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Recommended Citation

Dougherty, Jack. "Bridging the Gap between Urban, Suburban, And Educational History." In *Rethinking the History of American Education*, edited by William Reese and John Rury, 245-259. New York: Palgrave MacMillan Press, 2007. Available from the Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, Connecticut (<http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu>)

Rethinking the History of American Education, edited by William J. Reese and John L. Rury. Palgrave MacMillan, forthcoming December 2007.

CHAPTER 10



BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN URBAN, SUBURBAN, AND EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

Jack Dougherty

As educational history and urban history have developed in recent decades, a significant gap has opened up between them. On one side, educational historians have focused on the rise and fall of big-city school districts. On the other side, urban historians have documented how governmental housing, tax, and transportation policies fueled the postwar decline of cities and expansion of outlying suburbs. But these two fields have failed to connect with one another. In general, educational historians have not yet connected the decline of urban schools with the growth of the suburbs, and the broader political and economic shifts in the metropolitan context. Likewise, urban historians have rarely discussed what role schools played in the transformation of cities and suburbs. This chapter seeks to bridge the historiographical gap between urban, suburban, and educational history by demonstrating how these works can inform one another. It highlights major books that have served as the foundations in each field over the past few decades, as well as the rising body of new scholarship that attempts to span the distance between them.

THE RISE AND FALL OF URBAN SCHOOLS

American educational history was irrevocably altered when Bernard Bailyn delivered a wakeup call to the intellectually dormant subfield in 1960, challenging its practitioners to shed their parochial views of history. His most notable target was the late Ellwood Cubberley, whose portrayal of nineteenth-century reform emphasized “great battles” for tax-supported schools and statewide control. In Cubberley’s account, the forces of good (meaning the “public men of large vision”) inevitably triumphed over the forces of bigotry and ignorance (such as “narrow-minded” politicians and the “old aristocratic class”). Bailyn charged that Cubberley and his contemporaries were so consumed by the reform struggles of their own generation that they wrote myopic histories, rendering the past as “simply the present writ small.”¹

Within the next decade, a new generation of educational historians answered Bailyn’s call. Between 1971 and 1974, Marvin Lazer-son, Michael Katz, Carl Kaestle, Stanley Schultz, and Diane Ravitch published a collection of fresh interpretations on the rise of urban school systems in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Massachusetts and New York.² To be sure, this group had fierce internal divisions: the “radical revisionists” and their critics sharply disagreed on the extent to which economic determinism, social control, and human agency shaped history, and they criticized one another’s interpretations and policy conclusions. But what unified this 1970s generation of scholars was their common vision that urban education systems arose as a confrontation between two cultures: the elite leaders who established institutions and the marginalized masses who they hoped would attend them.³ Public schooling was a “battleground where the aspirations of the newcomers and the fears of the native population met and clashed,” wrote Ravitch, while Kaestle described public schooling as “an institutional response to the threat of social fragmentation” due to population growth, poverty, and immigration prevalent in Northeastern cities.⁴ Collectively, they replaced Cubberley’s benign account with a deeper interpretation of social conflict as the driving force behind the evolution of urban schooling. In doing so, these scholars created what observers now refer to as “a ‘golden age’ in the historiography of city schools.”⁵

The most enduring example from this golden age is David Tyack’s *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*.⁶ His

book stretched far beyond New York and Boston, synthesizing case studies from across the nation into the single most comprehensive interpretation of the growth of city school systems to date. According to Tyack, elite leaders acted under the pressure of urban and industrial change to transform nineteenth-century rural village schools into twentieth-century big-city school districts, marked by greater uniformity, centralized governance, and administrative expertise. His insightful portrayal of working-class students, families, teachers, and reformers emphasized their roles as real people who took actions “inside the system,” rather than passive pawns who were acted upon.

Tyack set the interpretive standard for the “post-revisionist” historical scholarship on urban education that followed, reconciling oppositional tensions from the 1970s literature. Post-revisionists generally viewed the politics of urban school reform as a “contested terrain” between administrative progressives, working-class immigrants, and racial minorities. All three groups actively supported certain reform movements, and many families sought to enroll their children in urban school systems. Although proponents of social efficiency and centralization tended to dominate debates, other forces actively proposed alternative agendas and occasionally prevailed. For example, Julia Wrigley’s history of Chicago education reform identified not only business elites, but also how working-class labor leaders called for an expansion of urban schooling in ways that fit their social and economic interests. Similarly, William Reese’s four-city study of Progressive era school reform emphasized the role of middle-class civic reformers who contributed to the “contested terrain” through their political struggles against administrative centralizers.⁷

While the *One Best System* stands as the classic work on the historical shift from rural to urban school systems, it scarcely mentioned another profound spatial change: suburbanization. Although Tyack brilliantly wove together several themes, he overlooked what one retrospective reviewer noted as an important one: “the territorial redistribution of the American population from cities to suburbs.”⁸ At the center of Tyack’s narrative in 1910, the majority of the nation’s population resided in rural areas and cities; only 7 percent lived in suburban areas. By the end of Tyack’s epilogue in 1970, that number had reached 38 percent, meaning that a plurality of Americans lived in suburbs compared to other places. By the year 2000, the suburban population climbed to 50 percent.⁹ During the same

time, the urban economy also began to experience deindustrialization, beginning at the first half of the twentieth century. Manufacturers began to relocate outside of older industrial urban centers, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest, and accelerated their departure in later decades.¹⁰

Several historical essayists have argued that these structural changes in the metropolitan political economy have fundamentally altered the shape of public education over the twentieth century. According to Harvey Kantor, Barbara Brenzel, and Robert Lowe, as race and class divisions in the urban geography became sharper and more distinct over time, school systems could not adapt to Black and Latino demands for inclusion in the postwar era as easily as they had addressed White ethnic demands in the pre-war era.¹¹ Similarly, in John Rury and Jeffrey Mirel's historical overview of research traditions in the political economy of urban education, they distinguish between two major schools of thought on this twentieth-century transformation. On one hand, scholars who identify with the functionalist ecological model hold that metropolitan spatial differentiation is a natural outcome of the interaction between physical space and social inequality. On the other hand, the "new urban sociologists" insert politics into this equation, asserting that historical change is due to power conflicts between social groups whose interests are tied to specific geographical locations. While the latter model is more appealing to historians, only a handful of scholars have applied it to educational research, with only a very thin layer of supporting evidence.¹²

While many educational historians agree on the importance of twentieth-century metropolitan spatial change, it has been more difficult to illustrate this dynamic in action. For example, Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir's *Schooling for All* boldly claims that "the possibilities of genuinely common, cross-class, cross-ethnic schooling eroded" when metropolitan areas grew during the twentieth century, because work and residence became more spatially separated, and upper and lower social classes lived further apart from one another. Previously, they assert, most children lived in the same urban school district, where struggles over governance, resources, and curriculum took place in one local political forum. When suburbanization divided the population into isolated school districts, this local forum evaporated. As a result, when increasing numbers of working- and middle-class Americans in the postwar era became able

“to purchase particular kinds of public schools by purchasing specific kinds of residence areas protected by defensive zoning,” Katznelson and Weir claim, “housing and schooling markets have displaced educational politics as key forums of decision making.”¹³ Although their argument is compelling, their case study of Chicago and San Francisco provided no direct evidence in support of this thesis about private real estate markets and public school politics. Furthermore, its nostalgic view of the early twentieth century overlooks fierce neighborhood divisions inside cities, and rural-urban conflicts over school funding in state legislatures.

Another attempt to incorporate a spatial analysis of the political economy into twentieth-century educational history is Jeffrey Mirel’s study of the rise and decline of the Detroit schools. He points out that postwar suburbanization was “both a blessing and a curse” for the Motor City, as demand for cars increased, but Detroit’s property tax base fell as middle-class families and factories moved out of the city during the 1950s and 1960s. Increasing numbers of black working-class families arrived in the city at the same time that its public school system had fewer resources to meet their needs. Furthermore, Mirel connects the fate of Detroit’s schools to Michigan politics, where for most of the twentieth century, a rural-dominated state legislature frustrated urban attempts to secure additional educational funding. Eventually, after the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1962 *Baker v. Carr* decision mandated proportional representation in the Michigan state legislature, Detroit lost seats to the booming suburbs, which tended to align into a rural-suburban block against urban interests on school finance issues.¹⁴

While Mirel’s spatial analysis enriches our understanding of metropolitan schooling, his narrative stays focused on the rise and decline of the big-city system. The corollary rise of the suburban public schools and housing markets—and the wide socioeconomic variations among them—remains hidden in the shadowy background. From the “golden age” of urban educational history to the present, the geographical scope of our scholarship has primarily been confined to case studies of cities, and has not kept pace with the nation’s suburban migration. In this respect, the current state of educational history is similar to the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in the 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* metropolitan school desegregation case: both stop at the city line.

URBAN DECLINE AND SUBURBAN GROWTH

Read together, the two most influential works on twentieth-century urban history tell a story of the decline of American cities and the rise of the suburbs. The first book, Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto*, took up the story of Chicago's housing struggles between 1940 and 1960, decades after the creation of the original African American ghettos during the Great Migration. In Hirsch's analysis, the second ghetto was formed by two factions: working-class white ethnics who violently defended their homes in racially transitional neighborhoods, and the more powerful white business elites who legally and politically manipulated Chicago's public housing and urban redevelopment agencies to relocate blacks in ways that served downtown real estate interests. "Out of the chaos emerged the second ghetto," Hirsch wrote, "an entity now distinguished by government support and sanction."¹⁵ Two decades later, historians have remarked that Hirsch's book "changed the debate" over Northern housing discrimination by demonstrating that racial change was not caused by benign market forces, but rather by intentional public policy decisions.¹⁶

The second influential book, Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, revealed an urban historian's analysis of the development of the nation's suburbs, with many similarities to Hirsch. Jackson argued that postwar mass suburbanization was caused by the cultural pursuit of the "American Dream" single-family home and the racial politics of white flight, but also by governmental policies to lower housing costs (such as federally-subsidized single-family home mortgages and interstate highway construction).¹⁷ Once again, suburbia did not occur simply due to "natural" market forces, but was the intended result of public policy decisions. Jackson's book inspired a new generation of urban historians to make sense of suburbs, sparking the creation of what proponents have labeled "the new suburban history" to adapt his interpretation to a wider variety of settings, including African American and working-class suburbs.¹⁸ Scholars like Amanda Seligman have commented on the intimate connections between Hirsch's and Jackson's accounts of urban decline and suburban growth, noting that governmental actions financed African American containment in one sector and white expansion in another. She and others have called for redefining the fields of urban and

suburban history into a consolidated “metropolitan history,” to more clearly signify the intellectual linkage between them.¹⁹

Perhaps the most widely recognized exemplar in this new field is Robert Self’s *American Babylon*, which creatively ties the decline of Oakland, California to the growth of East Bay suburbs during the postwar era. Self argues that the black power struggle and the Proposition 13 tax revolt are actually two halves of the same urban-suburban story. While the Black Panthers demanded governmental policies to benefit the impoverished residents of Oakland, conservative suburbanites responded by passing property tax caps that sharply curtailed their fiscal responsibilities to state and local governments. By explicitly linking urban and suburban narratives on a wide range of topics, including housing, labor, public services, and civil rights, Self brings these two fields much closer together.²⁰

But in Self’s otherwise comprehensive account of metropolitan history, what is especially striking is the virtual absence of any discussion of schools. According to one reviewer, *American Babylon* mentions public education only once, when quoting a white East Oakland resident who refused to send her children to a school with “too many colored” students.²¹ Looking back on the classics in urban and suburban history, perhaps this absence should not surprise us. Hirsch’s *Making the Second Ghetto* barely mentions schooling at all, and in Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier*, it appears in only a few paragraphs, isolated from the central narrative of the book.²² The gap between these different fields of history—on both sides—is remarkable. Whereas educational historians tend to stop at the city line, urban and suburban historians appear to have stopped at the school-house door.

EXPLAINING THE GAP BETWEEN CITIES, SUBURBS, AND SCHOOLS

Why does this divide exist between educational history and urban-suburban history? One reason may be because the conventional interpretations from each field do not neatly fit alongside one another. For example, in Kenneth Jackson’s thesis on why mass suburbanization happened, he claims that there were “two necessary conditions . . . the suburban ideal and population growth—and two fundamental causes—racial prejudice and cheap housing.” Expanding

on the racial prejudice theme, Jackson briefly discusses the role of schooling. In the wake of the 1954 *Brown* school desegregation case, he claims that “millions of families moved out of the city ‘for the kids’ and especially for the educational and social superiority of smaller and more homogenous suburban school systems.”²³

Indeed, white flight to suburban schools did occur, but not according to the compressed chronology that Jackson offers here. During the late 1940s and 1950s, schooling had not yet become a primary motivation for suburban migration. Based on David Tyack’s *The One Best System*, we know that most urban districts were still recognized as the nation’s prized exemplars of public education in this era, with physical facilities and services that typically surpassed what less-densely populated areas could offer. Furthermore, according to Herbert Gans’ sociological study of the Levittown, New Jersey suburban development, which opened in a sparsely settled agricultural area near Philadelphia in 1958, less than 1 percent of residents cited schooling as a reason for leaving their previous residence or selecting this new community. Yet these families cared a great deal about the quality of public education. Gans devoted an entire chapter to the intense conflicts he observed between Levittown’s rural school superintendent (who provided a traditional, basic education) versus the newly arrived middle-class suburbanites (who demanded a more challenging and expensive curriculum to prepare their children for prestigious colleges and universities).²⁴

Schooling does not fit neatly into Jackson’s suburbanization thesis because its role reverses during the late twentieth century. Although typical suburban schools did not attract families during the 1940s and 1950s, they eventually became an extremely strong magnet in the 1970s and 1980s. During this later period, more families left cities expressly to enroll their children in suburban schools, despite the fact that suburban housing costs were no longer as affordable as they had been a few decades earlier. Suburban schools flipped—from a negligible factor to an extremely influential motivator—halfway through the great white migration of the late twentieth century. In addition, school finance battles became more contentious in many state legislatures and courts as dollar costs for increasingly competitive schools rose sharply, and districts were torn between offering what newer residents demanded versus what older residents had settled for in their day. We need richer histories of cities, suburbs, and schooling to fully understand when, where, and

how these transformations—which could alter interpretations in both the educational and urban-suburban literature—occurred.

Bridging the gap also would help to reconcile some of the differences between case studies that fail to connect with one another. For example, consider two different prize-winning interpretations of postwar Detroit: one by an educational historian (Jeffrey Mirel's *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System*) and the other by an urban historian (Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis*).²⁵ On one hand, Mirel argues that a liberal-labor-black political coalition rose up to bolster Detroit schools in the 1950s and early 1960s, but its collapse in the later 1960s signaled the rapid decline of the district. On the other hand, Sugrue focuses on intense racial conflicts in housing and employment prior to the 1960s, thereby casting doubt on whether a liberal-labor-black coalition actually existed as described in Mirel's book. How do we deal with these seemingly incompatible interpretations? Is it possible that a cross-racial coalition was formed on some civil rights issues (like schooling) but not others (like housing and jobs)? This question remains unanswered. Neither of these books, published just three years apart, cites the other author's work, nor previous journal articles by him.²⁶ Furthermore, not a single historical journal has published a review that compares both Mirel's and Sugrue's interpretations. With enormous gaps like this between the literatures of educational history and urban-suburban history, both of our fields suffer.

EXEMPLARS FOR BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Within the past few years, a growing body of scholarship has begun to bridge the gap between cities, suburbs, and schools. Some works have been authored by educational historians, some by urban or suburban historians, and some by social scientists doing thoughtful historical research. The examples offered here are intended to recognize interesting work by a rising generation of scholars, and to inspire others about the range of possibilities.

One strand of new scholarship looks more closely at the connections between private real estate and public schools. Kevin Fox Gotham, in his insightful study of Kansas City, Missouri, explains why traditional factors (such as urban renewal, interstate highways, and migration patterns) fail to explain the shape of racial change

from the 1950s to the 1970s. Instead, he argues, one needs to understand the political economy of public education and housing. Gotham identifies how school administrators, real estate agents, and community activists struggled over “the unwritten law of the Troost line,” a racial boundary separating schools and neighborhoods on either side of a major avenue dividing the city.²⁷ In a related study, Amanda Seligman demonstrates the role that residential “block-busting” played in reshaping Chicago by altering racial housing patterns and neighborhood schools.²⁸ Real estate also involves the physical space upon which schools are located. Michael Clapper’s research analyzes the political decisions and cultural meanings behind the site selections and architecture of public and parochial schools in Philadelphia and its suburbs between 1945 and 1975. Using archives, oral histories, and computer mapping, it traces how the construction of public school buildings solidified inequalities across the metropolitan region.²⁹

A second strand of literature bridges the gap by emphasizing urban and suburban residents’ cultural ties to schools. For example, Gerald Gamm’s study of Boston neighborhoods investigates why the Jewish exodus to the suburbs occurred earlier and faster than in Catholic neighborhoods, reminding us that the generic phrase “white flight” does not capture important variations. His detailed community study of racial succession explains how Catholics identified more closely with neighborhood institutions—such as parochial schools and churches—which created a stronger sense of neighborhood stability amid racial transition.³⁰ Baxandall and Ewen’s rich portrait of Long Island, New York traces suburbanization from its all-white origins to its present-day racial diversity. Their book also connects heated political battles over public-private housing and racial segregation with changes in the fabric of suburban community life, particularly women whose life stories were framed in part by the newly constructed suburban schools their children attended.³¹ On a related theme, Claudia Keenan’s study of two different suburban communities in metropolitan New York City examines the cultural lives of women and men through their parent-teacher associations, and their role in defining suburban lifestyles that equated “good schools” with “the good life.”³²

A third strand of new scholarship moves outside of the stereotypical Northeast and Midwest to explore the range of city-suburban dynamics involving schools in the West and the South. In her study

of Compton, California, historian Emily Straus analyzes the external and internal factors that transformed the public schools of this comfortable Los Angeles suburb of the 1950s into an “urban crisis” by the 1980s. One factor, she argues, was the Compton’s residents “held onto the ideal of suburbia” as fiscal resources tightened around their community, eventually leading to a dual decline in school quality and property values.³³ Related themes also appear in portions of Becky Nicolaides’ history of the working-class Los Angeles suburb of South Gate, which shifted from a Depression-era democratic stronghold to a civil rights-era base of white conservatism. Nicolaides argues that South Gate’s residents’ primary concerns about homeownership and taxes were expressed most dramatically in the politics of race and education, both in the 1930s and the 1960s, with different results in each period.³⁴

In many southern states, school district boundaries were drawn at the county level, meaning that city-suburban tensions occurred within one large metropolitan area. In *Boom for Whom?* political scientist Stephen Smith explains how the white business elite supported school desegregation to promote economic development, more so than educational equity, in Charlotte-Mecklenberg, North Carolina.³⁵ Historian Ashley Erickson is writing a study of Nashville-Davidson County, Tennessee, which pays close attention to how real estate interests influenced desegregation planning, and its effects on school site locations and student curricula.³⁶ Kevin Kruse’s book on “white flight” in metropolitan Atlanta argues that school desegregation reshaped the urban-suburban Sun Belt as much as deindustrialization affected the Rust Belt.³⁷ Finally, Matthew Lassiter’s regional study of the metropolitan South explores the rise of a “color-blind” ideology as middle-class white suburbanites reacted against racial desegregation by defending what they viewed as their natural entitlement to neighborhood schools.³⁸

A fourth strand of new scholarship seeks to draw connections between cities, suburbs, and schools by focusing on historical changes in two closely related markets: education and housing. My own work on metropolitan Hartford, Connecticut investigates how middle-class Americans increasingly began to “shop around” for the best schools in postwar suburbia, thereby transforming public education into a commodity to be bought and sold through the private real estate market. I argue that “shopping for schools” became more widespread as accumulating educational credentials for one’s children

became a more reliable route toward socioeconomic mobility in the human capital labor market of the mid-twentieth century. Although governmental policy remains a key player, this study also presents evidence on the school-home market from both the sellers' and buyers' perspectives. During the postwar era, realtors increasingly featured selected suburban schools in advertisements and promotional materials, and homebuyers reported school quality as a greater motivation in purchasing decisions. Furthermore, local town officials became more heavily involved in both cooperation and conflicts with realtors, residents, and "outsiders" amid the changing relationship between schools and housing.³⁹ This scholarship draws on prior work by David Labaree, who traced the origins of an academic credentials market for elite public high schools back to the late nineteenth century, and also work by Lizabeth Cohen and others who have richly documented the mass consumer culture expansion of the postwar era.⁴⁰ It also seeks richer sources of evidence to test ideas originally raised in Katznelson and Weir's *Schooling for All*, about changes in metropolitan space and the politics of education.

CONCLUSION

Historical writing reflects a great deal about changes occurring during the context in which it was authored. In the 1970s, during the "golden age" of educational history, scholars sought to understand the role of education in nineteenth-century cities, and perhaps any insights they might offer regarding the urban school protests over their own generation. Similarly, in the 1980s, leading urban and suburban historians closely examined how governmental actions of the postwar era created the unequal social geography that had become more apparent in their own period. Today, scholars from both fields are beginning to make sense of how cities, suburbs, and schooling came together and influenced one another during the twentieth century, producing the results that are so evident to our own eyes.

Collectively, these strands can improve the quality of our scholarship by bringing educational history and urban-suburban history closer together, so that ideas and evidence from both fields may interact with one another. But this is not solely an academic matter. Better histories of cities, suburbs, and schooling also have the potential to contribute to broader public policy discussions on this controversial

and complex topic. Over four decades ago, James Bryant Conant published *Slums and Suburbs*, and broad audiences continue to read popular accounts on the same theme by Jonathan Kozol and other activists and journalists.⁴¹ Furthermore, school finance debates that pit the interests of different types of school districts against one another continue to grow across most of the nation's fifty states. The topic of cities, suburbs, and schooling clearly matters to the American public. Although history will not solve our contemporary policy dilemmas, it can give us a clearer sense of how we arrived at this point, and perhaps some ideas about our next steps.

NOTES

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4. Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, xiii; Kaestle, *Evolution of an Urban School System*, viii).
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41. James Bryant Conant, *Slums and Suburbs: A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1961); Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown, 1991).

