

Understanding Suburban School Segregation: Toward a Renewed Civil Rights Agenda

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Executive Summary

For at least the last fifty years, incentivized by government policy, the suburbs and their schools have rapidly expanded. In the largest U.S. metropolitan areas, suburban school districts enroll 14.4 million students, far more than the 6 million students enrolled in the same metros' urban districts. In fact, students enrolled in the suburban school districts surrounding the 25 largest metropolitan areas represent roughly 30% of the nation's entire public school enrollment.

Suburban growth has occurred alongside the creation of a segregated, metropolitan society through policy, law and practice. Discriminatory loan practices, federal highway construction, site selection for subsidized housing and exclusionary zoning are examples of how racial discrimination permeated to origins suburban society. State and federal governments are dominated politically by those representing suburban constituents too often eager to maintain an exclusionary status quo. Social policy routinely has ignored the metropolitan and, increasingly, suburban nature of segregation. Yet the fragmented nature of U.S. metros makes it impossible for suburban communities to “go it alone” in solving racial and economic isolation. Most suburbs can do nothing as forces large and small impact population flows. Opportunities exist in those changing flows—including stronger relationships across racial and economic lines and with them an emerging, multiracial urban and suburban coalition around addressing inequality. But those possibilities often are undermined by the current paradigm of racial politics, regional fragmentation and misguided law and policy.

As shifting populations change suburban school enrollment, education policy trends formerly confined to urban districts have spread to suburban ones. Many suburban school districts have experienced growth in the charter school sector, as well as a rash of school closures. Suburban schools and districts reflect broader societal problems, paradigms, and possibilities. Yet, if our society is to advance equitable opportunity for all, children learning together in suburban schools must be part of the solution. In order to think clearly about what a renewed civil rights agenda entails given our complex and multiracial geography of inequality, we must understand the extent to which suburban school districts are segregated—and why. We also need to think deeply about policy responses to advance integration with equitable status for all children.

In this paper, we draw on federal enrollment data from the nation’s largest 25 metros from 2011-2020 to descriptively analyze suburban school enrollment and segregation at the school district-level, seeking to understand different district contexts and their relationship to student segregation. The emphasis on districts helps us better understand potential levels for policy levers to remedy segregation.

Key findings include:

- 30% of the entire public school enrollment in US is in the largest 25 suburban areas. This percentage also includes a loss of 850,000 white students, which is more than offset by increase of nearly 1 million new Latinx suburban students.
- Substantial suburban racial transition continues in public schools the suburbs of major U.S. metros. White students remain the largest group of suburban students but have declined considerably, from 48% to 40% of the enrollment. Latinx students are the next largest suburban group, making up about a third of the enrollment, while the Black enrollment share declined to about 15%. Asian students are approximately 8% and multiracial students represent 4.5%.

- Though all regions experienced a decline in the number and percentage of White suburban students, the suburban areas in the Midwest and Northeast reported the highest percentages of White students. On average, suburban schools saw a decline in White enrollment of 7.5 percentage points.
- Conversely, the suburban enrollment of Latinx students rose considerably over the last decade. Latinx enrollment in the suburbs is the largest in the West (45%). But in every region, Latinx increases were substantial in suburban areas, with a lower percentage increase in the West than other regions. Five of the top 25 metros report that Latinx students make up majorities of the suburban enrollment.
- Meanwhile, Black student suburban enrollment held relatively steady across most of the 25 largest metros and was largest in Atlanta. Regionally, the suburbs of large Border and southern metros reported an increase in Black students.
- Suburban charter segregation is intensifying. Roughly 27% of suburban charters in 2019 were 90-100% Black and Latinx; nearly two in three were newly opened in the past decade.
- Close to half (43.5%) of new schools opened in the suburbs of the top 25 metros were charter schools. These new charter schools served disproportionately high shares of students of color—reporting enrollments, on average, that were 44% Latinx and 26% white.
- Traditional public schools that opened and closed in the suburbs of the top 25 metros had a lower share of White students than schools open in both years studied, suggesting that students of color experienced more flux than White students.
- At the district level, student enrollment in 90-100% Black/Latinx districts doubled, a sea change from a decade ago when more students were enrolled in 90-100% White districts

than in 90-100% Black/Latinx ones. The percentage of Latinx suburban students in these districts was the highest of any racial/ethnic group (22.1%) and the percentage of both Black and Latinx students enrolled in these districts rose substantially over the past decade.

- White student segregation declined even as Black and Latinx student segregation rose sharply. In 2019-20, 7.4% of suburban districts were 90-100% White, a decline from 17.7% in 2010-11. The share of 90-100% Black and Latinx suburban districts rose to 10% of districts in the suburbs of our largest metros.
 - This segregation was less substantial in metros with fewer suburban districts.
- The typical Black and Latinx student in the suburbs enrolled in a district that was just over 25% White. White student exposure to other White students remains very high at 57%. Asian students, historically the most integrated with White students, experienced rising isolation with same race peers over the past decade. In fact, Asian isolation with other Asian students increased more sharply than isolation for any other racial/ethnic group.
- Racial segregation by race overlaps with resegregation by class in suburbia. The typical White or Asian student goes to a suburban school where just over 30% of students qualify for subsidized lunches. That figure doubles to 60% for the typical Black or Latinx student.

Broadly speaking, we find evidence of continued racial transition in America's suburban school districts, accompanied by declining segregation for White suburban students. Meanwhile, segregation for suburban Black and Latinx students rose sharply. The past decade also witnessed a proliferation of segregated suburban charter schools and school closures and openings that disproportionately impacted Black and Latinx students. As the families of Black and Latinx students

have moved into the suburbs, they are increasingly enrolling in school communities that resemble the older pattern of racially and economically isolated urban cores (segments of which, at least in places with an active housing market, are now gentrifying). Our findings underscore the increasingly suburban and stratified nature of our society's schools.

We need an ambitious policy agenda to combat suburban school segregation. Such an agenda would replace market-driven complacency that has yielded profitable suburban and exurban development without attention to the expanding geographic scale of segregation. A lack of regional oversight and development fuels and exacerbates the issue. Households continue to move, developers continue to develop, and racial attitudes continue to shift meaning current patterns are not inevitable or set in stone.

An overarching recommendation, supported by our analysis and review of the literature on suburbia, is to move beyond simplistic urban/suburban/exurban dichotomies and to instead think in highly regional ways. The geographic footprint of metropolitan segregation is growing larger as the patchwork of higher and lower opportunity communities spread within and across suburbia. A lack of consensus around what constitutes suburbia flows from those rapid population shifts and the still widespread "Leave it to Beaver" suburban mythology.

We offer a detailed set of policy recommendations that highlight the importance of recognizing nuance, confronting history together, tackling segregation and stigma and working within suburban school districts and across districts and sectors to combat segregation. These solutions build from difficult-to-measure but important community education and organizing efforts to create political support up to concrete policy proposals for tackling suburban segregation within and across districts and sectors.