



## Proximity vs. Equity: Policy Actors' Decision-Making on Attendance Zone Boundaries in a Suburban School District

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**Abstract:** This study provides a qualitative analysis of how local policy actors in a predominantly White suburban school district engaged in collective decision-making regarding elementary school attendance boundaries. Given the long-standing neighborhood segregation caused by housing policies and practices since the city's inception, Riverside policy actors faced two competing options: maintaining the neighborhood school concept or addressing equity issues arising from the imbalanced distribution of students by income and racial groups. Utilizing critical policy analysis (CPA) and critical geography perspectives, the study found that while some community members and members of the rezoning committee challenged race-neutral approaches that influenced the decision-making process, the majority of policy actors ignored the existing spatial segregation. Instead, they positioned their decision-making as neutral and prioritized bureaucratic rationality. The implications for policy actors and future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** critical policy analysis; school attendance zones; education leadership; critical geography

### Proximidad versus equidad: Un estudio de las decisiones políticas sobre expectativas de asistencia escolar en un distrito suburbano

**Resumen:** El siguiente estudio presenta un análisis cualitativo sobre cómo los actores locales de política pública deciden de forma colectiva, en un barrio predominantemente blanco y un distrito suburbano, los límites de asistencia a la escuela primaria del barrio. Dado que nos encontramos en

un contexto de segregación urbana causada por políticas y prácticas que datan desde los albores de la ciudad, los actores de política pública de Riverside se plantean dos posibilidades opuestas: o bien mantener el modelo educativo actual del vecindario, o bien dar solución a los problemas históricos de equidad que dan pie a desigualdades estudiantiles, a causa de una insuficiente renta familiar o la pertenencia a una etnia racial desfavorecida. Mediante la implementación de un análisis de política crítica y diversas perspectivas geográficas, este estudio demuestra que, aunque algunos miembros de la comunidad y del comité estuvieron en contra de las políticas que no incorporaban la raza como un factor a considerar, la mayoría de los actores de política pública, incluyendo la junta escolar, ignoraron la segregación existente en la actualidad. De esta forma, la mayoría de los actores de política pública se posicionó de forma neutral, priorizando el raciocinio burocrático. Las consecuencias de este posicionamiento se analizarán a continuación.

**Palabras-clave:** análisis crítico de política; zonas de asistencia escolar; liderazgo educativo; geografía crítica

### **Proximidade versus equidade: A tomada de decisão de atores políticos sobre os limites de zoneamento escolar em um distrito escolar em área residencial**

**Resumo:** Este estudo apresenta uma análise qualitativa de como atores políticos locais em um distrito escolar em área residencial de classe média predominantemente branca se envolveram em tomada de decisão coletiva sobre zoneamento escolar. Diante da segregação do bairro, causada por políticas e práticas habitacionais desde a fundação da cidade, os atores políticos de Riverside enfrentaram opções conflitantes: manter o conceito de escola de bairro ou abordar questões de equidade decorrentes da distribuição desigual de alunos por renda e grupo racial. A análise crítica de políticas e a geografia crítica revelaram que, embora membros da comunidade e do comitê de rezoneamento tenham contestado a neutralidade racial que influenciou o processo de decisão, a maioria dos atores políticos, incluindo o conselho escolar, ignorou a segregação espacial existente. Em vez disso, posicionaram suas decisões como neutras e priorizaram a racionalidade burocrática. As implicações para os atores políticos e para pesquisas futuras são discutidas.

**Palavras-chave:** análise crítica de políticas; zoneamento escolar; liderança educacional; geografia crítica

### **Proximity vs. Equity: Policy Actors' Decision-Making on Attendance Zone Boundaries in a Suburban School District**

The majority of U.S. public schools assign students to attend schools based on their residential areas, making school attendance zone boundaries (AZBs) a key policy tool that can either promote or reinforce segregation based on race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Richard & Stroub, 2015). Research consistently shows that AZBs often contribute to segregation, particularly in suburban areas experiencing demographic shifts (Asson et al., 2023; Diem et al., 2014; Holme et al., 2014). More than 55% of the U.S. population now resides in suburban areas (Parker et al., 2018), and nearly 40% of public-school students attend suburban schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). By 2019, 54% of students of color attend suburban schools (NCES, 2021). Despite such rapid demographic shifts, suburban schools and neighborhoods remain segregated. Segregation persists as students from different racial groups often live in separate neighborhoods and attend different schools, even within the same suburb (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Loh et al., 2020; Reardon et al., 2012; Wells et al., 2012). The relationship between public school funding, school quality, and housing markets further complicates AZB policies, as they do more than manage

capacity or proximity—they shape access to high-quality education (Rascoff & Humphries, 2015; Richards & Stroub, 2005).

Scholars argue that intentional policies promoting diversity can reduce segregation, with diversity-focused attendance policies being especially effective in suburban areas (Asson et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2019). However, when policy actors design AZBs under ahistorical, aspatial, and acontextual ideologies, they can perpetuate segregation (Frankenberg et al., 2017; Richards & Stroub, 2015; Stroub & Richards, 2017). The roles of local policy actors (e.g., district leaders, school board, principals, educators, community members) who contributed to policy making and implement the policy are of utmost importance in developing policies that challenge the ahistorical and acontextual policy decision making, the hoarding of opportunities, and the unequal distribution of educational access, resources, and outcomes (Richard & Stroub, 2015). Policy actors' understanding of the impact of demographic changes and a need for equity-oriented and color-conscious decision making has power to challenge the status quo.

Despite evidence supporting equity-oriented AZBs to mitigate school segregation, policy actors often adopt ahistorical, acontextual, and aspatial approaches, reinforcing existing inequities (Asson et al., 2023; Taylor & Frankenberg, 2021; Taylor et al., 2019). The role of district leaders is crucial in challenging systems of segregation, opportunity hoarding, and unequal access to education. Yet, research has shown that many local policy actors fail to address or even exacerbate these inequities, often implementing policies that intensify segregation in response to demographic changes (Diem et al., 2014; Evans, 2007). In 2008-09, for example, the policy actors in Henrico County Public Schools in Virginia gerrymandered the district's attendance zones producing racially segregated enclaves, leading to one high school with less than 1% White students while two others in affluent areas had over 80% White enrollment (Siegel-Hawley, 2013). Similarly, in Memphis-Shelby County, Tennessee, local policy actors, made decisions about school secessions that increased racial segregation and reduced opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds to interact across districts (Frankenberg et al., 2017). These actions promoted decentralization and competition by forming new districts along racial lines, further entrenching segregation and deepening inequalities. Wealthier families used their financial privilege to move into districts with higher concentrations of White students (Frankenberg et al., 2017). Gentrification policies in some districts further amplified these trends by attracting wealthier families at the expense of marginalized communities (Diem, Holme, Edwards, et al., 2019). Local policy actors' responses to demographic shifts, often rooted in ahistorical, aspatial, and acontextual understanding of the issue have consistently failed to challenge underlying systemic inequalities, underscoring the need for transformative, equity-focused policies to dismantle segregation and inequity in schools.

This current study focuses on Riverside School District<sup>1</sup> (RSD), a predominantly White but demographically shifting suburban school district in Wisconsin, to examine how zoning decisions—specifically changes in elementary school attendance zone boundaries (AZBs)—can perpetuate existing segregation. While Riverside continued to grow more diverse, its school district perpetuated segregation by concentrating White students and students from affluent backgrounds in certain elementary schools. Riverside also had pockets of elementary schools that concentrated Black students and students from low-income backgrounds. This pattern of school segregation mirrored the existing pattern of neighborhood segregation, and they were uninterrupted.

Riverside offers a compelling case for understanding how school attendance policies—especially in diversifying suburban contexts—can entrench rather than disrupt existing patterns of segregation. Analyzing how district policy actors responded to demographic change within this landscape of structural inequality provides insights for other school systems grappling with similar

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<sup>1</sup> To protect confidentiality, all place and personal names in this paper have been replaced with pseudonyms.

challenges. This current study investigates how aracial, aspatial, and ahistorical decision making can contribute to existing inequities. Using critical policy analysis (CPA) as the framework, this research explores RSD's local policy actors' (e.g., school district, school board members, rezoning committee, educators, parents, and community members) decision-making process. The central research question is: *How did policy actors in Riverside engage in collective decision-making to determine changes to elementary school attendance zone boundaries?* This study contributes to discussions on how local policy actors, particularly in predominantly White suburban districts navigate high-stakes decisions like student assignment policy. By focusing on the socio-spatial-historical context of RSD as a suburban community, this study contributes to understanding the complexities of neighborhood-school segregation bringing into the discussion the historical and spatial aspects. The following sections outline the theoretical framework, study context, research methods, results, and discussion.

## Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in the framework of critical policy analysis ([CPA]; Diem et al., 2014; Diem, Young, & Sampson, 2019; Levison et al., 2009; Young & Diem, 2017). CPA challenges traditional approaches to policy design and implementation by problematizing their underlying assumptions of neutrality (Diem et al., 2019; Diem et al., 2014; Young & Diem, 2017). CPA demands interdisciplinary lenses that examine the complex historical, cultural, and spatial contexts within which policy is designed and implemented (Diem et al., 2019; Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Young & Diem, 2017). CPA situates policymaking as a socially, historically, and spatially situated process shaped by historical, spatial, political, and cultural dynamics. Rather than assuming neutrality, it calls for a critical examination of the gap between policy rhetoric and actual practice, questioning what issues are defined as problems and how proposed solutions may reinforce dominant cultural narratives (Young & Diem, 2017). CPA also brings to light the unequal distribution of power, knowledge, and resources embedded in both the creation and implementation of policy. Additionally, it considers how policy processes can sustain systems of privilege and inequality, often to the detriment of historically marginalized communities (Diem et al., 2014). Central to CPA is the recognition of these communities' agency—their capacity for resistance, advocacy, and meaningful participation in shaping more equitable policy outcomes (Diem et al., 2014; Diem, Young, & Sampson, 2019; Young & Diem, 2017).

In this paper, I position the decision-making process around changes to elementary school AZBs in Riverside within the socio-spatial-historical context of Riverside as a predominantly White suburb. It is imperative to understand how segregation and spatial stratification have been seeded and planted at the structural level in suburbs (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2022). Suburbs, including Riverside, were originally designed to promote economic and spatial segregation, and housing policies enacted by the local county and the RSD municipality decades ago continue to influence present-day housing and school segregation. I frame the creation of AZBs as an exercise of power that has the potential to reinforce existing systems of inequality (Levinson et al., 2009).

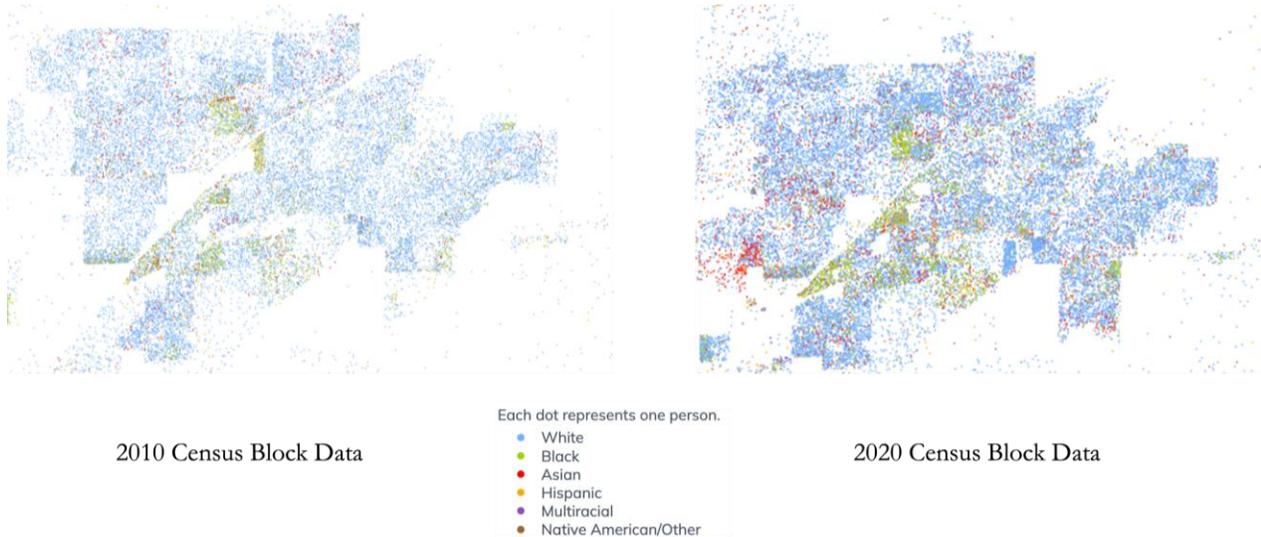
## Socio-spatial Historical Contexts of Riverside as a Suburban Community

A rapidly growing suburb with a population of around 30,000 in 2018, according to U.S. Census data, Riverside transitioned from a rural village to a small city in the 1950s amid the rise of modern U.S. suburbs. In the 1960s, Riverside was almost entirely White, but between 1970 and 1985, its population grew faster than other municipalities in the county and Wisconsin overall, shifting to more racially and economically diverse. This shift was driven by factors like highway expansion, immigration, industrial changes, and public housing policies. Between 2000 and 2018, the

percentage of White residents declined from 92% to 80%. However, while Riverside population between 2010-2020 continued to increase and diversify, the suburban community remained segregated by race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; 2020.) (See Figure 1).

### Figure 1

#### *Map of Racial Segregation in Riverside*



Source: <https://www.censusdots.com>

These demographic shifts were mirrored in Riverside School District (RSD), where the racial/ethnic makeup of students also shifted, with Latinx and Asian student populations doubling to 9% and 10%, respectively, while Black student population slightly declined from 11% to 10%. The number of students from low-income backgrounds also increased. In 2006, 19% of students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL); by 2018, that number had risen to 32% (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). Responding to these rapid changes, between 2007 and 2017, RSD built one new elementary school, adding to a total of seven elementary schools. In the 2017-18 school year, the Riverside community approved another referendum to build two additional elementary schools, bringing the total to nine elementary school. During this period, there were no charter schools in the district, and only one faith-based private school as options in addition to public schools. This made RSD the primary public-school option for local families and since attendance at neighborhood schools was a long-standing practice in RSD, the significance of attendance zones grew.

In Riverside, space has long been used as a marker of race and class differences, stemming from zoning and land-use policies established when the suburb was first developed in the 1950s. Since its inception, Riverside's development has been shaped by the spatial, racial, and class divide between urban and suburban areas. The government's leadership (e.g., the mayor and city planners) and key sectors of governance (e.g., the housing industry and banks) have aimed to establish Riverside as a residential area primarily for middle-class White residents. This aim was evident in Riverside's land use and zoning regulations, housing prices, and accessibility to and from the nearby urban city were designed to keep out low-income people from residing in Riverside. The government and governance of Riverside employed exclusionary mechanisms, such as high housing

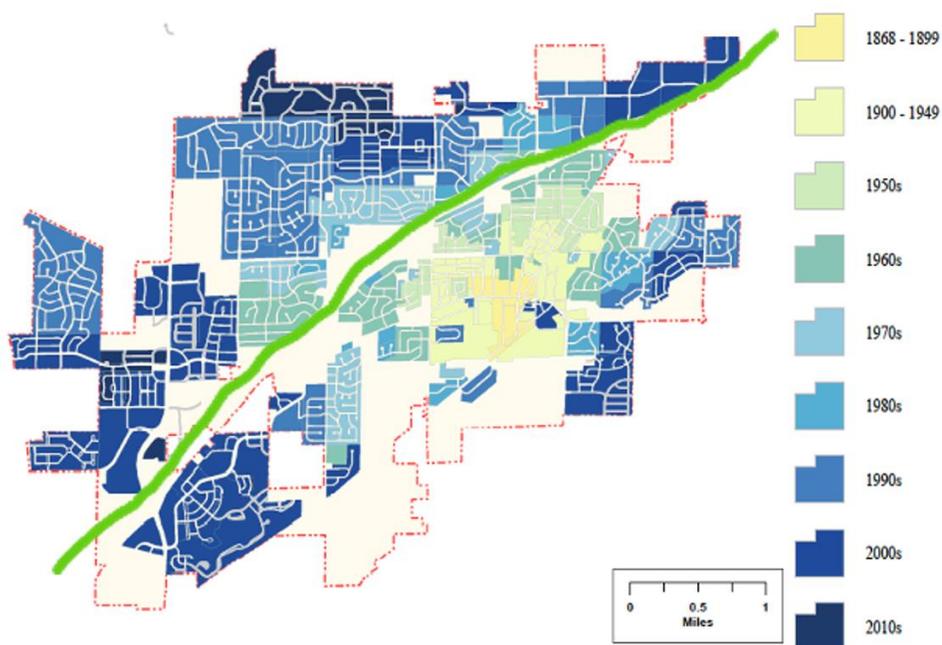
prices, zoning that segregated multi-family buildings, and limited public transportation, to restrict lower-income, often non-White residents from living in Riverside (Mawene, 2021).

A prominent exclusionary mechanism involved pricing out certain income groups, making housing exclusively available to middle-and upper-income residents. Builders and real estate industries at the inception of Riverside intentionally designed Riverside for upper middle-income groups, thereby excluding residents from lower-income backgrounds. One planner stated: "...it has been the intention of builders, and the purpose of zoning and building ordinances passed by the city, to make housing available to only middle- and upper-income groups" (Anonymous, 1970). A similar tone was also shared by other prominent developers in Riverside, as concluded by a historian: "...without federal funds the cost of building materials has been such as to make it impossible to build cheap homes. The net result, in any event, has been the provision in [Riverside] of exclusive housing that catered almost entirely to middle-income groups" (Anonymous, 1970).

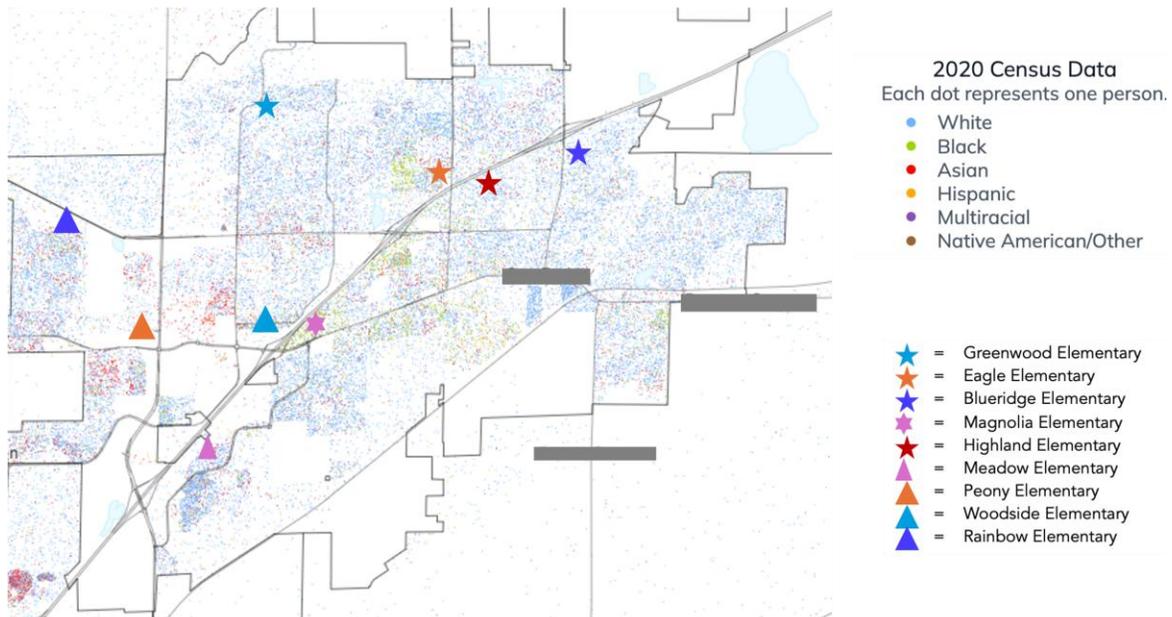
Zoning further reinforced segregation by limiting multi-family housing to areas near highways, and public transportation was restricted, making Riverside accessible only by private car, reinforcing class and racial separation. Indirectly, the expansion of highways physically divided Riverside, creating distinct parts of the city (See the green line in Figure 2). As Riverside expanded, wealthier neighborhoods were developed on the periphery, while older areas closer to the city center, with lower property values, gradually became home to low-income, predominantly Black residents. [Magnolia] Elementary, one of the nine schools in RSD, is in this area and has the highest concentration of low-income and Black students in the district (See Figure 3), reflecting the lingering effects of early zoning decisions. Meanwhile, [Greenwood] and [Peony] elementary schools), two newly constructed elementary schools, which construction prompted the rezoning discussed in this paper, are in the newer neighborhoods.

## Figure 2

*Map of Subdivision Development in Riverside*



*Note:* The green line represents the approximate location of the highway. The figure was adapted from a publicly available map provided by the city of [Riverside].

**Figure 3***Location of Elementary Schools in RSD*

2020 Census Block Data

Source: <https://www.censusdots.com>

The enduring legacy of exclusionary planning practices in the early development of the municipality has lasting impacts that shape housing and school segregation in Riverside today. Despite the city's growing racial and economic diversity, these early policies still affect decisions about school attendance zones, which are based on neighborhood proximity. In the most recent comprehensive plan, Riverside government acknowledged the contribution of the municipality's housing policies and practices to the contemporary (re)segregation challenges faced by RSD:

A current issue of concern in [Riverside] is a concentration of older, multi-family housing in [the city's main thoroughfare], west of downtown and close to [the highway], coupled with the construction of more multi-family housing in that corridor as part of redevelopment efforts along this important street corridor. At the same time, recent neighborhood growth at the north edge of the city has featured mostly large lots and high-cost homes. The disparity in household incomes between these areas was recently highlighted by a decision to accommodate school growth by building a new elementary school near the new high-cost neighborhood. The lack of income balance between these neighborhoods led to a difficult situation for the community, a choice between equity in education environments and a bussing program to balance the schools. This is a complex challenge with many factors to consider, but one such factor is the distribution of housing types. ([Riverside] 2019 Comprehensive Plan)

As the Riverside Comprehensive Plan acknowledged, disparities in housing types and income between neighborhoods have created a challenge for balancing educational equity and resources. The city's initial vision of maintaining an upper-middle-class White community laid the foundation for persistent spatial segregation, which continues to impact the RSD until today.

The color-evasive housing planning and practices established 65 years ago along with current housing policies and practices in Riverside carry detrimental impacts to neighborhood segregation.

## **Research Methods**

I present a brief context of rezoning of elementary boundary zones in 2017/18 followed by methods of data collection and data analysis.

### **Context of 2017/18 Rezoning of Elementary Schools Attendance Zone Boundaries**

Following a successful referendum to build two new elementary schools, the school board initiated a rezoning process. To lead this effort, the board formed the Rezoning Committee (pseudonym), composed of a diverse group of members to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive approach to zoning decisions. The committee was co-chaired by the assistant superintendent of operations and a school board member appointed by the board president. Another board member, also selected by the board president, served on the committee.

The committee's membership included three citizen representatives—possibly selected from past committees—ten parent representatives (one from each elementary, middle, and upper middle school), and 10 alternate parents who collaborated with the core group. It also included one city representative, and three district administrators appointed by the superintendent or their designee. Once the school board members were identified, the remaining committee members were appointed by the co-chairs and approved by the board president and the superintendent. In total, the Rezoning Committee consisted of 20 voting members and 10 alternates. The committee's charge was to provide a comprehensive recommendation on the new attendance zone boundaries (AZBs), though the final decision-making authority rested with the school board.

The committee convened twice a month in early-to-mid 2017 in meetings that lasted approximately two and a half hours. These meetings were open to the public and facilitated by the co-chairs. Each meeting included a discussion of agenda items by the committee, followed by a public input session that allowed broader community participation.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study is a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995). Data for this study was collected primarily through document analysis and complemented by interviews. I studied the most recent changes in RSD elementary AZBs that took place in 2017/18. I studied meeting agendas, meeting minutes and summaries, and maps. I also studied newspapers at the municipality and state level reporting on the changes in Riverside's attendance zones. I also delved into the municipality's documents including multiple comprehensive plans, maps, and other urban planning documents to understand the complex relationship between school-housing segregation in Riverside. In addition to documents, I also included interviews with three school board members (former and current), two parents and three community members actively involved in the AZBs rezoning meeting in 2017/2018. I completed the interviews between September 2019 to February 2020. In addition, I also collected RSD demographic data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WDPI) from 2007-2018. I analyzed this data to understand the distribution of students over the years across elementary schools in RSD.

Informed by literature in CPA, I analyzed documents and interviews using a multi-level coding process. I first conducted open coding (Corbin et al., 2015) wherein I jotted down potential themes freely without concern about their fitness. This stage served as an early foundation for the

creation of the codebook (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Examples of the initial themes identified were: District leadership understanding of spatial segregation; Questioning the committee's priorities; Prioritizing neighborhood school despite existing inequities; Challenging the leaders' understanding of school-neighborhood segregation; and Reasons why people want to maintain their current neighborhood schools. From the initial themes identified in the open coding, I conducted another round of data analysis. At this second round of data analysis, I built on the initial themes in the open coding by merging themes or adding new ones that fit the data, and recorded data. I then created a codebook. Using the codebook, I conducted a focused coding (Corbin et al., 2015), which is the third stage in analysis of documents and interviews.

## **Results**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Riverside school district policy actors (e.g., school district leadership, board members, educators, and community members) engaged in a collective decision-making process when deciding on the changes in the elementary school AZBs. The analysis of data indicates three major themes: 1) Ignoring the existing socio-spatial segregation; 2) Challenging race-neutral perception of policy; and 3) Prioritizing bureaucratic rationality.

### **Ignoring the Legacy of Socio-spatial Segregation in Riverside**

The ignorance of the legacy of the existing social-spatial segregation in Riverside was evident in how the school board determined the list of priority considerations—one of the key artifacts guiding the rezoning committee's decision-making. Throughout the process, neither the school board nor the rezoning committee systematically addressed the relationship between neighborhood and school segregation. The issue surfaced only sporadically, when raised by members of the public or individual committee members. Despite its relevance, neighborhood-school segregation was not part of the formal rezoning agenda.

At the first rezoning meeting, the co-chairs of the Rezoning Committee (the school board vice president and the assistant superintendent) introduced eight priority considerations for determining school attendance zones. These considerations were drawn from existing district policies on attendance boundaries and included: (1) the greater good of all students and the district; (2) geographic proximity to schools; (3) preserving neighborhood integrity; (4) transportation factors; (5) anticipated future growth and development; (6) minimizing the extent of change; (7) school demographics; and (8) contiguous boundaries.

The district first adopted these priorities in 2014, heavily influenced by the director of business and finance, who drew the information solely from external resources such as research from the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, policies from other districts, and prior local experience in Riverside. After several iterations of revisions with input from the District's Community Engagement Committee, the final version of the priorities along with its accompanying school attendance area and boundary change policy was formally approved by the school board in November 2014. Notably, just two days before the first meeting of the 2017–2018 Rezoning Committee, the board revised the policy procedures. While the language of the considerations remained unchanged in this revision, there was a subtle but significant shift in the use of the priority considerations during the presentation by the co-chairs of the Rezoning Committee. The original 2014 and 2017 policy documents framed the list of priority considerations as “Suggested Guiding Questions a Rezoning Committee May Consider When Analyzing Potential Boundary Changes (Additional questions may be added),” indicating a flexible and inquiry-driven approach. However, during the co-chairs' presentation to the 2017–2018 Rezoning Committee, the framing was altered to “Attendance Area Considerations,” transforming the original guiding questions into definitive,

statement-like criteria. This shift in language signaled a reification of the considerations as fixed priorities rather than prompts for critical inquiry. Throughout the process, the committee and the broader community accepted these priorities without questioning their origins and implications embedded within them.

Between the first and second meetings, Rezoning Committee members completed a survey that asked them to rank the importance of each consideration, such as “Geographic proximity to a school” and “The greater good of all students in the district.” Nineteen of the 30 committee members responded, rating each consideration on a scale from 1 (low importance) to 5 (high importance). The top three priorities identified by respondents were: (1) proximity to school, (2) maintaining contiguous neighborhood boundaries, and (3) minimizing transportation costs. Notably, school demographics—referring to the diversity of the student body within each school—were ranked among the lowest priorities.

In addition to gathering input from committee members, the Rezoning Committee also hosted seven in-person community input sessions—one at each elementary school. These sessions were sparsely attended, with only 150 participants across all events. A key question posed during these sessions asked attendees to identify the considerations they prioritized. The most frequently mentioned were: (1) ensuring that student diversity is reflected across all school buildings; (2) keeping neighborhoods together; (3) assigning students to schools closest to their homes; (4) planning for future growth; and (5) ensuring student safety.

During the second meeting, the committee reviewed both the community feedback and the survey data. At this point, competing priorities began to emerge. On one side was a preference for assigning students to their nearest neighborhood school, which emphasized contiguous boundaries and proximity. On the other side was a concern for addressing persistent inequities in RSD—specifically, the current concentration of low-income and Black students at Magnolia Elementary School and the potential concentration of White affluent students in other elementary schools, especially the two newly built schools given the existing neighborhood segregation. In the public input session of the second meeting, several community members urged the committee not to reinforce divisions between the “haves” and “have-nots” at the school or community level. However, a majority of community members and several elementary school principals advocated for preserving neighborhood boundaries. In response, the Rezoning Committee revised the list of priority considerations and asked the voting members of the Rezoning Committee to cast a vote on their priorities. The revised list included: (1) geographic proximity to school; (2) keeping neighborhoods intact; (3) transportation factors; (4) future growth; (5) contiguous boundaries; (6) school demographics; (7) least amount of change; and (8) the greater good.

Notably, the Rezoning Committee voted on the top three selected priorities—geographic proximity, contiguous boundaries, and transportation cost. They were consistent with earlier survey findings and closely interrelated. Sending students to neighborhood schools generally results in contiguous boundaries and reduces transportation costs. School demographics remained among the lowest priorities. Only one out of 20 voting members ranked it as a top consideration. Although some committee members voiced concern that these preferences might exacerbate existing segregation, particularly if demographic diversity was ignored, no further action was taken by the committee, the school board, or the broader community.

While some community members and some rezoning committee members acknowledged the legacy and nature of segregated neighborhood-school relationship, school district leadership seemed to ignore the complex relationship relying more on the importance of neighborhood intactness. For example, one principal stated:

Eight of us (elementary principals and the director of [teaching, learning and excellence] got together to talk about the boundary questions. The eight of us talked about demographics. All eight of us want neighborhood schools with contiguous boundaries. (March 15, 2017, meeting minutes)

We can see that the policy actors, in this case the assistant principals, ignored the potential further segregation fueled by their decision making. Instead, they advocated for technical approach that maintains the long-standing tradition in the community to send students to the closest school to home. The agenda to prioritize the neighborhood school concept was made clear by the district's director for [teaching, learning, and excellence]:

I'm closing out my 3rd year in the district, but I can tell you most of our appeals are from "island" families. That doesn't mean we shouldn't reconsider islands, but families who drive past schools to get to another get frustrated. In a perfect world, we would divide up [students with FRL and ELL status], but if we do that, we will most likely have to create islands and bus more. My caution is I don't know that there's a perfect solution. [The proposed] map meets the criteria [Top three priorities of considerations]. (June 21, 2017, meeting minutes)

"Islands" referred to areas that were assigned to schools located far from their neighborhood, even though closer schools were available. These "island neighborhoods" were geographically surrounded by other neighborhoods assigned to different elementary schools. The quote above indicated that the assistant superintendent did recognize a need to balance the distribution of students given the segregated neighborhoods. However, the need to maintain neighborhood intactness trumped equity needs, in this case even distribution of students. None of these policy actors, in particular school district leaders, were able to link the challenges they faced to the spatial historicity of the neighborhood segregation in Riverside. As a result, they simply relied on the voted priority consideration as a quick solution to solve the contradictions. One of the school board members I interviewed described the ignorance of the local policy actors in taking into considerations the existing neighborhood segregation in the community:

In my mind, we need to [rezone] all the neighborhoods, but the school board and the district believe that children should be able to go to the neighborhood schools. The whole emphasis was neighborhood schools, neighborhood schools [*repetition in original*]. I voiced my opinion on that because I didn't think that that was fair that a certain segment of students and families wouldn't have the opportunity to even have their children being educated in that [Greenwood Elementary] based on their economic status. So, it appears that only the rich can go to the school because it's located there.

Here, the board member implied that the school leaders, particularly school board members and district leadership seemed to rely on ahistorical, aspatial, and acontextual perspectives when deciding on the attendance zones albeit multiple pushbacks from other equity-minded community members, rezoning committee, and even school board members.

The process of determining the priority of consideration seemed to be steered by pre-existing district policy that listed eight pre-determined priority considerations. These considerations centered logistical and spatial concerns such as proximity to school, transportation efficiency, and maintaining neighborhood boundaries, while deemphasizing equity-related issues like school demographics or racial/economic integration. Throughout the process, these priorities went

unquestioned by both the Rezoning Committee, school board members, teachers, administrators, and the broader community. Even when public input highlighted concerns about maintaining diversity and avoiding deepening segregation, the dominant preferences—especially among committee members—reflected a commitment to neighborhood schools and contiguous boundaries. The predetermined priority of considerations seemed to function as gatekeepers, limiting the scope of the conversation and preventing a reckoning with the structural inequities embedded in neighborhood-based school assignment or reimagining the foundations of school zoning.

### **Challenging Race-Neutral Perception of Policy**

While most Rezoning Committee members, school board, and community members supported a proximity-based policy, others questioned its assumed neutrality and impact. These concerned community members urged district leaders to consider the broader context of segregation in the community, critically examining the policy in relation to Riverside's socio-spatial-historical patterns of neighborhood segregation. For example, one parent stated:

At the last meeting I attended, you talked about how the [Rezoning Committee] chose your top priorities and basically equity was not a priority at all. When you choose neighborhood schools, you are automatically not choosing equity because we live in a segregated community. I heard at one point too about trying to set or reduce the free and reduced-price lunch rate of not going over 50%, but I think you should have set a minimum too. I'm disappointed to see that has not happened. (June 21, 2017, meeting minutes)

Here, the parent raised two critical issues. First the parent alluded to the inseparable context of segregation between neighborhood and school segregation, an issue that the board members and rezoning committee failed to see. This parent challenged the race-neutral decision-making process pointing out how segregated neighborhoods replicate segregated schools. Second, the parent urged the local policy actors to reposition their gaze of equity problem not only at multiply marginalized students but also at those that are privileged and advantaged by the system. The parent suggested that addressing equity, in the case of Riverside, necessitated addressing both the segregation of low-income students in certain schools and the concentration of upper middle-class students in others. Similarly, another parent called on local policymakers to reconsider their supposedly neutral decision-making process:

Take demographics into account. Rebalance priorities. Limit enrollment in high [free and reduced-price] schools... My major concern is equity between schools and diversity between [free and reduced-price lunch] status. Obviously, no one likes islands, but it is necessary to look at islands to reconsider equity. Maybe we need to re-evaluate [rezoning committee's] priorities. (May 17, 2017, meeting minutes)

While "islands" were not ideal, given the existing neighborhood segregation, a thorough restructuring of priority considerations were necessary to address the potential for increased segregation between elementary schools, which could be exacerbated by both the rezoning policy and housing practices, it is essential for policymakers to move beyond neutral, technical considerations, such as contiguous zoning boundaries.

Alongside the parents who challenged perceived neutral policy, some rezoning committee members also questioned the committee's own decision-making processes, particularly equity-evasive overreliance on priority of considerations:

While I understand we voted on considerations, I don't think we had all the data to make an informed choice. Had I known diversity was pocketed, I don't think I would have voted the way I did. I feel like we were not given a clear shot at making a good choice on this. (June 21, 2017 meeting minutes)

This committee member referred to the eight pre-determined priority considerations the members voted earlier on at the first rezoning meeting. Notably, the Rezoning Committee members perhaps were not knowledgeable about the existing neighborhood-segregation and their impact to education and the school district leadership failed to bring the existing social, spatial, and historical context of neighborhood segregation in Riverside systematically in the rezoning meeting. In a similar tone, other rezoning committee members, parents, and community members pointed out the long-term impacts of such policy to students learning and development, particularly stigma and othering. For example, one committee member argued:

We just don't just send our kids to school to get an education. That's six very formative years of their lives. And I think that that goes beyond academics, and it definitely reaches to the social aspects of their lives, and I think we really need to consider what the lack of diversity at this site is going to do for those kids. (June 21, 2017, meeting minutes)

Here, this committee member alluded to how policy has the power to mediate students learning about self and others, about stigma, belonging, and othering. The school district (in)directly perpetuated the cultures of othering and segregation, something that students can learn as a member of the community.

Along the concern of creating the schools of the haves and have-nots as well as othering and belonging, another community member who was also a former board member recalled her statement to the board members:

I know how difficult this is but don't make one school 2% and then make [Magnolia] 59% free and reduced-[price] lunch... what are you saying to the community? What do you say to all the kids in the district? We don't care if you're poor?

This former board member questioned the ethical, moral, and social implications of the disparity in students' enrollment. She implied that such kind of segregation risked reinforcing social inequality and fostered a sense of othering and undermining sense of belonging for students in high-poverty schools.

In addition, another parent succinctly summarized the long-term impact of the rezoning policy to students. Particularly, the parent urged the local policy actors to reposition their focus to understand the long-term negative impacts of segregations not only to multiply marginalized students but also to privileged upper-middle class White student:

I'm concerned about the lack of economic, racial, and linguistic diversity at [Peony Elementary—newly built elementary school]. I'm concerned about the long-term impact. A lot of districts try to get out of what we are about to create. You have a pocket of affluence that is hard to crack. The perception that follows the kids from elementary to middle or beyond is something that becomes

integrated into people's ways of thinking about the world... I would encourage you to think carefully about that. I'm concerned about perceptions, attitudes and expectations of "have" versus "have-not" schools. Perceptions don't just follow kids to middle school—they persist far beyond. Let's learn from other districts. (June 7, 2017, meeting minutes)

Here, the parents critically brought the existing neighborhood segregation that were not challenged by local policy actors at all in their decision-making processes. The existing segregation at the neighborhood was easily replicated at the school level because of the perceived neutral policy making. The quote also indicated a harmful long-term impact of segregation and differentiation of opportunity between elementary schools to students learning and development as they learn to associate who they were and their learning opportunities *vis-à-vis* other students in other neighborhoods and schools. The parent suggested that the harmful policy affects both privileged students and multiply marginalized students. However, despite those critical suggestions coming from parents, community members, and rezoning committee themselves, the majority of RSD policy actors stayed course on prioritizing keeping neighborhoods intact.

### **Prioritizing Bureaucratic Rationality**

The third theme focuses on how the decision making was bounded by the logic of organization: Cost control and adherence to rezoning meeting norms.

#### ***Cost Control***

Early in the rezoning decision making, in the third meeting, the Rezoning Committee raised a concern about segregation unless bussing is involved. For example, one of the committee members said: "The [Greenwood Elementary] will likely not have a lot of diversity unless students are bused there" (March 15, 2017, meeting minutes). Here, we can see that the rezoning committee member was aware of the existing inequity issues and the potential for their color-evasive policy to escalate the status quo. However, financial considerations stopped the initial equity goal from further development. Instead, the school board relied on the logic of bureaucratic rationality, albeit conflicted with the equity goal. The president of the school board summarized the logic of bureaucratic rationality:

My caution is that anything we do that requires significant transportation also requires more finances. In our current budget place, from a programming perspective, there's not a plan in place to change the diversity numbers. (School board president, June 21, 2017 meeting minutes)

By framing equity efforts as costly and, therefore, unfeasible, district leadership was implicitly maintaining the status quo. The lack of a "plan in place to change the diversity numbers" was not just a result of budgetary limitations, but a reflection of how policy choices—consciously or unconsciously—continued to perpetuate inequality rather than challenge it. From the perspectives of CPA, such sidelining of equity by upholding bureaucratic logic of cost control was a failure to prioritize equity in meaningful, transformative ways. One school board member who advocated equity consideration, recalled the school board decision making processes in an interview:

They [the school board] looked at the cost and said it was going to cost too much to re-zone. They will have to do a full-blown tear out [of the zones]; re-zoning all

the schools so that it could be more equitable. And they just didn't want to go down that road that was gonna be a lot of money. And busing does that.

It appeared that financial considerations were the primary justification in RSD's policy actors' meaning making of such a high-stake policy like rezoning. The school board seemed to avoid rezoning due to its high costs indicated a systemic hesitation to invest in equity-oriented transformation that involve substantial financial investment.

While the board may see rezoning as financially costly, for multiply-marginalized students and families the actual cost of maintaining segregated schools—both in terms of financial and social implications—is significantly higher. One parent argued against the district decision. In an interview I had with this parent, she mentioned that for Black parents and community members, the cost of segregation is much higher: “The economical route is taken on the expense of the education of students of color.” Having grown up in a segregated part of Chicago, this parent was acutely aware of the characteristics of a segregated community. Upon moving to Riverside, she quickly recognized signs of redlining, noting that “Certain houses are built in certain areas.” Though the segregation in Riverside was less pronounced than her previous place of residence, she still felt a similar atmosphere. With her lived experience in a segregated community, the parent pointed out that what may appear as cost-saving in the short term can lead to significant social and educational costs in the long term, particularly for multiply marginalized groups. The costs of segregation are invaluable compared to the financial costs of bussing. The avoidance of bussing aligns with existing research. That is, although bussing has been a solution for some integration efforts (Orfield; 1978), it is often perceived as not politically practical (Diem et al., 2014).

### ***Adherence to Meeting Norms***

Another bureaucratic logic RSD's policy actors relied on in the decision-making process was to adhere to the priority considerations rezoning members voted on at the commencement of the rezoning meetings: 1) Proximity to school; 2) Neighborhood intactness; and 3) Transportation cost. From the critical policy perspectives, the work of addressing inequities requires questioning the norms and taken for granted policy practices. However, during the rezoning meetings, community members, and school district leaders were unwilling to challenge the traditions. They simply relied on the adherence to the voted priority of consideration as their justification of policy decision making. For example, one parent commented during a public comment session advocated for the school district leadership to maintain the concept of neighborhood school:

I'm concerned with the bubble of [ X, Y, and Z neighborhoods] in [the proposed map]. In accordance with your two top factors, i.e., “geographic proximity to a school” this would send hundreds of kids to the 6th closest school. That will dramatically affect bussing, commute time, bus pick-up time, and I'm guessing the real-life numbers of students bussing. There are a large number of students in that area [who] currently don't take the bus that would, due to the farther geographic distance. (June 7, 2017, meeting minutes)

Here, we can see that the parent utilized the logic of administrative routines: adherence to the voted priorities. The parent questioned the alignment of the proposed boundaries that would balance student enrollment with the voted priority consideration: Maintaining neighborhood intactness and home-school proximity. Maintaining geographic proximity between home and schools, while ostensibly practical, can inadvertently perpetuate segregation because neighborhoods in Riverside were segregated. The parent also raised concerns, such as bussing and commute time, that may arise if the rezoning committee prioritized diversity in student

enrollment across the elementary schools. This perspective indicated a critical policy tension: While prioritizing proximity aims to streamline logistical efficiency, it also risked reinforcing existing patterns of segregation by not addressing the broader systemic inequalities that underpin existing neighborhood spatial segregation. In a similar logic, another parent added:

In referring to [the proposed map], it seems to go against what criteria was deemed important. For “island” area [X, Y, and Z] to be bused all the way to [Woodside Elementary] puts a lot on the families. I understand when it comes to diversity, but when you have a low number and you double it, it’s still a low number. It doesn’t make much of a difference in diversity... Keeping [neighborhood] continuity is a big deal. (June 7, 2017, meeting minutes)

The advocates of contiguous neighborhood boundaries strategically employed priority considerations as the overarching principle to inform decision-making. They placed significant emphasis on upholding the preservation of contiguous neighborhoods as the key objective of the rezoning. Adhering to the established organizational routine benefitted both the district's interests and the proponents of the neighborhood school concept.

In addition to the community members, school district leadership also simplified the responsibility of school district in addressing inequity issues. For example, the district's superintendent chose to not acknowledge the implications of AZBs policy on the concentration of students from low-income background in certain elementary school, in particular Magnolia Elementary saying: “There’s been a lot of talk about free and reduced-price lunch; It’s out of the scope of the [rezoning committee]” (May 17, 2017, meeting minutes). From a critical policy perspective, the superintendent indicated a narrow framing of the rezoning committee's responsibilities. By limiting the discussions on the outcomes of the policy to the scope of the rezoning, the superintendent failed to position how policy can have larger long-lasting impacts on (in)equity.

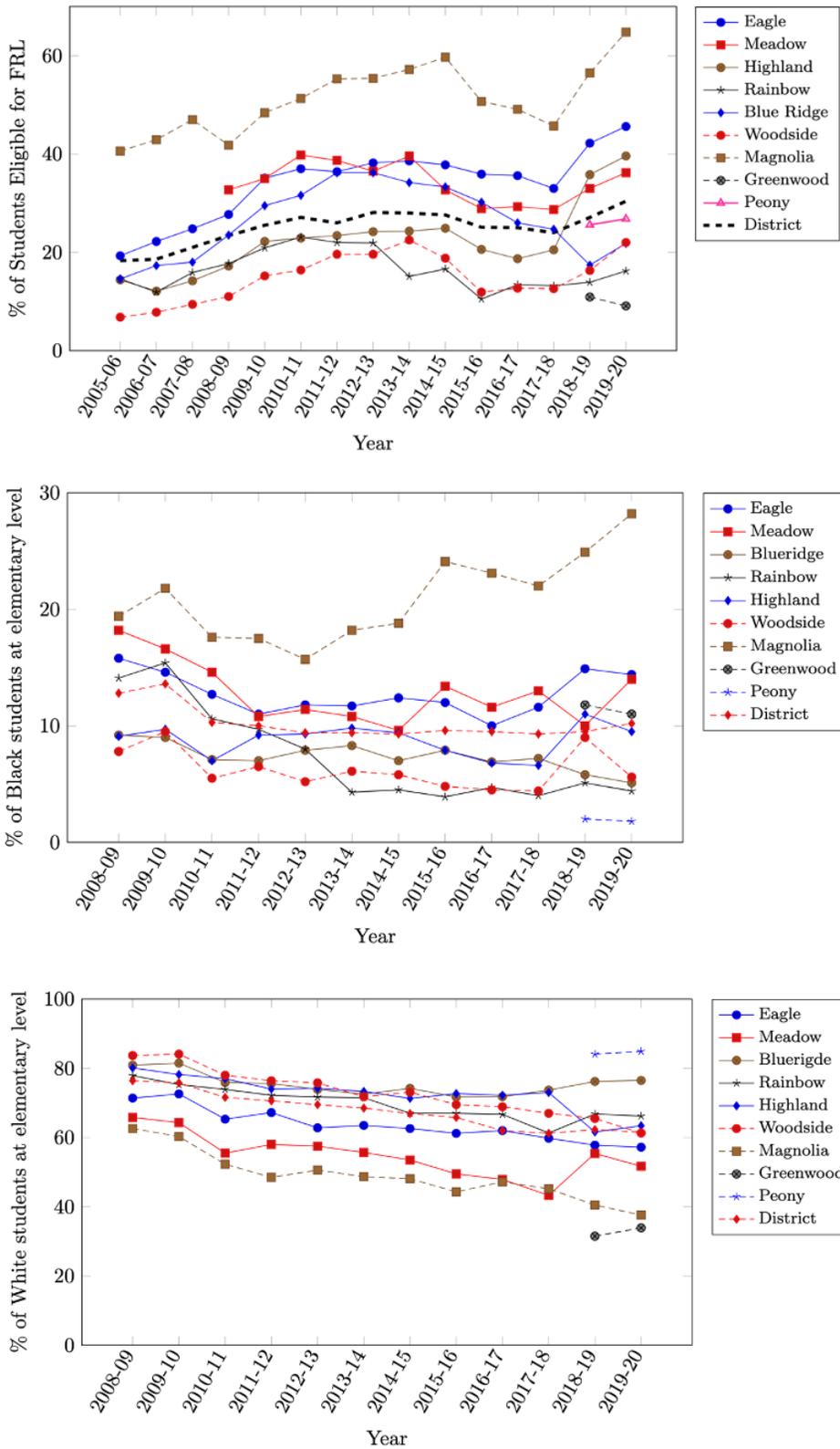
By examining the process of AZBs rezoning, we can see that the decision making was simply reduced as a technocratic process bounded by the district's bureaucratic rationales and as such intersects with the aspirations of the proponents of neighborhood school concept. I argue that such a technocratic process perceived policy outcomes as neutral, ahistorical and acontextual (Diem, Holme, Edwards et al., 2019; Diem et al., 2014). Such rationale may serve as an indication of maintaining whiteness that comes through within school district segregation.

### **Implications of AZB Rezoning to the Perpetuation of (Re)Segregation in Riverside**

The examination of the broader implications of policy implementation is imperative within the framework of CPA, particularly with regards to the perpetuation of segregation. The prioritization of maintaining contiguous neighborhood boundaries by ensuring proximity between residential areas and schools resulted in a substantial majority (70%) of elementary school students in the RSD in 2018 attending their nearest school, thereby reducing transportation costs. However, the consequences of these two priorities and the technocratic lenses that framed the process have led to an exacerbation of segregation. The inadequate consideration of the historical, social, and spatial context of Riverside as a suburban community with existing neighborhood segregation during the rezoning decision making has resulted in the exacerbation of the concentration of Black students and students from low-income backgrounds at Magnolia Elementary (See Figure 4). In addition, the zoning decision also created enclaves of White students and students from affluent backgrounds in the two newly build elementary schools (Peony and Greenwood elementary (See Figure 4).

Figure 4

Students with FRL Eligibility, Black Students, and White Students Enrollment at Elementary Level in RSD



Notably, in 2018, when the AZBs policy was implemented, while 62% of students assigned to [Magnolia] Elementary come from low-income backgrounds, Greenwood Elementary, one of the new schools situated in affluent neighborhoods, had only 6% of students from low-income backgrounds. Similarly, Magnolia Elementary comprised 28% Black students, whereas Peony Elementary School, another newly built school enrolled only 3% of Black students (See Figure 4).

Furthermore, the enrollment patterns during the 11 years (including the two years after the rezoning in 2018; see Figure 4) indicated a decline in White student enrollment at the elementary level. This pattern suggested a steady demographic shift and increasing racial and economic diversity across the district. While racial diversity increased, there was a simultaneous rise in students from low-income backgrounds. The district is experiencing greater racial and economic diversification, though some schools remain racially and economically segregated.

Greenwood Elementary presented a complex case: It had a somewhat racially diverse student body but a persistently low—and declining—percentage of low-income students. While the racial composition suggested some level of diversity, the minimal representation of low-income students indicates that economic privilege remained largely unchallenged. This may reflect the influx of middle- and upper-middle-class families of color into the area. Greenwood’s location in a newly annexed, affluent neighborhood—designed for wealthier residents—reinforced spatialized privilege.

In contrast, Peony Elementary, located in a predominantly White and affluent neighborhood, had remained largely unaffected by demographic shift. This was a result of aspatial rezoning that fails to confront the structural protection of affluent White neighborhoods through attendance zone boundaries. Without addressing neighborhood-level segregation, continued reliance on neighborhood-based assignment policies risks deepening spatial insulation of privilege—preserving White, affluent enclaves amid broader demographic shifts.

Magnolia Elementary appeared to have absorbed a disproportionate share of the district’s racial and economic redistribution (See Figure 4). Over time, the school had seen a sharp decline in White student enrollment and a marked increase in low-income students. Located in the oldest and most deteriorated part of the city—home to many Black residents and families with low incomes—Magnolia likely became a “receiving zone” for students from marginalized backgrounds. This pattern raised concerns about the equity implications of rezoning policies that redistribute students without redistributing resources, thereby concentrating disadvantage in already vulnerable communities.

To further evaluate the implications of the rezoning policy, I measured the isolation index.

Isolation index ( $I_a$ ) =  $\sum_{i=0}^n \left( \frac{a_i^2}{A \times B_i} \right)$  measures the probability that a student from a given (racial or economic) group shares a school with another student from the same group. Here  $i$  is the index for each individual school;  $a_i$  is the number of students from a specific racial or income group in school  $i$ ,  $A$  is the total number of students from that group of interest across all  $n$  schools, and  $B_i$  is the total number of students in school  $i$ . A higher value of isolation index (closer to 1) means more isolation (i.e., a student is more likely to be in schools with others from the same group), and a lower value of isolation index (closer to 0) indicates more integration. Using publicly available 2018 enrollment data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WDPI), I calculated the isolation index for elementary school students in Riverside based on race and economic status, the year the new attendance zone boundaries took effect.

The isolation index for elementary school student in Riverside based on racial group was as follows: *White*: 0.65; *Black*: 0.14; *Latinx*: 0.1; *Asian*: 0.2; *Two or More racial groups*: 0.09. This means that White students were much more likely to attend schools with other White students. Black, Latinx and Asian students are far less likely to attend school with peers of the same racial group. Students

from Two or More Racial Groups had the highest level of exposure to students from other racial groups. In addition, the isolation index for students from low-income backgrounds and students not identified from low-income background indicated stark isolation. The isolation index of students from low-income background was 0.36 (moderate level of isolation) while the isolation index for students not-from low-income background (affluent students) was 0.76 (very high level of isolation). This suggested that low-income students in Riverside were more likely to attend schools with peers from different economic backgrounds. In other words, they were more integrated. In contrast, students from affluent backgrounds were significantly more isolated, typically attending schools where most peers were also affluent. These patterns indicated that the rezoning in 2017/18 may have furthered concentrated White students and students from affluent background. This finding might be an indication that the school system, in this case the rezoning policy may be structured in a way that concentrated privilege students, while dispersing students from low-income backgrounds and students of color. The isolation index confirmed the worries of some concerned parents, community members and school board members that the policy actors perpetuated the schools of the haves and have nots along with isolating White students in certain neighborhood schools.

## Discussion

Using the lens of CPA and drawing from the case of Riverside, this paper offers several insights. First, the absence of structural context, in particular socio-spatial-historical contexts of neighborhood-school, in policy discussions and decision making can lead to inequitable decisions. Assuming socio-spatial-historical void in school assignment policy, policy actors ignored existing racialized organization (Ray, 2019) that comes through meso level (city) housing/ neighborhood policies and practices that started at the inception of Riverside and which legacies continues to actively shape Riverside's current planning and school district's decision-making. Neighborhood segregation is a product and tool of whiteness; suburbs are, at their core, racial and economic projects. It is critical for education leaders, particularly those serving in suburban contexts to not detach the context of suburbs as a bedrock of racism (Diamond & Possey-Maddox, 2020; Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2024). In high stake policy making such as attendance zones, it is critical for policy actors to foreground their policies within the existing socio-spatial-historical context of the community such as the patterns of neighborhood segregation. Historical evidence shows that neighborhoods in U.S. metropolitan areas are rooted in racism and racial relations, influenced by intentionally racist federal housing policies and redlining practices (Federal Housing Administration, 1938; Massey & Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2017). Notably, the housing planning and practice in Riverside since its inception has racialized implications and were/are materialized in spatial segregation.

Second, the commonly held ideal of "neighborhood public schools" does not align with educational equity—*unless* neighborhoods are racially and economically diverse. In communities where race and socioeconomic status are spatially concentrated—arguably the case across most of the United States—it is difficult to achieve equity, in this case equal distribution of student populations through neighborhood-based enrollment alone. In Riverside's case, when district policy actors chose to preserve existing neighborhood boundaries, they simultaneously chose to forego equity. In this context, "equity" refers to a more balanced distribution of students across racial and socioeconomic lines. Allowing the continued segregation of White and affluent students into certain schools—simply because of where they live—cannot be considered equitable. Rather than neutral, such decisions actively reproduce educational and social stratification and further spatial othering of students by racial and class lines (Mawene & Bal, 2020).

Third, the issue of school-neighborhood segregation is complex and systemic, shaped by forces well beyond the education sector. Housing markets, banking practices, and commercial development all play critical roles in shaping the demographic composition of neighborhoods. In the US, schooling is capitalized—schools do not merely serve an educational function but also contribute to the valuation of property and the perceived “worth” of a neighborhood (Rascoff & Humphries, 2015). When families search for homes, they are essentially shopping for schools. This deep entanglement between housing and education must be acknowledged by policy actors when designing school assignment policies (Dougherty, 2012; Rhodes & Warkentien, 2017). Despite this complexity, equity analysis in school zoning is often treated as a one-time, ad hoc event. A more transformative and systemic approach might involve school boards conducting regular equity reviews and collaborating with urban planners to address long-term neighborhood-school segregation patterns.

### Limitations

The aim of this paper was to provide an empirical narrative of the complex entangled socio-spatial-historical relationship between housing and school segregation. In particular, this paper highlighted the potential of high-stake educational policies to perpetuate inequities when policy actors operate within ahistorical, aspatial, and acontextual perspectives. Nevertheless, this paper has limitations. First, I relied primarily on policy documents for analysis, which may present its own limitation. Second, I was not able to interview more diverse community members and district leadership. Future research should include interview data from community members from diverse perspectives such as superintendent, school principals, teachers, and more parents.

### Conclusion

The problem of school-neighborhood segregation is complex, and it is systemic. Therefore, the solutions need to be systemic as well. While there is no one single solution to the issue, there are some policy implications worth considering. First, there is a need for transformative educational policy to advance equity work. It is imperative for educational leaders and policy makers to critically situate the socio-spatial-historical context of a school or a school district as an important ground where things happen rather than simply as a meaningless backdrop (Kelly, 2019; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Policies that do not consider racial-class-spatial contexts may further marginalize historically minoritized students and families. Second, it is critical to acknowledge that school district leadership alone is not sufficient to address decades of spatial segregation in schools. Boundary-crossing of responsibilities, roles, and expertise from city and district officials are needed in order to disrupt the status quo. City government needs to reconsider its housing and urban planning as well as other city policies such as ordinances that (in)directly influence spatial segregation. School district leaders need to take into serious consideration existing racial-class-spatial segregation in the rezoning decision. While equity-based responses from school district leaders is far from a panacea, at the very least they challenge the existing status quo and contribute to mitigating segregation produced by housing policy and practice, which is almost beyond the control of school district leaders.

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