A New Lens on Educational Inequality

NORMANDY IS an inner-ring suburban school district in the St. Louis, Missouri metropolitan area, which is one of the most segregated and unequal metropolitan areas in the country. Normandy’s student body is 97 percent African American and 91 percent low income. It is one of the lowest performing districts in the state of Missouri, having only “provisional accreditation” status for over a decade. This status has meant that the district not only faces the challenges that come along with high levels of poverty in its student population, but it has also faced extra monitoring from the state.

Normandy gained national attention several years ago as the school district that Michael Brown graduated from shortly before his death at the hands of a police officer in nearby suburban Ferguson, Missouri, in August, 2014. The school district also featured prominently in the Peabody Award–winning 2015 radio episode of This American Life, reported by
Nikole Hannah-Jones and titled “The Problem We All Live With,”3 which chronicled the story of the district’s troubles.

While the Normandy district had struggled academically for more than a decade, it had been slowly making improvements until 2010, when it was forced by the state to absorb the 100 percent black and predominantly low income Wellston school district, which the state had dissolved due to low performance.4 Wellston had been the only all-black district in the state of Missouri at the time.5

After the forcible annexation of Wellston, achievement in Normandy subsequently declined and, in 2012, the state completely stripped Normandy of its accreditation, triggering a provision that was put into state law in 1993 that allows students in unaccredited districts to transfer to nearby districts. This meant that students in Normandy had the right to leave and attend any school district that the Normandy district selected. Normandy selected the affluent and mostly white Francis Howell district that was thirty miles away (some say in hopes of discouraging transfers); in spite of this distance, thousands of Normandy students took advantage of the transfer option, which had the unintended effect of increasing integration in some of the area’s predominantly white suburban districts. This was in many ways an ironic outcome in light of declining state and suburban support for the area’s long-standing metro-wide school integration program, run by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC), that had permitted students for years to transfer from St. Louis to mostly white suburban school systems.

The unaccreditation transfer policy was intended to be a punishment for districts that performed poorly, reducing their enrollment and ultimately their financial sustainability, under the assumption that such losses—or the threat of such losses—would spur improvement. Further, because in the eyes of the state Normandy was to blame for losing its accreditation, it had to pay for the cost of student transfers. As a result, Normandy was forced to pay upwards of $20,000 per pupil to the affluent suburban districts for every student who transferred out, as well as
additional transportation costs for these students. In the 2016 school year, one in four students transferred, costing the district $1.3 million per month and leading to teacher layoffs and school closures.\(^6\)

The transfer situation quickly became a political mess for the state of Missouri. Many parents in the suburbs were not happy with the transfers because it meant an influx of students of color and less affluent students into their community.\(^7\) At the same time, as Normandy educators were working furiously to meet the performance targets set for them by the state, the district was buckling under the cost of payments to the suburbs and quickly sliding towards bankruptcy.

In an effort to address the situation, in 2014, state lawmakers decided to dissolve the Normandy school district; they renamed it the Normandy Schools Collaborative and stipulated that it be run by a state-appointed board. The state also laid off all teachers and administrators and required those interested in returning to re-interview for their positions. The state then gave the district a status of “no accreditation.” While it seems like a minor shift in terminology, the switch from unaccredited to no accreditation had a big impact on the community, as it revoked the students’ rights to transfer out of Normandy. Parents sued in court, and a county judge ruled in their favor, allowing Normandy students to continue to transfer out and receive their education at suburban schools with the cost paid by the district.\(^8\)

Normandy's story is a dramatic illustration of the academic struggles that have afflicted segregated, high poverty school districts in the United States. The difficulties faced by the Normandy district also form the foundation for the main argument of this book: that districts like Normandy are embedded in a rigged system of structural relationships that set them up for “failure.” Normandy is in a disadvantaged position within what is presently a zero-sum regional competition for tax base, businesses, middle income households, and industry, a competition that perpetuates resource inequality and racial and economic segregation. This results in an unbalanced system in which affluent communities
continue to reap benefits, while communities with limited resources, like Normandy, struggle to stay afloat. The end result is that students like Michael Brown live, attend school, and work within environments that are stacked against them, and then are at risk of serious physical threat when they move into more affluent, white communities. Furthermore, educators, students, and parents within those communities are blamed for low school performance, while more affluent districts nearby cordon off their boundaries and rarely explicitly acknowledge or address the ways that they contribute to these inequities.

Our key argument in this book is that without addressing this system of relationships—particularly the competitive dynamics of the metropolitan environment in which school districts are located and the structural inequities upon which those dynamics have been built—Normandy and the low income students of color it serves will continue to struggle. Further, current educational policy approaches, like the unaccreditation transfer law in Missouri, largely take an acontextual perspective by failing to account for the diverse local conditions in which school districts operate vis-à-vis the broader structures of opportunity in the metropolitan economy. The punitive systems of accountability and market-based reforms that have been so prevalent in the last decades, in essence, blame school districts for their struggles, and in doing so, do little to address the underlying causes of poor performance. We argue that reforming failing urban districts like Normandy requires broader, bolder policy approaches that change the underlying framework and system of relationships in which school districts are operating.

THE PROBLEM: NORMANDY AND REGIONAL INEQUALITY

As we will demonstrate in this book, the problems facing low performing and high poverty school districts like Normandy can be traced to policies adopted by many states, beginning in the early twentieth century, that allowed the new, predominantly white suburbs popping up around urban core cities to incorporate themselves into separate and autono-
mous municipalities. These movements were often tied directly to racial segregation, and they were the result of the advocacy of white suburbanites to have local control and isolate themselves from the nearby central cities. These multiple governments then created a system of competition between local municipalities for residents, businesses, and tax bases. In this system, the more affluent municipalities have, over time, been able to use their state-granted powers to exclude low income housing and zone in higher income housing, through regulations such as prohibitions on multifamily housing, minimum lot size ordinances, etc. This leaves lower income municipalities with little power in this regional competition: highly segregated and with a low tax base, they have been forced to impose high tax rates to provide basic services, leaving them unable to lure businesses or middle income residents.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Normandy. The district encompasses twenty-four of the region’s ninety municipalities, yet the communities are all very small: the district serves just 3,100 students across those twenty-four cities. In the early twentieth century, the municipalities making up the school district were white working- to middle-class suburbs, and the student population itself was virtually all white. By the late twentieth century, however, some of the communities in the Normandy district transitioned to predominantly black after low income housing was demolished in nearby neighborhoods for “urban renewal” projects and to make room for local expressways. Realtor steering and blockbusting also played a part in the racial transition in many of these communities, which were then subjected to further lending and insurance discrimination. Each of these factors together fueled white flight out of the area to newer suburbs.

At the same time, new affordable housing that was built in the region was disproportionately constructed in low income communities like Normandy, exacerbating existing patterns of segregation and racial isolation. Patterns like these can be seen throughout the United States. Today, as illustrated in figures 1.1 and 1.2, the Normandy school district serves primarily low income students of color. And, according to
FIGURE 1.1
St. Louis Metro: Percent Black and Latinx residents in school districts by census tract

Note: The census data racial categories for this analysis were “Black or African American” and “Hispanic or Latino.” Throughout we shorten those to “Black” and “Latino,” respectively.
FIGURE 1.2
St. Louis Metro: Percent of individuals under 18 years old in poverty in school districts by census tract

American Community Survey data from the US Census, the per capita income of the residents in the Normandy district is extremely low, at $17,516 in 2014. Further, due to the flight of businesses and higher income residents out of the area, Normandy has one of the lowest tax bases among the districts in the St. Louis region. As a result, Normandy has had to tax itself at a very high rate—nearly double the tax rate of nearby affluent districts—and this rate yields relatively little local revenue (see table 1).

The high tax rate means that the community has a difficult time luring new businesses and non-poor residents, who have little incentive to locate in a community where they will be taxed at a high rate for very low level of services. To compensate for its low tax base, Normandy increased its court fees 407 percent between 2008 and 2013, an increase of revenue from $341,000 to $1.7 million dollars. This regressive system resulted in not only an increased burden on residents, given the low income levels and high poverty rates, but it also resulted in greater conflict between members of the community and law enforcement who were increasing the number of tickets and traffic stops to shore up local revenue.

In this fragmented system of government, more affluent and white families make calculated decisions to choose high income and predomi-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>St. Louis metro area school district tax rates and demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>% white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladue</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clayton</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parkway</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferguson-Florissant</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normandy</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Sources: Missouri Department of Education and St. Louis County, 2016
nantley white school systems, those with high tax bases and low tax rates (such as Clayton, Parkway, or Ladue, in table 1) and few social needs to provide for. By choosing affluent districts, therefore, families effectively wall themselves off into their own communities, hoarding resources, opportunity, and political power.21

This is what we mean when we say that the system is rigged against Normandy and districts like it. Because of this unbalanced system of relationships, no matter how brilliant or creative or committed the superintendent and other educators within districts like Normandy are, they cannot overcome these underlying structural and racial dynamics.22 This is true even if extra resources were provided each year to lower income schools, although in Missouri poor districts receive 17 percent less funding than affluent ones.23 The district is then further punished by educational policy approaches like the state’s accountability law, which contributes to the district’s woes rather than shoring it up.

In fact, educational policy has largely focused on technical reforms within the educational system—including governance, teacher training, choice, and standards—with limited results. While school finance equity would certainly be an important step forward in terms of addressing the differential needs of schools across segregated communities, it does not sufficiently reverse the decades of discriminatory policies and practices that have impacted other aspects of students’ (and their families’) lives in terms of housing, community services, health care, transit, job opportunities, etc. Without a better understanding of the broader housing, tax, and economic dynamics that we just described, educational policy continues to spin its wheels in trying to improve “failing” schools.

THE FOCUS: REWRITING THE RULES OF THE REGIONAL GAME

For districts like Normandy to break out of this cycle, the structures of segregation must be tackled, along with the underlying competitive relationships (between school districts, between cities, and between schools)
that drive these patterns. Headlines often focus on the symptoms of this crisis in urban areas—the concentration of poverty, cities struggling to reinvent themselves, violence—but what has not received sufficient attention are the historical trends and interconnected social and economic policies that have led us to this point in time. As Myron Orfield writes: “Central cities function within structural systems that operate across entire metropolitan areas, their housing and job markets, their transportation networks. Those structural systems must be altered before the spatial distribution of jobs, housing, and residents will shift.”

In this book we argue that educational policy must take a regional equity approach to tackle these issues. A regional policy approach that is focused on equity seeks to address the problems of inequality that we have described (poverty concentration, housing segregation, unequal school funding, and access to jobs and transit) by focusing on the low income communities that are negatively impacted by regional inequity while at the same time working to change the dynamics of the region as a whole.

As a 2006 report by the Conversation on Regional Equity concluded, regional equity involves broadening the lens to focus on entire regions and all aspects of children’s lives:

Achieving regional equity means considering both people and place. A competitive and inclusive region is one in which members of all racial, ethnic, and income groups have opportunities to live and work in all parts of the region, have access to living wage jobs, and are included in the mainstream of regional life. It is also one in which all neighborhoods are supported to be vibrant places with choices for affordable housing, good schools, access to open space, decent transit that connects people to jobs, and healthy and sustainable environments.

Regional equity thus broadens the lens from cities to entire regions, and calls attention to the way in which competitive dynamics between cities and suburbs contribute to what continues to be constructed as “urban” problems. As Fordham political science professor Paul Kantor
argues, “it is no longer fruitful to treat cities and other urban places as
special interests with special problems to successfully address urban
inequalities. The most critical forces now shaping urban America over-
whelmingly are found beyond it.”

Regional equity approaches vary in structure and scope: at their most
limited, they entail coordination between cities and suburbs on specific
regional problems; at their most powerful, they consist of a regional
governing body with policymaking powers over transit, taxation, land
use, and housing.

While regional equity has gained traction in scholarly and policy
debates in urban studies, education has been largely left out of these
conversations to date. Although education is a key part of the diagnosis
of the problem, advocates for regional equity have focused on munici-
pal governance reforms, transit, and the environment; schools have not
been a large part of the solutions that have been set forth within these
conversations. At the same time, within education policy and scholarly
conversations, the focus has frequently been on reforms within educa-
tion alone.

There is something missing, therefore, from both the regional equity
and educational reform conversations. The education policy debates over-
look the problem of regional inequality as a cause of poor educational
performance. The urban affairs narrative, on the other hand, largely
overlooks the role of education policy as a tool (individually or in com-
bination with these other policy tools) to address such trends. This book
argues for the need for a bridge between these two largely disparate, yet
interconnected, conversations.

In Striving in Common, we push the education policy world to con-
sider how problems of school failure are linked to larger inequities
across regions—not only in terms of segregation and inequities in school
funding, but in the underlying conditions and structures that limit eco-
nomic growth and maintain patterns of segregation. We also show how
educational policies (particularly school choice and accountability policies) can worsen these inequalities if the underlying disparities are not taken into account.

Our book crosses disciplinary boundaries, urging regional equity advocates to engage with educational policy scholars in deliberate and comprehensive ways and to understand how including education in regional equity initiatives can bolster efforts to promote equity, thus, for example, shoring up economic development and improving housing integration through targeted supports or investments in schools in the most challenging neighborhoods. This book, therefore, is a bridge between these two disparate, yet interconnected, conversations in education policy and in urban affairs.

The book’s title captures our main argument. The phrase derives from *competere*, the Late Latin root of *compete*, which means “to strive in common” (or, in classical Latin, “to come together, agree, to be qualified”). Our title is thus a play on the word *competition*—and it encapsulates our argument about the need to flip the educational system’s current competitive structure towards more collaborative, regional, and cross-sector arrangements. Central to the book is the idea that growing spatial inequality has fomented political polarization that has thwarted regional equity in education and other areas that are closely linked, such as housing, economic development, and public health. This mostly comes from inaction in these areas—in fact, as political science professors Marion Orr of Brown University and Valerie Johnson of DePaul University accurately point out, even “deciding not to decide is a decision.”

Despite a growing awareness of the problems facing urban communities, there is a lack of a broader framework or clear policy approach to address the underlying regional dynamics that drive segregation, concentrated poverty, and racial isolation. Broader approaches must include multiple school districts across a region, and integrate or align educational policy with housing, transit, economic development, and health.
Our own work in this area began with a focus on urban education and equity, but has evolved over time into a regional equity focus. This is a result of our collaborative work over the last seven years through a Ford Foundation–funded study of one type of regional education policy: interdistrict school integration programs. These programs, adopted from the 1960s through the 2000s, seek to address segregation between city and suburban schools by allowing students to transfer across the boundaries of districts, both to create more integrated learning environments and to provide students with access to greater resources, academic and social opportunities, and networks. Varying in size and structure from nearly 600 students in Rochester, New York (the oldest program); to more than 6,000 in Omaha, Nebraska (the newest); to nearly 19,000 in Hartford, Connecticut (the largest); they have involved tens of thousands of students. Our book draws on our interviews with individuals involved in these programs in eight communities: St. Louis, Missouri; Hartford; Minneapolis; East Palo Alto (and the surrounding region), California; Rochester; Boston, Massachusetts; Omaha; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. What we learned from these programs is that while they provide some important opportunities that almost no other educational policy provides—by addressing the problem of segregation across districts—they are woefully inadequate in addressing the underlying dynamics that created the segregation and inequity in the first place. From this work, we came to realize that there are severe limits to educational policy without a broader regional approach. Throughout this book, we include cases from this study as well as other selected cases that we have studied as part of this broader work.

POLITICS AND THE CHALLENGES OF MOVING FORWARD
The regional inequities that we point to in this book have, for the past several decades, received relatively little attention in the education policy world. One key reason for this lack of attention is that these arguments
were largely drowned out by a counter-narrative that held that calling attention to these issues was tantamount to letting schools off the hook—and that, in fact, schools can and should be able to “do it alone.” Another reason that these arguments received little traction is that they were often dismissed by skeptics who believed these issues were both unlikely to capture the public’s attention and were politically not feasible.

The political problems are, indeed, formidable. This is in part because growing spatial inequality has fomented the political polarization that has often thwarted efforts to address these issues, with resistance coming from all sides (communities of color, suburban elites). In this work, we therefore employ a “political geography” framework to explain both the causes and consequences of urban inequality. This framework draws attention to the ways in which both public policy and private actors have created racialized spaces over time, and in particular to the ways in which city and school district and neighborhood boundary lines have inscribed racial inequality into geographic space.

Legal theorist Richard Thompson Ford points out that political dynamics are self-perpetuating, even after the explicitly racist policies of the past are long gone; they are reproduced from generation to generation, as the higher incomes, home equity, educational opportunities, and social networks of the wealthier communities provide access to opportunities that families of color in poor communities do not have access to. These power dynamics and tensions set up a dichotomy of “us” versus “them,” and they most often advantage the affluent.

Political geography helps to drive localism, which is another political framework we employ in this work. Localism refers to the inclination on the part of communities to promote their own interests, through either legal or political channels. Localism is thus an important political issue, especially as it is considered from the perspective of white, suburban populations as compared with the perspective of communities of color within cities or inner-ring suburbs. On the one hand, localism helps us to
understand what is sometimes referred to as “opportunity hoarding” of elite suburban actors within a metropolitan system, as they consciously or unconsciously support policies and practices that benefit their own children. However, localism is also associated with community control, which is one of the reasons why communities of color are sometimes lukewarm on regionalism themselves: after decades of marginalization they do not want to give up their political voice. Movements supporting community control of schools—including community schools that may remain segregated—have strong roots in communities of color, and many of these communities fought difficult political battles to gain more power and authority over local schools and to raise appropriate levels of concern that their communities might again lose if they were to consider metro-wide equity policies.

Creating a regional table for discussion, therefore, doesn’t necessarily ensure that equity will be the focus, or that the families of color living in the city will have—or seek—a voice at this table and benefit from the approaches put forward. Localism therefore is critical to understanding two different perspectives: those of white suburbanites and those of leaders of color within cities as they consider approaches to ensure regional equity.

Two theories can help set a course around these thorny political dynamics and help us to think about ways to move forward: urban regimes and civic capacity. These theories, taken together, help illuminate how the capacity of a community to change lies in the ability of key actors to develop a shared focus on community problems and in the existence of a broad-based network of both elites and ordinary citizens involved in deliberation and action.

Urban regimes focus on who is making reforms in a city, so as to understand which reforms are pursued, which are successful, and why those are successful. While the theory came to prominence with Clarence Stone’s study of Atlanta in 1989, it has been used to understand how various interests are incorporated into coalitions not just at the city level
but also at the regional, subcity, and neighborhood levels. Rather than focusing on formal governmental actors, urban regime theory focuses on the coalitions built among governmental actors and others including business elites, community leaders, advocacy groups, citizens, etc. Just as one might consider the importance of building broad social and political coalitions across sectors within an urban community in pursuit of a common goal, so too must efforts toward regional equity consider these same strategies. Urban regimes are important to understand because they help to explain how and why metropolitan areas have worked toward regional reforms, developing a common vision around equity, in some instances and not others.

While urban regime theory is primarily focused on collaboration among actors and the resources they mobilize, at the root of any urban regime is the idea of power. Research suggests that it is important to examine not just the power elite but also the larger connections across individuals and agencies, the relationships among these members, and the resources they bring to bear on social problems, as this is what builds “civic capacity” in a community. Stone and his colleagues define civic capacity as the ability of communities to interject new ways of thinking to address problems and to bring together diverse interests from a broad segment of the community in order to solve problems collectively.

Linking back to our discussion of political geography above, these theories help us to understand how a community might alter the power structures aligned with these racialized spaces and develop collective efforts toward regional equity. In essence, the ability to engage a community’s civic capacity relies on a variety of institutions and individuals who contribute to a shared vision, participate in the change process, and plan to maintain the community over time. A closer look at the coalitions that do or do not exist in a metro area can help to explain what may be getting in the way of regional equity within education or other areas of urban policy, such as housing, transportation, health, or economic development. Such an analysis can also illuminate, in cases
where regional equity has been advanced, what the process was that led community members to pursue collective regional goals despite competing local interests.37

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In this chapter we have argued that there must be a stronger bridge between educational policy and the urban policy and planning worlds to allow for more closely aligned and integrated policy responses that focus on regional equity. In the chapters that follow, we further develop this argument using particular cases from our research to help illustrate these issues.

In chapter 2, we describe how the current context of inequality between school districts in metropolitan areas in the United States arose, illustrating how decades of discriminatory policy decisions at the local and state levels created deep inequities between urban school districts and their surrounding suburbs. The damaging effects of these policies—particularly the creation of intensely segregated and racially isolated neighborhoods—have been documented in a burgeoning literature on “neighborhood effects” in the past several years.38 In this chapter, drawing upon our study of Milwaukee, we also show how and why educational policymakers and pundits have, over time, downplayed the patterns of segregation and concentrated poverty as sources of educational problems, and have focused instead on “technical fixes” to improve the performance of racially isolated and high poverty (primarily urban) schools.

In chapter 3, we describe the interdistrict school integration programs that were the focus of our study. As we show, these policies were among the few developed explicitly to address the growing segregation and inequality between urban and suburban schools that had occurred over decades. Through our case studies of two interdistrict programs, in East Palo Alto, California, and Rochester, New York, we show how these programs resulted in gains for some students, yet we conclude ultimately that such programs were like small sandbags trying to hold back a wall of
water: they were ultimately unable to counteract the powerful economic and political tides that worked against them. We also show how these programs ultimately ended up being inequitable as a result of power dynamics, particularly in terms of the suburban power that constrained both the policy design and implementation, and localism on all sides.

In chapter 4, we switch gears and turn outside the education policy world for ideas. We examine the stories of places that sought to address the underlying system of relationships that create inequalities across regions through broad-based, regional solutions—places like the Twin Cities in Minnesota and Portland, Oregon. Yet we also illustrate how these solutions have missed their potential because they have largely left education off the table.

In chapter 5, we shift our focus to begin to develop our solution—a policy framework centered around regional equity in education. We begin with the story of Omaha’s multifaceted regional educational policy, which went far beyond most other interdistrict programs we studied by including both place-based approaches and mobility, tax sharing, and regional governance approaches. Building on Omaha, we lay out the core elements of what a regional approach to educational and broader social inequality might entail.

Although the politics of regional equity are discussed throughout the entire book, it is in this last chapter, chapter 6, that we focus directly on the steps that are necessary to confront political geography and localism, and to build civic capacity around regional equity. We return to the underlying political theories and discuss the ways that communities can build coalitions, interject new ways of thinking, and develop a vision that aligns education with other policies, all in the pursuit of regional equity. In this chapter we also discuss what local, state, or federal courts or policymakers must do to move beyond treating the symptoms of inequity to understanding and reversing the underlying, systemic causes of urban school failure with sustainable and politically viable approaches.