Arthur Garrity in 1974. *Morgan v. Hennigan*, a lawsuit filed by the NAACP in 1972 on behalf of fourteen parents and forty-four children, found that BSC “knowingly carried out a systematic program of segregation affecting all of the city’s students, teachers and school facilities and have intentionally brought about and maintained a dual school system.”¹⁴⁹ Observing that “the defendants deliberately dragged their feet in formulating plans to lessen overcrowding as well as racial imbalance generally,” Garrity mandated the compulsory busing of 17,000 Boston students to remedy unconstitutional discrimination in Boston’s schools.¹⁵⁰ Upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, Garrity’s mandate encompassed the entire city, but ethnically-concentrated working-class Irish and Italian-American neighborhoods were the most affected. In response, over 12,000 white students from those communities boycotted their newly assigned schools during the first weeks of the plan. Government officials dissented as well. School Superintendent William J. Leary declined to enforce the city’s truancy laws, and Louise Day Hick’s anti-busing crusade evolved into a mass movement under the name Restore Our Alienated Rights (ROAR).¹⁵¹

Oversight of the mandate lasted for over a decade, and resulted in the mass racial unrest that became the unitary focus of national news media and numerous scholars of the period.¹⁵² Integration orders led to white flight to the suburbs and declining enrollment in public schools, which dropped from 95,000 to 56,000 students.¹⁵³ The BSC was handed authority to oversee the desegregation plan in 1988.

Although thirteen schools remained in violation of the Racial Imbalance Act, a district court ruled them to be in compliance because their composition was “rooted not in discrimination but in more intractable demographic obstacles.”¹⁵⁴ Integratory busing was all but abandoned in 2013.¹⁵⁵

Boston’s integratory busing policies were pursued in defense of the constitutional rights of Black Americans, but popular understandings of the crisis instead centered on the desires and opinions of white parents. The false dichotomy of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation allowed public officials, courts, and civilians to elude legal and moral responsibility for racial segregation. Emphasis on the anger of white Bostonians and use of ‘busing’ rhetoric complicated and muddled actual resistance to integration, and cemented the failure of busing as a viable policy for school desegregation. This ahistorical approach to racial segregation is the primary stumbling block of any progressive anti-discrimination policy. Successful education reform must be designed to account for the willing ignorance of white Americans in defense of inequitably distributed resources.

OPTIONS

The inequality in U.S. public schools demands a solution that combats historical racism in both housing and public education policy. Solutions that fail to consider the confluence of property wealth and educational quality are bound to fail. The following policy options will succeed if applied together as a comprehensive approach.

Option 1: Regional School Districts

The dysfunction in Providence Public Schools overwhelmingly stems from racial isolation inside the PPSD. Racial seclusion leads to inequitable resources, as witnessed in Providence’s disintegrating school buildings, outdated course materials, and, more recently, the district’s dependency on dubious privatized digital learning systems.¹⁵⁶ A county or regional district approach will broaden the tax base responsible for the majority of school funding, and it will tether the fortunes of more affluent suburban

schools to their less fortunate neighbors.¹⁵⁷ What’s more, a consolidated district system will reintroduce the long forgotten principle that education is a public good and responsibility which benefits society at large, rather than a private endeavor for individual advancement.¹⁵⁸

Unfortunately, the Shelby County District secessions set a grim precedent for collaborative district plans. The retreat from cooperative public education policy set a precedent in Memphis, Tennessee which is already underway in numerous districts nationally, and will very likely be replicated in Rhode Island.¹⁵⁹ Current state law allows any Rhode Island municipality that is part of a regional school district to secede by simply withdrawing.¹⁶⁰ While very few school districts are composed of more than one municipality, existing law allows immediate defection by any municipality required to consolidate. As evidenced by abundant cases studies, majority white school districts tend to rebel against integrative policy, even when such plans do not require physical desegregation. In Rhode Island, an action of the General Assembly is required to amend this lenient policy, an unlikely prospect as non-urban, and relatively affluent white legislators representing the suburban and rural communities traditionally dominate the state house, and there is little evidence of any white suburban Rhode Island communities supporting such mandates.

Option 2: Housing Policy - Inclusionary Zoning

In Rhode Island, as in the nation at large, a child’s zip code determines the quality of their education.¹⁶¹ Racially segregated neighborhoods produce racially isolated school districts, and so solutions to public school inequity must not focus on education policy alone. Inclusionary residential zoning policy (municipal planning ordinances that mandate a certain percentage of newly built housing be affordable) allows low-income families access to low-poverty neighborhoods, along with their better resourced schools. Access to affluent schools is not cosmetic; evidence shows that low-income students attending high performing schools make

significant educational gains.¹⁶² In the context of historical housing discrimination—including restrictive housing covenants, redlining, urban renewal projects, and predatory mortgage practices—real estate may be the most effective tool to alleviating entrenched racial discrimination in public education.

Shifting demographic and racial attitudes present a unique opportunity to redefine the urban/suburban educational divide that historically correlates ‘good’ and ‘bad’ schools with race.¹⁶³ Fair housing policy promises to create more diverse neighborhoods, and with them a more equitable tax base. To succeed, these policies must provide for the maintenance of urban areas and scatter affordable housing units throughout a county/state to ensure no single area is overburdened with low-income residents, as is currently the case in virtually all of the country.¹⁶⁴ To avoid the racially isolating effects of gentrification that demographic shifts frequently entail, housing policies must assure that non-white and low-income families are able to remain in their communities through rent stabilization measures and generous mortgage subsidy programs.¹⁶⁵

Unfortunately, historical precedent suggests that the entry of non-white students into majority white school districts will trigger white flight, as will a substantial increase of the non-white population in neighborhoods. White parents are likely to respond by relocating and removing themselves from the districts entirely, or by simply withdrawing their children from the public school system, as happened during the desegregation of Boston’s schools, and the Shelby County secession movement. To avoid this, Rhode Island must either pass legislation that bans secessions outright or create stringent regulations for the creation of any new school district, such as consideration of the racial diversity, economic stability, or resource access of the schools left behind.¹⁶⁶

Option 3: Community Schools

Community schools combine traditional public education with community resources

frequently lacking in low-income, under-resourced districts. They provide health and community social services, and act as community anchors accessible to all residents. These schools function to counterbalance the deficiency of resources endemic to low-income, frequently urban, non-white communities by offering social support in the form of nurses, social workers, counselors, substance abuse programs, food insecurity aid, crisis intervention, and even laundry and bathing facilities, alongside the provision of education, job training, and mentorship programs for their students.¹⁶⁷

The U.S. public school system regularly fails to provide adequate education for students from low-income communities. But even a quality academic program might prove insufficient to support children whose communities bear the brunt of historically racist public policy. Because the U.S. provides little in the way of a social safety net, individuals who have been chronically isolated from wealth accumulation require extensive social support. Converting public schools into community centers that provide these services free of charge is one way to provide low-income children and their families access to services essential to academic and social success.

Community schools are usually funded by a combination of public-private partnerships, with state and federal aid provided by Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, alongside grants from corporations and educational institutions.¹⁶⁸ The use of private funding can be problematic. Local authority is key to the success of community schools, which need to respond to the unique changing conditions of their location. But, private support can lead to a crisis of authority, and independent interests threaten to pervert the mission of such schools to serve their constituents. Community schools are the least effective of the three policy options above, in that they place responsibility for improvement on the least-resourced communities, rather than mandating a system of equitable resource allocation.

Rhode Island already offers an assortment of “school-linked services” with its Child Opportunity Zone Family Centers (COZ). This program is managed by the Rhode Island Department of Education, the Rhode Island Department of Health, the United Way of Southeastern New England, and local coordinators.¹⁶⁹ The services and resources COZs offer vary depending on district. Ultimately, they fail to offer the holistic support a proper community school promises. Rather, COZs facilitate access to already existing social services, offer parttime service hours, with “family service centers” that are often housed in facilities separate from public schools.¹⁷⁰

RECOMMENDATION

The above policy options are solutions to centuries of inequality in our schools and neighborhoods. The twin subjects of school and real estate segregation are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable. American history is replete with examples of racist public policy and personal preference. This history underscores the need for a holistic approach to inequality driven by a robust public policy that resists popular dissent, political reversal, and legal amendment. Failure to account for residential segregation led to the failure of decades of school reform. In America, desegregation attempts are routinely stymied by residential isolation. History shows that policy designed to prohibit *de jure* segregation, in fact endorses *de facto* discrimination.¹⁷¹ Racial segregation in American neighborhoods stems from legislation and jurisprudence that failed to excise, and often endorsed, racist real estate sales and mortgage lending practices. Evidence for this is seen in the racially restrictive covenants of the early 19th century, or the Federal Housing Administration’s own segregationary programs built on racist real estate maps. Solutions to failing urban school systems depend not just on educational reform, but a complete overhaul of housing policy, and with it resource allocation.¹⁷²

Immediate action must be taken to remedy racist educational funding disparities. Regional school districts will consolidate artificially

separated regions, linking the success of wealthy citizens to that of impoverished populations. A shared tax base will reduce the inequality apparent in today’s urban-suburban divide, and encourage reinvestment in public schools which serve the entire population.¹⁷³ As evidenced in this paper’s case studies, district consolidation inevitably leads to the mass departure of affluent white families.¹⁷⁴ Examples abound; white exodus to the suburbs that began in the 1950s, disenrollment in public schools as seen during Boston’s desegregation attempts of the 1970s, or district secession movements enacted in Shelby County in the 21st century, are all examples of white America’s resistance to integration.¹⁷⁵

To avoid repeating such results, expeditious school district reform must be paired with the longer-term remedy of fair housing policy. Inclusionary zoning will begin the process of disrupting centuries of racist real estate policy by ensuring a heterogeneous population by race and income level. In these diverse neighborhoods, low-income families will gain access to resources at present hoarded in high-wealth communities, and affluent residents will necessarily become invested in the success of the diverse community in which they live. Equitable real estate zoning will ensure that low-income residents, currently isolated in the city’s ailing urban neighborhoods, will gain entry to high-functioning school systems, allowing poor children to escape the endless cycle of poverty that has long consumed them.¹⁷⁶

An understanding of America’s racial, real estate, and educational history is essential in comprehending the grave dysfunction in our urban public schools. U.S. school segregation cannot be separated from residential segregation, and neither can be severed from their connection to race. Any policy approach that fails to consider the intersection of all three of these issues will not succeed. It is incumbent upon all Americans to re-orient themselves to an accurate historical understanding of educational inequity. Policymakers ignore this history at their own peril.

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APPENDIX A- LITERATURE REVIEW

The amount of policy work focused on public education is overwhelming. A vast majority of the scholarship propounds an identical message: public schools, specifically those in high-poverty, non-white neighborhoods, are in crisis. Innumerable reasons are given for the dysfunction, which in Providence manifests as chronic student underachievement, demoralized and unenthusiastic teachers, and marginalized parents.¹ There are likewise innumerable recommendations for repairing, reforming, and replacing the “broken” schools in America’s poorest neighborhoods. The policy is partisan, but not exclusively. Conservative institutions tend to prefer the “free market” approach, with its rights-based argument of school “choice.” Progressive policy makers frequently focus on equality of resources, concerned that funding for teachers, materials, and facilities is not equitably distributed throughout districts. But, while every policy paper offers a unique diagnosis of the problem of American public schools, nearly every report, no matter the underlying ideology, recognizes the role of race, place, and wealth in public school success or dysfunction.

The intersection of race, socio-economic status, and residential location is essential in understanding an American student’s access, or lack thereof, to quality education. Community affluence, reflected in local real estate values, is indicative of both higher-performing schools and a majority white population. In Rhode Island, the link between race, poverty and school dysfunction is clear. The state’s worst performing schools are those in its lowest-income, majority non-white neighborhoods.² *Improving High School Graduation Rates* in Rhode Island, a 2017 Rhode Island Kids Count policy report,

identifies the way in which under-resourced schools perpetuate a cycle of poverty in low-income communities. The paper presents a clear link between earning a high school diploma and improved economic status; in 2016, adults with less than a high school degree were four times more likely to be unemployed than Rhode Islanders with at least a bachelor's degree.³ While graduation rates continue to rise throughout the state, there is a persistent gap between high and low-income, and white and non-white students. White students drop out of school at a rate of 6%, considerably less than their Black (10%) and Hispanic peers (13%). Low-income students leave school at a rate of 13%, significantly higher than the dropout rates of more affluent students at 4%.⁴

A report on the state’s largest urban district presents similarly alarming findings. The Johns Hopkins Institute for Educational Policy report, *Providence Public School District: a Review*, detailed a troubling picture of dysfunction in Providence schools, including chronic student underachievement, demoralized teachers, and marginalized parents.⁵ The report blames the district’s exceptionally low student proficiency and graduation rates on structural dysfunction, citing a system “overburdened with multiple, overlapping sources of governance and bureaucracy” as responsible for PPSPD’s failure to meet its educational mission.⁶ Johns Hopkins found that the district lacked meaningful parental involvement, and underscored PPSPD’s failure to commit to racial equity, maintaining that the district “inadequately addresses, and at times actively avoids addressing” racial differences between students, who are majority children of color, and teachers, who are overwhelmingly white.⁷

Both reports lament the disparities between the educational experiences of non-white students in low-income districts and their peers attending more affluent schools, but the remedies they prescribe differ significantly. The RI Kids Count brief makes a number of recommendations to decrease the graduation gap between student groups. It advocates for reforms such as a renewed focus on early reading proficiency, absenteeism reduction, a redesign of disciplinary procedures, and normalizing a role for students in policy advocacy and decision-making.⁸ The Johns Hopkins report asserts a need for increased rigor in Providence classrooms, immediate renovation of disintegrating school facilities, and relief for local administration from onerous bureaucracy.⁹ The RI Kids Count report enjoins schools to develop early warning systems that identify at-risk students, and encourages them to develop strategies of support.¹⁰

While these reports offer logical and valid recommendations to remedy the dysfunction in Providence schools, both fail to address the underlying issues that preempt low-income, minority students from accessing the quality education available to their more affluent peers. The policy reforms above will not succeed unless they are executed alongside an understanding of public school failure as a symptom of a larger issue of socio-economic and civil rights. More comprehensive policy prescriptions are required to combat the disastrous intersection of race and wealth in public education.

The Rhode Island Kids Count report cites chronic absenteeism (defined as missing 10% or more of the school year) as a warning sign that a student is likely to drop out—a better indicator, in fact, than standardized test scores.¹¹ There are many reasons a student

misses school, and these burdens are frequently concentrated among children from low-income families; physical and mental health issues, unstable housing, lack of reliable transportation, work or sibling-care responsibilities, or the lack of clean or appropriate clothing may keep a child out of school.¹² A 2017 report by the Learning Policy Institute offers a solution with educational policy that actively compensates for a student's lack of familial wealth and resource security. In *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: a Review of the Evidence*, Anna Maier, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes, and Livia Lam propose community schools as an effective tool to combat the inequitable educational opportunities caused by economic inequality and racial segregation. Community schools allocate resources for education, health, social services, and community development for children and adults alike.¹³ The report indicates that community schools in high-poverty neighborhoods lead to improved outcomes, both academic and non-academic, for underperforming students.¹⁴ *Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools*, complicates these findings. William R. Johnston, John Engberg, Isaac M. Opper, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, and Lea Xenakis studied three years of the school reform policies of New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio's administration, which invested \$52 million in the New York City Community Schools Initiative in 2014.¹⁵ Johnston et al. measured attendance, academic achievement, and disciplinary incidents, among other measures, to track the efficacy of community schools in the country's largest school district. The authors found a shift to schools which provided community and social services had a positive effect on attendance at all grade levels, but produced contradictory results in math and reading

scores, finding improvement in third through eighth grade students, but no statistical gains for those in high school.¹⁶ Because these scores improved only after this intervention was in place for several years, regardless of whether or not a student was new or had been participating for the length of the program, the authors suggest that consistency and patience is key to successful employment of community-oriented school reform.¹⁷ The authors also found that the community schools with more robust mental health programs saw increased improvements, indicating that half-measures will prove insufficient to reverse entrenched inequity of resources within and between school districts.¹⁸ Johnston's findings deviated from those of Maier et al. in key areas. Johnston et al. found no improvement in disciplinary incidents in high school students attending New York's community schools, and reported that opportunities for family and community engagement in comparison to traditional New York schools was statistically insignificant.¹⁹ The absence of community empowerment within schools devised for this very purpose suggests that further attention to this reform option is necessary, and evidence of underwhelming academic improvements for high school students demands a more comprehensive approach to education reform.

The surest sign of a high achieving school is neighborhood affluence. Community schools aim to compensate for a low-wealth population by providing services that impoverished neighborhoods lack. But such programs place the burden for educational reform on our nation's least-resourced members, while America's wealthier communities hoard resources. A 2020 Brandeis University's study, *The Geography of Child Opportunity: Why Neighborhoods Matter for Equity*, indicates that Black

children are 7.6 times more likely than white children to live in low-opportunity neighborhoods.²⁰ Nationally, about 60% of both Black and Hispanic children live in these communities, compared to just 20% of their white peers.²¹ This matters. Children who live in low-income neighborhoods suffer long-term disadvantages such as lower life expectancy and decreased earning potential.²²

In *Sharing the Wealth: How Regional Finance and Desegregation Plans Can Enhance Educational Equity*, John Brittain, Larkin Willis, and Peter W. Cookson Jr. argue that to reverse the inequitable trends revealed by the Brandeis report, school reform policy must focus on racial and economic segregation between school districts, and not among the schools inside them. The authors assert that inter-district inequity can only be remedied by desegregation plans that cross the boundary between affluent and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.²³ In this way, resources such as tax dollars, high-quality educators, and educational materials and technology are shared more equitably among districts. The authors suggest that inter-district integration plans are most effective when all participants are involved voluntarily.²⁴ Local context too must be taken into consideration; the authors point out that the decentralized nature of the American education system requires that equity plans be flexible and unique to each location and situation. The authors point to results that show evidence of higher academic achievement for students from under-resourced communities in integrated schools compared to their low-income, nonintegrated peers. For example, students who participate in Boston's METCO program, a voluntary integration plan between the city and its suburbs, tend to outperform their

peers in Boston and Springfield schools, and boast an average graduation rate of 98%, significantly higher than that of Boston (67%) or Springfield (62%).²⁵ Attempts to mitigate disparity between school districts need not focus on physical integration. Brittain et al. also examine resource distribution through tax-base consolidation. The authors use Omaha, Nebraska's "Raikes Plan" as a case study. The plan established a regional governance system, with the authority to mandate a common levy, the combined value of all property taxes, and distribute educational funding in an equitable manner, with greater weight given to districts with a higher population of low-income and non-English speaking families.²⁶

The results of tax sharing were positive; participating low-income students performed dramatically better than their non-participating low-income peers in reading and mathematics.²⁷ But, the program was not to last. In 2016, non-urban districts successfully lobbied against the common levy, though the common funding was replaced with increased state support for low-income districts.²⁸ Such resistance to mandated consolidation is not unprecedented. *Fractured: The Breakdown of America's School Districts* documents a national movement of district secessions, in which affluent communities withdraw from their home districts, manipulating borders in a way that preserves areas with high real estate values and leaves behind low-income and racially isolated neighborhoods. Secessions intensify the already substantial socioeconomic and racial divides in American public schools.²⁹ Without a shared tax base, abandoned districts suffer economic devastation, leading to teacher layoffs and school closures.³⁰ The authors of this report recommend states enact legislation that bans secessions entirely, and failing that, attach

restrictive provisions to the formation of new school districts that ensure the economic and racial diversity of the communities left behind.³¹

The work of Hannah Thomas, Tatjana Meschede, Alexis Mann, Allison Stagg, and Thomas Shapiro provides an alternative solution to district resource hoarding. Though it is not concerned with district secession specifically, *Location, Location, Location: The Role Neighborhoods Play in Family Wealth and Well-Being*, highlights the relationship between personal wealth and residential segregation, and the attendant racial isolation within school districts. In this report, the authors draw a distinction between two types of neighborhoods: "high opportunity" and "low opportunity." They define "high opportunity neighborhoods" as residential districts which provide robust resources and services, such as good schools, public transportation, and access to shopping or leisure, and "low-opportunity neighborhoods" as zones in which disinvestment and precarity are the norm.³² In order to move from a lower-resourced neighborhood into a high opportunity neighborhood, a family must have access to wealth.³³ Otherwise, families with fewer resources must spend a greater percentage of their incomes to maintain a home in a less desirable neighborhood.³⁴ As in the EdBuild report, Thomas et al. assert that racial segregation by real estate is allowed or even encouraged by public policy, but their recommendations provide a remedy that preempts district secession attempts. The authors argue that equitable housing policy creates sustainable and lasting wealth across district borders. To resist the concentrated pockets of affluence and poverty, the authors propose that high opportunity neighborhoods must become accessible to low-income families through a program of

inclusionary zoning policies.³⁵ These policies mandate a certain number of affordable units be included in the building of all market-rate housing. The authors found that this approach is most successful when compliance is mandatory, and even suggest that affordability be preserved through contract for ninety-nine years after construction.³⁶

In *Diverse Housing, Diverse Schooling: How Policy Can Stabilize Racial Demographic Change in Cities and Suburbs*, Amy Stuart Wells, a Professor of Sociology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, also examines residential segregation, but sees opportunity in contemporary population shifts. Wells finds that white Americans are leaving diversifying suburbs, while citizens of color are forced out of gentrifying urban cores, but asserts this change, if backed by progressive policy, will make space for more equitable school funding systems.³⁷ Wells warns against “colorblind” educational reforms, such as charter schools and district restructuring, which she finds to increase the prevalence of racial segregation.³⁸ The author asserts that there is evidence that demographic changes in the U.S. are resulting in an increasing valuation of diversity as an asset, and recommends that policymakers take advantage of shifts in attitudes towards race to normalize diverse communities.³⁹ To ensure racial and socioeconomic diversity in all neighborhoods, a circumstance that will render district consolidation, secessions and integration programs irrelevant, Wells recommends that city officials, zoning boards, developers, and realtors work together to “scatter” affordable housing, so that no one area becomes more or less desirable than others.⁴⁰ This is important in suburban areas, which are experiencing a reduction in white affluent residents, as well

as gentrifying urban areas, in which long-term, low-income residents of color now struggle to find affordable housing.⁴¹

While the success of Wells’ recommendations relies on municipal action, Linda Darling-Hammond assigns responsibility for desegregation to the federal government. Darling-Hammond, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University, refers to American public schools as “one of the most inequitably funded systems in the industrialized world” and points to property values as key in understanding and repairing under resourced schools.⁴² Darling-Hammond’s assessment of persistent public school dysfunction aligns somewhat with proponents of community schools. In *Investing for Student Success: Lessons from State School Finance Reforms*, she points to reduced access to systems of welfare as reasons lower-income public school districts require greater funding than districts with less poverty.⁴³ Darling-Hammond’s solution is to counter the decentralizing tendencies of the American education system by making equitable access to educational resources a condition for receiving federal funds.⁴⁴ She recommends requiring states to include information on resource access alongside academic progress reports.⁴⁵ In this way, states which fail to provide qualified teachers, updated educational materials, or adequate facilities to all districts equally will be immediately identified.

Darling-Hammond is not alone in arguing for more robust federal oversight of public education. Perhaps the most audacious policy recommendation for public education reform comes from the Southern Education Foundation (SEF). Their report, *No Time to Lose: Why America Needs an Education Amendment to the US Constitution to Improve Public Education*, argues that a

fundamental change to the nation's founding document is the only way to "abrogate place, wealth and color as markers of education quality."⁴⁶ The SEF understands public education as intrinsic to American democracy and national interests, making the familiar argument that an ignorant populace is unprepared to fulfill their civic duties and unqualified for a global workforce which depends on labor.⁴⁷ The SEF warns that Americans who lack sound judgment and analytical capabilities are a threat to national security, and foresee a "point of no return" at which the population will contain too many uneducated civilians to generate the financial resources needed to initiate reform.⁴⁸ The authors argue that states are ill equipped to properly fund public schools, and interstate discrepancies in demographics, political sentiment, and tax bases results in decentralized dysfunction which can only be resolved at the federal

level.⁴⁹ The report recommends convening an independent, national commission to assess the best model for a federal education amendment. The authors list possible approaches, but find distinct policy recommendations beyond the scope of their paper.⁵⁰

While the literature on public school policy is extensive, it is easy to identify a common theme. The dysfunction in American public schools stems from the compounding effects of race, place, and wealth. The best policy reports identify this relationship and pattern and make recommendations for progressive policy capable of overcoming systemic funding inequity, in a movement to reverse centuries of decentralized, inequitable education policy. The above approaches promise to ensure a fair allocation of resources to low-income students, their families, and the communities which surround them.

Notes

¹ Jay Plasman, *Providence Public School District: a Review* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, 2019):1-93. Accessed February 7, 2019. <https://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PPSD-REVISED-FINAL.pdf>.

² Rhode Island Kids Count. *Improving High School Graduation Rates in Rhode Island* (Providence: Rhode Island Kids Count, 2017): 4. Accessed February 2, 2020. <http://rikidscount.org/Data-Publications/Issue-Briefs>.

³ Rhode Island Kids Count, 1

⁴ Rhode Island Kids Count, 3.

⁵ Plasman, *Providence Public School District: a Review*, 3-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 76, 8.

⁸ Rhode Island Kids Count, 6, 7, 8, 10.

⁹ Plasman, *Providence Public School District: a Review*, 28, 92.

¹⁰ Rhode Island Kids Count, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Anna Maier, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes, and Livia Lam, *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: a Review of the Evidence* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2017): 1. Accessed February 7, 2019.

<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-report>.

¹⁴ Maier, 5.

¹⁵ William R. Johnston, John Engberg, Isaac M. Opper, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, and Lea Xenakis, *Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020): 1. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3245.html.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63, 72.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁰ Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, Clemens Noelke, and Nancy McArdle, *The Geography of Child Opportunity: Why Neighborhoods Matter for Equity* (Waltham: The Heller School for Social Policy and Management at

Brandeis University, 2020): 3.
http://new.diversitydatakids.org/sites/default/files/file/ddk_the-geography-of-child-opportunity_2020v2_0.pdf.

²¹ Ibid., 2.

²² Ibid.

²³ John Brittain, Larkin Willis, and Peter W. Cookson Jr., *Sharing the Wealth: How Regional Finance and Desegregation Plans Can Enhance Educational Equity* (Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute, 2019):v. Accessed February 7, 2019.
[https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/sharing-wealth-regional-finance-desegregation-](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/sharing-wealth-regional-finance-desegregation-Plans-report)

[Plans-report](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/sharing-wealth-regional-finance-desegregation-Plans-report).

²⁴ Ibid., 17.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Ibid., 12.

²⁷ Ibid., 11.

²⁸ Ibid., 14.

²⁹ EdBuild, *Fractured: The Breakdown of America's School Districts* (New Jersey: EdBuild, 2017): 4.
<https://edbuild.org/content/fractured/fractured-full-report.pdf>.

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ Ibid., 17.

³² Hannah Thomas, Tatjana Meschede, Alexis Mann, Allison Stagg, and Thomas Shapiro, *Location, Location, Location: The Role Neighborhoods Play in Family Wealth and Well-Being* (Waltham: Institute on Assets and Social Policy, The Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, 2017):2. Accessed February 7, 2019.
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³³ Ibid., 13.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 14.

³⁷ Amy Stuart Wells, *Diverse Housing, Diverse Schooling: How Policy Can Stabilize Racial Demographic Change in Cities and Suburbs* (Boulder: National Education Policy Center, School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder, 2019):17. Accessed February 7, 2019.
<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/housing-school-nexus>.

³⁸ Ibid., 2.

³⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁴¹ Ibid., 18.

⁴² Linda Darling-Hammond, *Investing for Student Success: Lessons From State School Finance Reforms* (Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute, 2019):V. Accessed February 7, 2019.
<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/investing-student-success-school-finance-reforms-report>.

⁴³ Ibid., vi.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Southern Education Foundation, *No Time to Lose: Why America Needs an Education Amendment to the US Constitution to Improve Public Education* (Atlanta: Southern Education Foundation, 2009): 3.
<https://www.southerneducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/No-Time-to-Lose.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 6, 36.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 33.

APPENDIX B- HISTORIOGRAPHY

American systems of education were inequitable from the start. Ostensibly built with mediocratic intensions, and tasked with constructing a democratic society sustained by a well-educated populous, American schools have instead remained segregated, inaccessible, and ineffectual in their mission to provide education to all citizens equally. Class, gender, and race functioned as long-maintained barriers to a quality education in the US, and this inequity remains. This historiography will trace the evolution of public education in America, and illuminate the multitude of ways in which schooling was manipulated to maintain an elite status quo at the expense of the country's most vulnerable population. This paper is focused on Rhode Island, but the findings can be extrapolated to the entirety of the country. Rhode Island schools, like public education institutions nationally, are in desperate need of reform. This historiography will reveal the complex and interconnected causes of public education failure, and provided a starting point from which these failings must be remedied.

New England boasted the earliest public schools in the colonies, but Rhode Island—skeptical of religious authority over education, and reliably contrarian—was markedly slower than Massachusetts and Connecticut to organize a tax-based public school system.¹ Though the literature on modern public education in Rhode Island is scant, there is ample, if somewhat outdated, scholarship on the establishment of a school system in early Rhode Island.

Charles Carroll, a professor of education at the Rhode Island Normal School in the early 20th century, authored a remarkably comprehensive study of the early history of education in the Ocean State. In *Public Education in Rhode Island* Carroll refuted the notion that early Rhode Islanders were ambivalent about education. The book was five hundred pages in length, but the very first page contained an essential point regarding one of the most confounding factors of the American school system: the challenges of ensuring collective responsibility for public

education in a republic founded on ideals of individualism.² Americans, and indeed Rhode Islanders, notoriously resistant to taxation, have never made an exception for education. On a rejected 1756 proposal to fund new school construction via town tax, Carroll quotes Moses Brown, then a school committee member, as lamenting that “the plan of a free school, supported by a tax, was rejected by the poorer sort of the people, being strangely led away not to see their own as well as the public interest therein.”³

Aristocratic Education and the Making of the American Republic by Mark Boonshoft was primarily concerned with North American academies, privately-run schools for the elite, but it is indispensable in understanding the evolution of American sentiment towards education. A colonial academy's original mission was to bolster church authority over a rapidly increasing population by training clergy for the continent's ever-expanding congregations.⁴ Boonshoft, an assistant professor of history at Duquesne University, shows that these schools rapidly became a “tool of civil elite formation,” with the goal of creating a leadership class tasked with controlling an unruly population, at first for British Authorities striving to maintain their hold on a sprawling empire, and later by an American elite acting on fears of an “excess of democracy.”⁵ Boonshoft disputes the ahistorical interpretation of a nascent nation devoted to a democratically-educated populous, and instead asserts that such reforms only materialized after a long period of dissent from a population that interpreted wealthy, white men's domination of education, and therefore American politics, as nothing less than a new aristocracy.⁶

Education reformers finally managed to reorient Americans to a republican understanding of education as essential to a self-governing population, but the popular skepticism and anti-tax sentiment lamented by Moses Brown remained. In “The ‘Working Class’ and Educational Reform in Early America: The Case of Providence, Rhode Island,” William G. Shade,

associate professor of history at Lehigh University, documented a lengthy series of legislative gains and setbacks through which the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers (P.A.M.M.) was ultimately able to secure free schooling in Providence. Like Carroll, Shade found evidence that educational reforms were overwhelmingly spurned by poor rural farmers, the very class such reforms were designed to benefit.⁷ Instead, support for free public schooling came from organizations overwhelmingly made up of the “middling” classes.⁸

Shade’s examination of the resistance to publicly-funded education revealed the outsized influence that rural Rhode Island communities held over their urban counterparts. Legislation to create a state-wide public school system was routinely stymied by extra-urban representatives in the Rhode Island General Assembly.⁹ In “The Providence School Board Reform Movement, 1898-1924,” Patrick Harshbarger also faulted the legislature for the slow and fraught development of Rhode Island public schooling. In his examination of the battle for control over Providence public education, Harshbarger illuminated an 18th century school board reform movement’s push for control over school budgets, building construction, and school board elections in an attempt to reverse a “haphazard division of authority among city councils, school supervisors, and school boards.”¹⁰ It wasn’t until 1924 that the political climate changed enough to allow these centralizing reforms, which were championed by the elite as a system to organize the chaos of an ever-diversifying urban population.¹¹

Harvard University professor Joel Perlmann concurred with Shade’s assertion regarding the middle-class origins of early public school students, but his interest lay in the shifting socio-economic background of enrollees during the Progressive Era. In “Curriculum and Tracking in the Transformation of the American High School: Providence, R.I. 1880-1930,” Perlmann employed enrollment data and changes in curriculum to illuminate the ways in which student demographics shifted between 1880 and 1925.

Providence’s early public high schools were tasked with preparing privileged students for entry into elite universities and training female students to become teachers.¹² However, increasing immigration expanded the population and generated more working-class students, resulting in a curriculum shift to provide education more appropriate to industrial needs.¹³ The curriculum reform that followed led to an exodus of upper and middle-class students, contributing to the stigma of vocational programming, and the elitism of classical education, producing the familiar pattern of social differentiation seen in today’s public school curriculum.¹⁴

In addition to class status, Perlmann’s research also revealed stark differentiation by gender. Early curriculum provided few options for those enrolled in women’s programs, and this inequity of opportunity continued well past high school. In turn-of-the-century Providence, an educated woman’s career choices were severely limited, and the positions available came with little autonomy. An examination of scholarship focused on public school teachers makes evident a female educator’s historic lack of agency. In “Margaret Fuller’s Row at the Greene Street School: Early Female Education in Providence, 1837-1839,” University of California’s Judith Strong Albert explored the brief tenure of radically progressive teacher, Margaret Fuller. Fuller’s unorthodox approach to education anticipated some elements of the progressive movement’s educational reforms: she disdained the traditional teacher-student hierarchy, encouraged female inquiry and debate, and discouraged the more traditional traits of modesty and congeniality.¹⁵ Resistance to Fuller’s educational approach, unsettling even to her own students, forced her to leave the Greene School after a mere two years. Her equality-based classroom methods did not manifest in an American public education system overwhelmingly focused on vocational training. Female students, ultimately limited to teacher training and commercial programs, were never granted the same breadth of opportunities as their male peers.

The issue of teacher autonomy was further explored by Professor Victoria-María MacDonald in “The Paradox of Bureaucratization: New Views on Progressive Era Teachers and the Development of a Woman's Profession.” MacDonald’s findings were somewhat more encouraging than the experience of Margaret Fuller. MacDonald argued that the centralization of public education during the Progressive Era was not an oppressive development in the evolution of female teachers. Rather, these reforms were responsible for creating a devoted, long-term, and career-oriented female teaching force.¹⁶ MacDonald admitted to the male-dominated managerial control over curriculum and instruction experienced by Margaret Fuller and her peers. However, she asserted that, instead of leading to the deskilling of female teachers, it contributed to a system of female mentorship and camaraderie which encouraged female teachers to remain at their posts for increasingly longer terms, and to achieve advancement into the lower spheres of upper management.¹⁷

MacDonald’s claims seem rather dubious in the light of a 1946 Act signed by Rhode Island Governor John O. Pastore, which contained a loophole that allowed school committees to fire tenured female teachers who married.¹⁸ “Rhode Island's Last Holdout: Tenure and Marred Women Teachers at the Brink of the Women's Movement” examines the lengthy legal battle over women’s tenure rights in the state, focusing on a struggle in Pawtucket which culminated in one of the largest teacher strikes in Rhode Island history. David M. Donahue, Assistant Professor of Education at Mills College, shows that, although hiring bans against married women in education ended during World War II, legalized discrimination remained in the form of tenure policy until the women’s rights movement of the 1960s. A woman who married in Pawtucket prior to 1965 was automatically fired, regardless of how many years she had been a teacher, and rehired as a substitute at a reduced salary.¹⁹ A mid-century movement for teacher professionalization, the rise of teacher activism, and civil rights-era gains shifted public sentiment

and state policy, and prompted the Rhode Island House to pass legislation which barred marriage discrimination in teacher tenure decisions.²⁰

Both gender and socio-economic class presented barriers to a comprehensive and equitable public education, but it was the population’s attitude towards race that served as the largest obstacle to equitable access to education. There is a plenitude of literature which explores early race relations in Rhode Island, but scholarship on the essential intersection of race and education in the Ocean State is severely lacking. The work of John Wood Sweet and Joseph W. Sullivan does not discuss schooling, but their examination of civil unrest in Providence provides context for the social conditions non-white Americans faced at the start of the 19th century. The authors focused on the outbreak of urban riots in the city’s capital, a seminal moment in both Rhode Island and US racial history. The Hard Scrabble and Snow Town riots ushered in the end of a brief time of egalitarianism for Black freedmen in the north, and represented the start of the racial violence in “free” societies that paralleled the legalized oppression in the South during the Jim Crow era.²¹ In *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830*, Sweet argues that racial intolerance of free Blacks caused the Hard Scrabble riot, an outburst of white mob violence that destroyed the Providence neighborhood in which Rhode Island’s Black freedmen and women clustered.²² Sweet argues that this violence prompted voters to support a more centralized city government with “the authority of surveillance, discipline, and police,” leading to the incorporation of Providence as a city.²³

Joseph W. Sullivan challenges Sweet’s assessment. In *Reconstructing the Olney’s Lane Riot: Another Look at Race and Class in Jacksonian Rhode Island*, he proposes that class tensions between unskilled laborers and artisans were the trigger for Providence the riots. While acknowledging race as a factor, Sullivan pointed to the socioeconomic status of rioters as evidence of his theory that class divisions were a primary motivation. The more than one-thousand rioters that destroyed the

neighborhood of Snow Town were largely made up of skilled workers: shoemakers, storekeepers, and blacksmiths. Sullivan asserted that the violence targeted brothels and “disorderly houses,” and not Black property in general, as newspaper reporting at the time made clear that Black residencies in other parts of Providence were not threatened.²⁴ Sullivan maintains that both the citizenry and the authorities blamed lower classes for the violence “without distinction to color.”²⁵

Sullivan’s work adds some ambiguity to the role of race in early American discrimination, but an examination of inequality in education makes the primacy of race very clear. A dearth of scholarship on racial segregation in Rhode Island schools makes local studies challenging, but the literature on educational inequity in neighboring states is abundant. Black Americans were routinely presented with inferior options for educating their children in public schools, and few cities represent this history better than Boston, Massachusetts. Carlton Mabee revealed how African Americans fought back in “A Negro Boycott to Integrate Boston Schools.” Mabee illuminated the campaign of Garrisonian abolitionist William C. Nell to integrate Boston’s public schools, which, in 1845, were the only segregated schools remaining in Massachusetts. Nell’s proposed method of protest was a school and taxpayer boycott.²⁶ Enraged by the result of *Roberts v. Boston*, an 1850 desegregation case which decided that local school systems had the authority to decide on segregation independently, Black Bostonians withdrew their children from segregated Boston schools and enrolled them in neighboring districts, cutting black student attendance in half by 1849.²⁷ The protracted school boycott, coupled with the sudden withdrawal of tax dollars, spurred the governor to sign a law prohibiting segregation by race or religion in Massachusetts schools in 1855, when Boston became the first major American city to desegregate public education.²⁸

Hilary Moss, an Assistant Professor of History and Black Studies at Amherst College, also looked at Boston during the battle over integration, but her focus was instead on Black opposition to

desegregation. In “The Tarring and Feathering of Thomas Paul Smith: Common Schools, Revolutionary Memory, and the Crisis of Black Citizenship in Antebellum Boston,” Moss identified the fight to integrate Boston common schools as part of African Americans’ struggle against the creep of disenfranchisement.²⁹ At this time, public education was regarded as the “most Americanizing of all institutions,” and Black Americans increasingly became aware of the need to assert an American identity in the defense of their political liberty.³⁰ Moss asserted that integrationists understood that to allow the public school system—which accepted students from a diversity of ethnicities, religions, and classes—to bar African Americans weakened black claims on equality.

Antebellum Rhode Island activists relied heavily on Massachusetts’ success with school desegregation during their fight to integrate public education in the urban regions of the country’s smallest state. While most children in Rhode Island were already attending integrated public schools by 1855, the cities of Providence, Newport, and Bristol, areas that contained the majority of the state’s nonwhite population, maintained their racially segregated systems. “George T. Downing and Desegregation of Rhode Island Public Schools,” was one of the few pieces of scholarship that directly addressed racial segregation in Rhode Island schools. Grossman, an associate professor of history at Yeshiva University, detailed George T. Downing’s attempt to leverage wealthy white Rhode Islanders in his fight for school desegregation by arguing that, because the rich invariably choose private schooling for their offspring, desegregation did not affect them directly.³¹ Downing’s activism in concert with a shift in Northern sentiments spawned by the Civil War finally encouraged white Rhode Islanders to push for the complete desegregation of public education. In 1866, the General Assembly passed a statute mandating the integration of Providence schools, the last in the state to remain segregated.³²

Providence’s early aversion to racial integration was in keeping with her Northern neighbors, and post-Reconstruction sentiment

promised little change. Northern cities demonstrated a dearth of compassion for the influx of rural black migrants during the Great Migration. Sociological work on urban poverty during this period laid the groundwork for the establishment of a lasting conviction of persistent black inequality as natural and self-imposed. In his 1984 book, *Losing Ground*, conservative American sociologist Charles Murray referred to the black 'underclass' as "an immoral pathological subculture nurtured by permissive Great Society social plans."³³ Murray's late-twentieth century assertion was perfectly aligned with the sentiments of sixty years before, which asserted that black social culture, and not racially-inequitable programs and policies, caused poverty in black urban neighborhoods.

Though its focus was not on Rhode Island, "Race and Class in Chicago-School Sociology: the Underclass Concept in Historical Perspective" by Alice O'Connor examined American sociological thought on urban poverty, and her findings extend to all of the nation's industrializing urban centers in the North, including Providence, Rhode Island. O'Connor focused on the Chicago School, a group of sociologists at the University of Chicago who developed the theory of an "ecological model of social development." The School argued that an immigrant's incorporation into American culture always began with alienation and poverty, eventually led to social "cooperation," and ultimately resulted in assimilation.³⁴ This theory was applied to Black Americans as well as European immigrants, but, as O'Connor made clear, the experience of Black Americans was unlike that of any other social group. A 1922 report, *The Negro in Chicago*, found that an "intense competition for residential and recreational space" triggered anti-black violence.³⁵ O'Connor argued that the commission's 1922 report maintained that "discriminatory economic practices," "deep seated racial animosities," "state-sanctioned segregation," and the "political nature of racial inequality" were the true reason for dysfunction in black communities.³⁶

When the Chicago School theory failed to explain the peculiar socio-economic

circumstance of Black Americans, an updated theory was supplied by controversial sociologist William Julius Wilson, who in the 1980s proposed a "race-neutral" view of inequality.³⁷ Disregarding findings like those of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, Wilson blamed Black "institutional disintegration" on the deindustrialization of the urban core and the loss of jobs that followed. He asserted that mass unemployment triggered the collapse of the nuclear family in Black urban neighborhoods, and that the matriarchal family which resulted encouraged delinquency in children and welfare dependency by their mothers.³⁸ Wilson's theory of urban poverty blamed the "pathology" of Black communities for their impoverished circumstances, and removed race from the discussion about Black inequality, allowing politicians to "universalize" social improvements, both to attract a larger white constituency and to bolster efforts to roll back social welfare programs and civil rights-era gains.³⁹

It is worth noting that the Chicago School's fixation on poverty as an independent condition, unconnected to existing political policy or practice, was a premise that predated the 1920s. In "For Whose Benefit?: Social Control and the Construction of Providence's Dexter Asylum," Etan Newman, a graduate of Brown University's history department, made the case for a shifting conception of poverty from a temporary situation demanding communal responsibility to an independent moral failing. Newman agreed with the Chicago School theory that conceptions of poverty rested on the emergence of American industrialization, but focused his research on the prior century. With his examination of the opening of Providence's first poorhouse, the Dexter Asylum, Newman revealed a connection between a change in popular conceptions of the indigent population to the rise of industrial capitalism. Newman employed a framework of social control theory to explain the rise of the mythology of individual responsibility examined later in Wilson's theory of "urban pathology." Newman highlighted the poorhouse as a tool of the elite, who used indoor poor relief to manipulate social relations, transforming those

who were once considered only temporarily disadvantaged by misfortune into lazy, morally-bankrupt threats to society.⁴⁰ Newman suggested that, by offering relief so oppressive only the most desperate agreed to accept it, the Dexter Asylum ensured that a majority of the population instead submitted to poorly compensated wage labor, and thereby cemented the economic dominance of elite industrialists.⁴¹ Newman argues that this new perception of poverty spawned lasting public policy which placed the burden of achieving socioeconomic success with the least-resourced members of American society, creating a permanent underclass whose isolation from quality housing, social services, and education reinforced their inequality.

The nation's habit of pathologizing poor and black Americans was difficult to extinguish. African Americans were racially ostracized regardless of class status, as seen in Andrew Wise's exploration of middle-class Black America's fraught relationship with homeownership in "'The House I Live In': Race, Class, and African American Suburban Dreams in the Postwar United States." Wise's focus was on a nascent Black bourgeoisie, wealthier and better educated than its pre-war peers, which sought to demonstrate their class distinction by physically distancing themselves from working-class Black neighborhoods, and by practicing a carefully considered pattern of consumption in which the private suburban home played a central role.⁴² Black families attempting to buy homes in primarily white suburbs faced strong resistance from the white community, who made life unbearable for non-white families who did manage to acquire property in white-dominant suburbs. Just as Moss attributed the Black Bostonian's demand for integrated schools to a desire to defend African American political liberty, Wise asserts that the Black American's struggle to control and benefit from space was "a crucial terrain of black agency, politics, and identity-making throughout the twentieth century."⁴³

Segregation by neighborhood was an effective barrier to racial equality, and the resulting lack of access to well-resourced schools

became a key force behind the eruption of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Desegregation movements garnered white dissent in all corners of the US, and Rhode Island certainly was no exception. Because scholarship on this subject focuses on better-known examples of white resistance to school integration, Boston again must be used as a stand-in for Providence. The Boston busing crisis of the 1970s and 1980s has inspired a robust body of literature. In their introduction to an entire *Journal of Urban History* issue devoted to the matter, Matthew Delmont and Jeanne Theoharis, argued that this period is more aptly labeled a "segregation" crisis.⁴⁴ In "Rethinking the Boston 'Busing Crisis,'" the authors detailed violent white resistance to state integration mandates, but argued that the prodigious Black activism of the period merits more attention.⁴⁵ Bert Useem used the term "anti-bussing movement" to acknowledge white Bostonian's reaction to desegregatory actions.⁴⁶ He parsed the difference between trust in government and policy dissatisfaction in the context of organized resistance to the 1974 busing mandate, and finds that perceived illegitimacy of Boston's public officials contributed to the strife.⁴⁷ Finally, John H. Morgan looked at Boston's segregated neighborhoods from an ethnic, rather than racial, perspective. In "Ethnoconsciousness and Political Powerlessness: Boston's Irish," Morgan asserted that the Irish of South Boston were an intentionally distinct, blue-collar community withing the larger metropolis. His was a sympathetic view of a group of Americans historically subject to the "radical and irrational prejudices of Protestant Anglo-Saxons."⁴⁸ While Morgan decried the violence on display during the early days of Boston's busing programs, he argued that the unrest was not necessarily racial in nature. In fact, Morgan wrote, Americans of Irish dissent in South Boston had a lengthy history of being hostile to outsiders.⁴⁹ Instead, Morgan placed the blame for unrest at the feet of the Massachusetts Department of Education who, in organizing integration between Boston's poor and working-class communities while leaving wealthier areas untouched, engendered a sense

of political powerless and resentment within Irish communities.⁵⁰

Inequitable access to quality education can be traced back to the very beginnings of the country. America's fraught history of racial oppression, class inequality, and gender discrimination work together to perpetuate social inequalities, and these disparities remain

on display. The "most Americanizing of all institutions," exists today as a place of extreme social differentiation.⁵¹ The historical scholarship on American education history illuminates the interconnected source of these inequities and provides a starting point from which they must be remedied.

Notes

¹ Charles Carroll, *Public Education in Rhode Island* (Providence: E. L. Freeman Company, 1918), 14.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴ Mark Boonshoft, *Aristocratic Education and the Making of the American Republic*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 67, 81.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰ Patrick Harshbarger, "The Providence School Board Reform Movement, 1898-1924," *Rhode Island History* 44, no. 2 (1985): 47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹² Joel Perlmann, "Curriculum and Tracking in the Transformation of the American High School: Providence, R.I. 1880-1930," *The Journal of Social History* 19, no. 1 (1985): 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵ Judith Strong Albert, "Margaret Fuller's Row at the Greene Street School: Early Female Education in Providence, 1837-1839," *Rhode Island History* 42, no. 2 (1983): 45.

¹⁶ Victoria-María MacDonald, "The Paradox of Bureaucratization: New Views on Progressive Era Teachers and the Development of a Woman's Profession," *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1999): 428.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 452.

¹⁸ David M. Donahue, "Rhode Island's Last Holdout: Tenure and Married Women Teachers at the Brink of the Women's Movement," *History of Education Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2002): 50.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

²¹ John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006): 355.

²² *Ibid.*, 357.

²³ *Ibid.*, 395.

²⁴ Joseph W. Sullivan, "Reconstructing the Olney's Lane Riot: Another Look at Race and Class in Jacksonian Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History* 65, no. 2 (2007): 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Carleton Mabee, "A Negro Boycott to Integrate Boston Schools," *The New England Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (September 1968): 343.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 356.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 356.

²⁹ Hilary Moss, "The Tarring and Feathering of Thomas Paul Smith: Common Schools, Revolutionary Memory, and the Crisis of Black Citizenship in Antebellum Boston," *The New England Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (2007): 234.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

³¹ Lawrence Grossman, "George T. Downing and Desegregation of Rhode Island Public Schools," *Rhode Island History* 36, no. 4 (1977): 101.

³² *Ibid.*, 104.

³³ Alice O'Connor, "Race and Class in Chicago-School Sociology: the Underclass Concept in Historical Perspective," in *The African American Experience: Perspectives from the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Joe W. Trotter, Earl Lewis, and Tera W. Hunter (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.), 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴⁰ Etan Newman, "For Whose Benefit?: Social Control and the Construction of Providence's Dexter Asylum," *The Historian* 72, no. 1 (2010): 99.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴² Andrew Wise, "'The House I Live In': Race, Class, and African American Suburban Dreams in the Postwar United States," in *African American Urban History Since World War II*, ed. Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe Trotter, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 164.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁴ Matthew Delmont, and Jeanne Theoharis, "Introduction: Rethinking the Boston 'Busing Crisis,'" *Journal of Urban History* 43 no. 2 (2017): 192.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁶ Bert Useem, "Trust in Government and the Boston Anti-Busing Movement," *Western Political Quarterly* 35 no.1 (1982): 81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 87, 89.

⁴⁸ John H. Morgan, Ethnoconsciousness and Political Powerlessness: Boston's Irish, *Social Science* 53, no.3 (1978): 159.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵¹ Moss, "The Tarring and Feathering of Thomas Paul Smith," 224.

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