

Even as the Suburbs Diversify, Racial Inequality Persists in Suburban Schools

Racial residential segregation combined with families' resources reproduce educational inequalities in the suburbs.

by ANNA RHODES AND SIRI WARKENTIEN

The quiet neighborhoods and good schools of the suburbs have long held an allure for families. Not everyone, of course, is able to move to the suburbs. Racism and legacies of poverty have prevented many people of color and low-income families from making suburban moves. But today, the suburbs are diversifying rapidly, and many families of all incomes and racial and ethnic backgrounds are hoping to find “the package deal” of a good school in a good neighborhood in the suburbs.

But as our recent study reveals, the dream and the reality are sometimes far apart. Black and lower-income families in Cleveland, for example, hoped to leave the city for improved suburban schools. But while many were able to make the move, schools often continued to disappoint. For black families in particular, their suburban schools were often lower-performing and did not meet their expectations. In contrast, white suburban movers were able to access schools that fulfilled their hope for the “package deal.”

As the suburbs continue to diversify, one of the most important goals of education policy will be to stem the tide of growing educational inequality in suburban school districts.

The Changing Suburbs

Lower income black and Latino families are increasingly leaving the city for the suburbs. The share of the nonwhite suburban student population has nearly doubled since 1994,

KEY FINDINGS

- Nearly all parents interviewed were seeking “the package deal”—a good neighborhood with good schools so their children could live and thrive near where they went to school.
- But finding the package deal was harder for black and low-income families. Among the 24 black families seeking to relocate, just 13 were able to make a suburban move. Of those, only three families were satisfied with their suburban school. In contrast, all white families who made a suburban move were satisfied with their children’s schools.
- Networks (family and other contacts) pulled families of color to more segregated suburban neighborhoods, reflecting long legacies of inequality.

to 41 percent.¹ But while the suburbs are becoming more diverse, they are also growing more segregated. Many factors contribute to suburban segregation and families’ ability to access high opportunity neighborhoods and schools. Racial steering and overt discrimination are still common when purchasing homes.² Middle-class minority families looking for suburban homes are often directed toward largely minority suburbs.³ Additional practices, such as exclusionary zoning, which prevents the construction of higher-density affordable units, keep non-wealthy families—often families of color due to historical and contemporary discrimination—from these neighborhoods.

It was within this context that we asked how families were navigating residential and school choices. We interviewed 50 families in Cleveland in 2013 and 2014. Just over half of the sample resided in the city while the other half lived in the suburbs. Approximately two-thirds of the parents were black, one-fourth were white, 6 percent were Latino, and 2 percent were Asian. One in five had at least a bachelor's degree. Half the sample had incomes below \$25,000 a year and 20 percent were making more than \$50,000 per year.

The Interplay of Money, Networks, and Racism

Nearly all parents (40) sought “the package deal”—a good neighborhood and good schools so their children could live and thrive near where they went to school.⁴ However, finding that package deal was not always possible, particularly for people of color and lower-income families. Among the 24 black families who sought the package deal, just 13 were able to make a suburban move. Of those, only three families were satisfied with their suburban school. Among the 12 white families, in contrast, eight made a suburban move and all eight were satisfied with their children's suburban schools.

Parents who grew up in the city and attended Cleveland public schools often viewed the suburbs as neighborhoods with superior schools and tended not to critically evaluate the differences between suburban school districts. In contrast, parents who grew up in the suburbs were more discerning. In our sample, White parents more often than black parents lived in suburban neighborhoods and attended suburban schools during their own childhood.

The pull of family was also a factor and shows how family histories can shape futures. One woman and her husband, both white, lost their home to foreclosure as they struggled to pay medical bills. Her husband's parents offered to put them up in their suburban Lakewood duplex. This family pull provided a financial reprieve, but more importantly, it allowed their children to attend the well-regarded schools in the Lakewood neighborhood. In contrast, a black mother of two was eager to move into a suburban neighborhood when she received a housing voucher. The pull of family led her to move to Garfield Heights where her sisters lived. But she soon became disillusioned with the poor-performing schools in that suburb.

Indeed, white families tended to be pulled into majority white and more advantaged neighborhoods with higher-performing schools, while black families more frequently moved to the opposite. Even among neighborhoods with similar rents and median income, such as Garfield Heights and Lakewood, black families more often landed in Garfield

Heights and were dissatisfied with their neighborhood schools. White families, meanwhile, more often landed in Lakewood and were happy with their children's schools.

Racism Endures

Racial discrimination also played a role in not finding the package deal. A black mother of four spent her high school years in the majority white suburb of Lakewood. She had experienced racism in Lakewood growing up, but as a parent she returned to Lakewood to give her children access to “good schools.” However, her son started to have trouble with his classmates and she suspected it was due to racism, similar to her own prior experiences. She tried to intervene, but when her son's grades began to fall, she moved back to the city and saw a nearly immediate improvement in his grades.

As a result of these legacies, both family and systemic, black families were much less likely to find a suburban neighborhood school that did not disappoint. As a result, they often faced the task of navigating the school choice process, even sending their children to schools outside the neighborhood, something few white families had to navigate.

Policy Implications

The persistence of educational inequality stemming from residential segregation, even in suburban communities, highlights the need to focus on adopting integrated approaches to housing and education policy. It is also important to examine how housing and school policies accommodate a family's desire to couple residential and school decisions.

Communities and school districts across the country are working toward such coordinated approaches, including efforts in Los Angeles. There, the Department of Housing and Community Development is working with the school district to ensure that housing programs expand access to proficient schools. The goal is to ensure that state and local planning initiatives simultaneously promote diversity in schools and affordability of neighborhoods, while actively assessing whether local education policies are “contributing factors” to housing segregation. Other municipalities and districts are pursuing many other creative housing and education policies.⁵

Some existing housing policies also offer an opportunity for families to access the package deal. Housing mobility programs that help families move to lower-poverty neighborhoods and school districts are an example. The Baltimore Housing Mobility Program, for example, incorporates advice on schools for families considering a move. Such counseling has helped families find better schools.

Inclusionary zoning (IZ), in which developers set aside a percentage of new units for affordable housing, allow low-income families to live in low-poverty neighborhoods with high-performing neighborhood schools (see the brief by Heather Schwartz and colleagues in this series).⁶ Whether a sufficient number of affordable housing units can be built in high opportunity neighborhoods remains a critical question.

These and other efforts can help ensure that all children and their families have access to a high-quality education in a safe and healthy neighborhood. Such access is critical to economic and social mobility. Neighborhoods and communities, too, benefit from cultural and economic diversity that families of different backgrounds and circumstances bring.

Endnotes

- 1 Pew Research, “Sharp Growth in Suburban Minority Enrollment Yields Modest Gains in School Diversity” (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, March 31, 2009), www.pewhispanic.org/2009/03/31/sharp-growth-in-suburban-minority-enrollment-yields-modest-gains-in-school-diversity/.
- 2 C.Z. Charles, “The Dynamics of Racial Residential Segregation,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, no. 1 (2003): 167–207, <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100002>.
- 3 J. Dougherty, “Shopping for Schools: How Public Education and Private Housing Shaped Suburban Connecticut,” *Journal of Urban History*, 38, no. 2 (2012): 205–24.
- 4 In this study “good” neighborhoods and schools were those perceived to be good by our respondents, most of whom viewed the suburbs as the place where this could be found.
- 5 Philip Tegeler and Micah Herskind, “Coordination of Community Systems and Institutions to Promote Housing and School Integration” (Washington, DC: Poverty and Race Research Action Council, 2018), https://prrac.org/pdf/housing_education_report_november2018.pdf.
- 6 Heather Schwartz et al., Inclusionary Zoning Can Bring Poor Families Closer to Good Schools (Chicago: MacArthur Foundation series on “How Housing Matters, March 2014), https://www.macfound.org/media/files/HHM_-_Inclusionary_Zoning_Can_Bring_Poor_Families_Closer_to_Good_Schools.pdf.

Anna Rhodes is an assistant professor of sociology at Rice University. Her research explores the intersection of families’ school and residential choices. Siri Warkentien is a researcher at RTI International in the Center for Evaluation and Study of Educational Equity. She studies the causes and consequences of racial and economic segregation in schools and neighborhoods.

ABOUT THE HOW HOUSING MATTERS TO FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES RESEARCH INITIATIVE


This brief summarizes research funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of its How Housing Matters to Families and Communities Research Initiative. The initiative seeks to explore whether, and if so how, having a decent, stable, affordable home leads to strong families and vibrant communities. By illuminating the ways in which housing matters and highlighting innovative practices in the field, the Foundation hopes to encourage collaboration among leaders and policymakers in housing, education, health, and economic development to help families lead healthy, successful lives. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the MacArthur Foundation.

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John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
140 South Dearborn St., Suite 1200
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