

# **NEPC Review: Priced Out of Public Schools: District Lines, Housing Access, and Inequitable Educational Options (Bellwether Education Partners, October 2021)**



**Reviewed by:**

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March 2022

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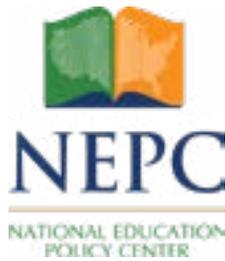
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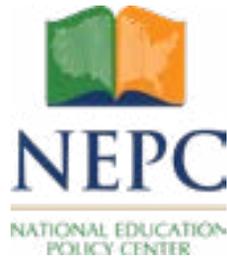
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## Summary

For decades, politicians have struggled to make educational opportunity more widely available and less tied to where a child’s parents can afford to live. Bellwether Education Partners’ recent report, *Priced Out of Public Schools: District Lines, Housing Access, and Inequitable Educational Options*, attempts to examine the availability of low-income rental units in school districts to understand whether districts in the largest 200 metropolitan areas are accessible to families in poverty. The report finds nearly 500 examples of borders between two starkly different types of districts: those that are the most and least “accessible” based on the cost of rental housing. It designates the borders between these districts as barriers. It recommends a combination of education policy solutions, including expanding school choice, and affordable housing opportunities. While the report’s focus on the intersection of housing and education policy for students’ opportunities is commendable, it suffers from significant methodological shortcomings. One problem is that the report’s approach is disconnected from federal housing policy and research. In addition, and particularly problematic, the report is silent on how race and racism relate to housing access and educational opportunity. These concerns and others severely limit the report’s utility for informing social policy.



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## I. Introduction

Politicians often sloganeer that educational opportunity should not depend upon a child's zip code. For example, federal and state leaders of both political parties have declared this goal in recent years.<sup>1</sup> However, more than 70% of children attend their local school. Moreover, these zoned schools vary widely in the types of opportunities that they offer children, which, in turn, influence children's life chances.

In Bellwether Education Partners' report, *Priced Out of Public Schools: District Lines, Housing Access, and Inequitable Educational Options*,<sup>2</sup> Alex Spurrier, Sara Hodges, & Jennifer O'Neal Schiess attempt to analyze the relationship between the cost of rental housing and educational opportunity, as measured by per-pupil spending, in school districts. The report finds more than a thousand school districts to be financially inaccessible to low-income households, and that these districts offer greater educational opportunity because they have higher per-pupil funding, on average, than districts that have more low-income rental housing. Court rulings have made it difficult to use legal means to require that states provide low-income students equitable access to high-quality schools regardless of where a child lives, and inequality persists. Thus, educational advocates are seeking other solutions to persistent inequality, including through housing desegregation efforts.

One challenge of addressing inequality is that it is not solely a function of education policy but is affected by other social policies, especially those related to housing. Housing patterns, including segregation based on race, result from a patchwork of federal, state and/or local policies, as well as realtor and landlord actions. The report is helpful in that it approaches the question of educational inequality with an integrated policy lens that includes housing.

Yet, as noted below, the report suffers from significant shortcomings that limit its ability to inform social policy.

## **II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report**

The report begins by illustrating that higher percentages of low-income households in comparison to middle- or higher-income households live in rental units. This, along with the fact that most students go to schools within their district's boundaries, is the context for the report's investigation of the availability of rental housing units affordable for a family at or below the federal poverty line. To do so, the report constructs an affordability index to categorize districts based on the relative percentage of low-income rental housing, which is defined as rental units under \$1,000. Of the 5,743 districts,<sup>3</sup> it deems 1,400 districts "inaccessible" to low-income families because of the relatively low percentage of low-cost rental units they contain. Conversely, it labels 1,545 districts "concentrated low-income housing" because they have a relatively high percentage of low-cost rental units. The report describes how certain characteristics of the population, students, and per-pupil spending are more advantaged, on average, in the "inaccessible" districts than those with "concentrated low-income housing." The report also concludes that inaccessible districts have greater average per-pupil spending.

The report then considers whether "inaccessible" districts are contiguous to "concentrated low-income housing" districts, and labels each such instance a "barrier border" between districts. The report finds 497 such barrier borders in the U.S. The final section of the report examines where the barrier borders occur. It finds that most of the states with the highest number of barrier borders are also states with the highest number of districts.

The report offers five implications for policymakers: 1) change how schools are funded; 2) redraw district boundary lines; 3) allow for choice across boundary lines; 4) disperse the supply of low-income rental units; and 5) subsidize housing costs.

## **III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions**

The report's findings hinge, in large part, on the "affordability index" that it calculates. The index, discussed in greater detail below, attempts to measure the extent to which there are affordable rental units in particular school districts for low-income families. The report calculates the percentage of such rental units compared to all rental units in a school district and compared to the poverty rate for the metropolitan area in which the district sits.<sup>4</sup>

Once the affordability index has been calculated, the report compares the values of the affordability index for every set of adjoining districts in the largest 200 metropolitan areas. If neighboring districts have values for the affordability index in the lowest and highest categories, the report designates the school district border between them as a "barrier border"—meaning that a school district border divides a district determined to be inaccessible

to low-income households from one with a concentration of low-income rental units.

The report concludes that districts that are considered to be the most inaccessible provide greater educational opportunity because per-pupil funding is higher compared to districts with concentrations of low-income housing.

#### **IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature**

The report omits significant and existing research at the intersection of educational equality and housing. In particular, it completely ignores research and associated policy recommendations that highlight the role of race and racism at the intersection of educational opportunity and access to housing. Indeed, the report cites only two studies, despite existing research examining the segregating effects of district boundaries and how housing and education policy intersect to create inequality.

Specifically, peer-reviewed research has found high racial segregation and inequality across district boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Recent think tank reports supplemented these findings by identifying both segregating boundaries (within and between districts)<sup>6</sup> and also funding disparities for majority White districts compared to those serving more students of color.<sup>7</sup> In their 2018 book, Holme & Finnigan analyzed how the combination of housing and educational policies led to inequitable distribution of opportunity across district boundaries to demonstrate inequity within metropolitan areas.<sup>8</sup> They showed, for instance, that the combination of policies made more high-opportunity districts less accessible to students of color.<sup>9</sup> Had the report focused on the role of race and racism in limiting access to opportunity—a key omission—it would have been useful to include research about the effects of race beyond income alone. For example, analyses illustrate that even affluent Black households are quite segregated from affluent White households.<sup>10</sup> More recent research has indicated the widening racial wealth gap for households with school-aged children.<sup>11</sup> These studies contribute important context to illustrate how race adds an additional layer of inequality for low-income households in accessing schools in higher-funded districts.

More generally, the report omits important evidence about the relationship of housing and educational opportunity. For example, equity analyses of opportunity for all students have illustrated opportunity gaps linked to property wealth in districts.<sup>12</sup>

Further, the report's discussion of how communities within counties have created new boundaries ignores emerging research about secession, a process by which smaller communities leave larger, typically more heterogeneous districts to form municipal districts.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the report overlooks research showing that metropolitan areas with a proliferation of district boundaries that already exist have higher levels of segregation, which is related to the report's discussion about where higher numbers of barrier borders exist.<sup>14</sup> This research would have provided useful context for the report's finding about barrier borders, including consideration of processes that may explain how they have developed.

Finally, research exists about possible policy implications, such as regional educational eq-

uity approaches or policies that address fair housing and educational opportunity jointly, although the report did not cite any.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, other work has found that some of the report's suggestions may not be as effective as hoped. For example, research finds that cross-district choice can further inequality, if not properly designed.<sup>16</sup>

## V. Review of the Report's Methods

A primary limitation of the report is the lack of detail describing the research methods chosen and the assumptions that guided those choices. Without understanding the assumptions, readers cannot adequately judge the validity of the conclusions in the report about the accessibility of districts for low-income residents and how that varies within and across metropolitan areas.

### Race

The report's inattention to race carries over to its methodology. For example, Table 2 (which describes the affordability categories for communities) includes categories such as income and poverty rate, but it does not include racial composition or student enrollment.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Figure 3 compares amounts of local revenue raised in districts with concentrated low-income housing and those with inaccessible housing. Although Figure 3 tracks closely with EdBuild's 2019 analysis that found vast differences in the funding for majority White and majority nonwhite districts, it ignores race.<sup>18</sup>

### Affordability Index

The report's study design decisions related to the affordability index, a metric central to the report's conclusions, weaken the overall analysis in a number of ways. First, the report ignores pre-existing and accepted methods used to determine rental affordability. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has typically determined that a household should spend only 30% of its income on housing, with percentages above that deemed to be unnecessarily burdensome.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is unclear why the report set the rental price at \$1,000 (50% of income) rather than \$600, which would be 30% of the income for a family of four at the federal poverty level. This \$1,000 rental price threshold also doesn't reflect differential cost of living.<sup>20</sup> Had the report used either of the HUD-aligned estimates of rental price, it probably would have estimated fewer affordable rental units, and more inaccessible districts.

Second, the report defines a school district's "affordability" as the percentage of rental units that are \$1,000 or less among all housing units matches the metropolitan area's share of households at or below the poverty line. This measure usefully compares each relative to the metropolitan area, but it considers only the percentage of affordable rental units and not their absolute number. Yet, according to Figure 1 in the report, more than 40% of low-income households do not rent their home. Comparing percentages might obscure the extent

to which the district is affordable. If the *number* of affordable rental units does not meet demand in places where the housing market is tight, or the population growing, that may not make a district affordable even if the *percentage* of rental units is relatively high.

Third, particularly in non-central city districts, other policies such as the extent to which the district is served by public transportation or density (e.g., ability to walk to locations) may play an important role in whether it is accessible to low-income families. In other words, there are costs of living in locations aside from rental costs that may make units affordable to a family in poverty.

Finally, in addition to the questions about the *measure*, it is also unclear how the categories of the affordability index were constructed. For example, there was no discussion about what the variability of the index was, and whether the report's conclusions are sensitive to the specification of the categories. Without this explanation, readers cannot assess the validity of the cut-points chosen to distinguish between categories.

### **Other Methodological Shortcomings**

More clarity in reporting and displaying findings from the barrier borders would be useful. Figure 5, for example, has dots to demonstrate where barrier borders exist, but this is not precise enough given the often high fragmentation within these metropolitan areas.<sup>21</sup> Figure 5 also purports to demonstrate which states have more or fewer “barrier borders,” but given the wide variation in number of districts and students in each state, an analysis that relied on the *percentage* of districts, or ideally students in such districts, would be more informative.<sup>22</sup> The relative share of districts can be inferred from Figure 8, but designating California as one of the red states—a state with among the highest number of barrier borders—is much different from putting Connecticut, with a much smaller number of students and districts, in that same category.

The report implicitly assumes that districts that have more per-pupil funding are those providing greater educational opportunity for students. More broadly, reporting per-pupil funding averages ignores variation within the report's categorization of districts as well as variation in costs between districts. For example, compared to more dense districts, less dense districts may have higher transportation costs, or have to pay teachers more in order to attract teachers of similar quality and experience.

Finally, the report noted that some states, such as Florida and Maryland, have relatively few districts, which are largely or entirely countywide: “[I]n these states, more families will have a better chance to find housing options that fit their budget in the school district of their choice.”<sup>23</sup> This assumption overlooks that many districts have more than one school at a given grade level, which means boundaries *within* districts govern student assignment. These boundaries are permeable in some districts, but in most districts, there are significant arbiters of ability to access schools that provide more educational opportunities. It is inaccurate to presuming equitable access within districts.<sup>24</sup>

## **VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions**

Several significant omissions undermine the report's findings and conclusions. Most significant is the failure to consider the effects of race. What makes the report's lack of attention to race all the more surprising is that the dataset available on the report's webpage *does* include the percentage of nonwhite students by district.<sup>25</sup> Using that dataset, it is possible to calculate, for example, that there is a much bigger difference across barrier borders in the percentages of students of color (nearly 27 percentage points) than of students in poverty (10 percentage points). Including this information about race would illustrate how students of color are even less able than White students to access the districts deemed "inaccessible"—and their higher average funding.

The report's policy recommendations do not take into account how nonwhite and low-income families can be disadvantaged. For example, the report recommends policies that would expand school choice. However, expanding choice might exacerbate inequality by providing opportunity only to relatively more advantaged (i.e., White, higher-income) families to leave lower-funded districts. To provide mobility to nonwhite and low-income families, policies that expand school choice would need to be carefully designed to provide information to all and free transportation. Moreover, affluent districts, which have higher percentages of White residents and students, typically are quite resistant to efforts to increase housing for low-income residents in their communities.

Additionally, although the report references the ways in which advantaged, typically disproportionately White communities have seceded from larger districts and constructed barrier borders, it does not fully address limiting secession in its recommendations.<sup>26</sup> And finally, the report omits consideration of how zoning within districts also limits access to schools perceived as offering greater educational opportunities.

## **VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice**

The report is useful in its consideration of the relationship between housing and educational opportunity. However, it overestimates affordability and fails to consider race and racism, which is central to understanding a racialized lack of affordability. Further, the report's failure to consider prior research, its lack of clarity about its methodology, and its overlooking of boundaries that exist within districts make it unlikely to have fully identified the barriers to high-quality schools. Finally, the report's recommendation to increase school choice would exacerbate inequalities unless such policy is carefully designed to address racial and economic equity. For these reasons, the report is significantly limited in its ability to provide actionable guidance about how to increase accessibility to educational opportunity.

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This research, like other research about funding and equity, typically applies weights to school funding, ac-

knowledging that districts have varied factors like costs of living, student need, and district characteristics that require adjustments in order to best compare educational opportunity to students.

See, for example, Baker, B. (2018). *Educational inequality and school finance: Why money matters for America's students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

- 13 This is true generally, as well as specifically the metros they focus on (Birmingham and Memphis). In these specific metros, research finds rising segregation including the creation of affluent, largely White districts.  
  
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- 20 When examining the technical details of the report, cost of living is an indicator that is part of the data package merged to use for the analysis.
- 21 Fragmentation is the number of jurisdictions, in this case school districts, within a metropolitan area. Higher fragmentation means that there are more borders between districts. Moreover, research has found that there is higher segregation in metropolitan areas with higher fragmentation.

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22 The online dataset does summarize this by percentage for each state.

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