

CITY ON THE RISE, STUDENTS LEFT BEHIND

Education Inequity in Nashville, TN



VANDERBILT
UNIVERSITY

Oxford Map the System 2022

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND	1
POSITIONALITY & PARTNERSHIP	2
METHODS	2
CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE	3
SYMPTOMS OF EDUCATION INEQUITY	3
SYSTEMS MAP	4
ROOT CAUSES	5
STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS	9
SOLUTIONS LANDSCAPE	12
GAPS, LEVERS, & RECOMMENDATIONS	14
INSIGHTS & LESSONS LEARNED	17

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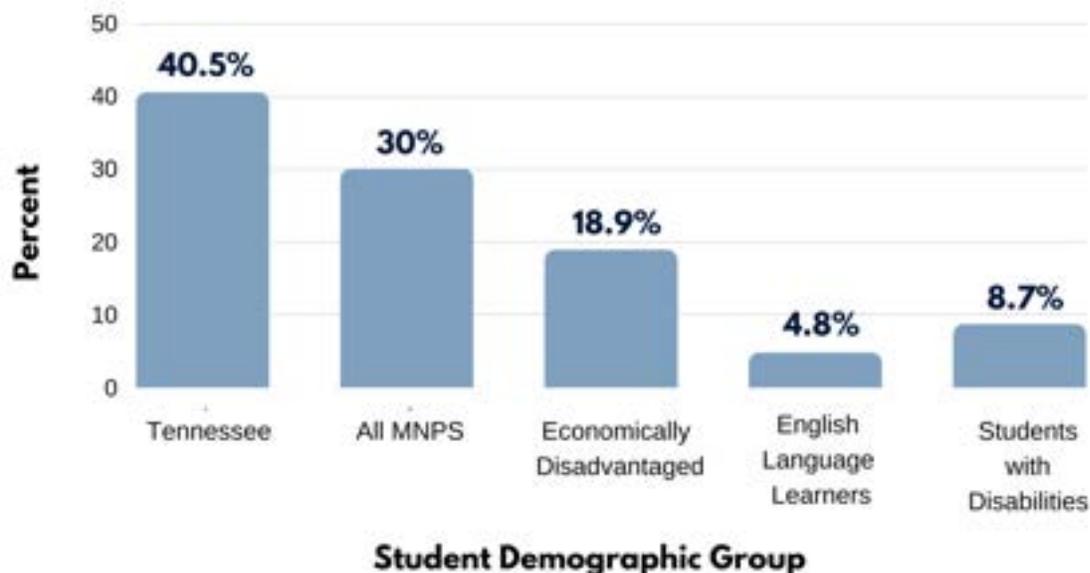
INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Nashville, Tennessee's state capital, is among the fastest-growing cities in the U.S., but the city's economic success is not replicated in its public education system. Metro Nashville Public Schools* (MNPS), Nashville's public school district, struggles to produce positive outcomes and experiences for all students.

Nashville's policies have consistently prioritized wealthy, White, and highly educated residents to drive visible economic growth, neglecting the needs of low-income families. Public schools are differentially resourced, and students' academic outcomes typically differ according to their backgrounds (see table below).

Our research investigates how historical and current policies contribute to unequal funding, segregated neighborhoods, and inequitable access to school choice, leading to a deeply unequal education system. We argue that Nashville's policies create, maintain, and intensify inequitable student experiences and outcomes for low-income students and students of color in Nashville's public schools. Nashville must engage all stakeholders to deliver transformative initiatives and interim actions that direct investment to students who have consistently been overlooked. The city must engage all stakeholders to improve city and school conditions for all Nashville students, through youth-centered legislation, community investment, and corporate partnerships.

CLASS OF 2020 READY GRADUATE* RATE



*Asterisks indicate terms defined in Glossary (Appendix 1)

POSITIONALITY & PARTNERSHIP

Our research team consists of five education policy graduate students at Vanderbilt University. We have taught, tutored, and mentored students across the U.S. and internationally, and currently work at influential Nashville education advocacy groups, foundations, consulting firms, and research institutions.

This report was created in partnership with the Oher Foundation, whose commitment to education equity in Nashville motivates our work.

METHODS

Our research draws on over 100 academic and non-academic sources as well as semi-structured interviews with experts and stakeholders at the state and local levels, including current students. We used systems thinking to understand how factors outside the school building generate education inequities and map interconnected stakeholders, mental models, power dynamics, and structures that allow the problem to persist.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent have Nashville's economic priorities affected education inequity?

CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE

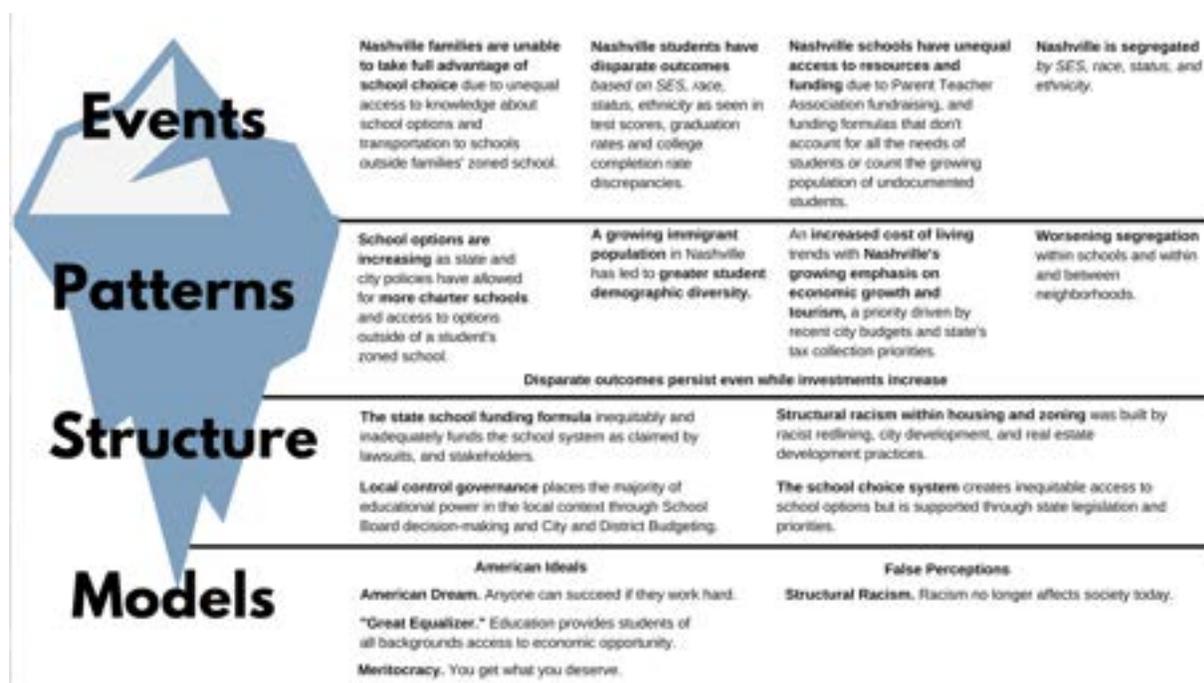
SYMPTOMS OF EDUCATION INEQUITY

Disparate educational outcomes—measured by standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college-going rates—differ dramatically by school and student demographics.ⁱ On average in Nashville, Black students are academically 1.9 grades behind White students, while Latino students are 1.7 grades behind their White peers.ⁱⁱ Graduation rates for students of color, economically disadvantaged* students, and other marginalized groups are lower than those of their more privileged peers.ⁱⁱⁱ Standardized test scores influence a student’s ability to access Early Postsecondary Opportunities* and to prepare for the college-and-career transition.

On average, a wealthy student can access schools with higher levels of community engagement and fundraising, leading to greater school resources and higher academic success. Conversely, on average, a low-income student will experience under-resourced schools, perpetuating opportunity gaps for marginalized students.

Long-standing American ideals allow inequity to persist. Mental models like the American Dream, meritocracy, and education as the “great equalizer” all assume that students start from the same place. However, racism embedded in societal structures systematically disadvantages some students from playing on a level field. Without acknowledging historical racism, these mental models reinforce the inequitable system.

ICEBERG MODEL



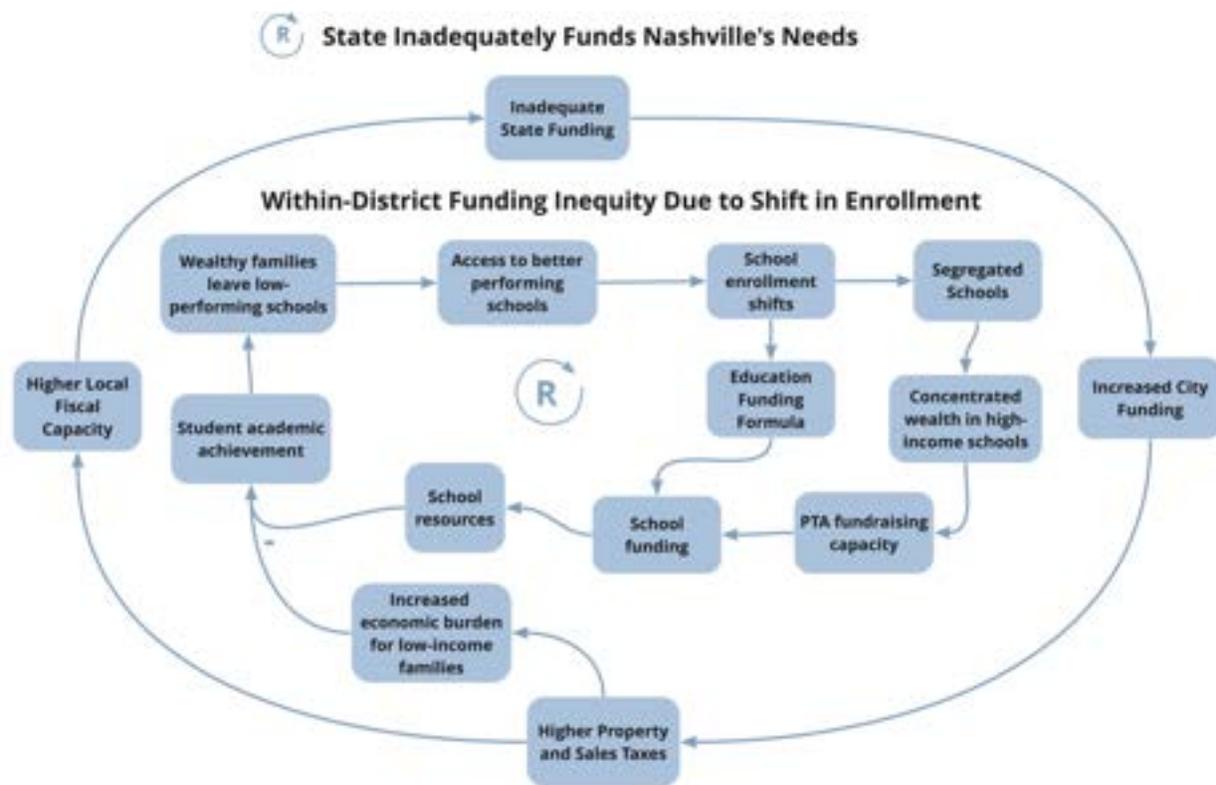
ROOT CAUSES

We identify three root causes of education inequity in Nashville: school funding, school choice, and housing. While other systemic issues exist, these encapsulate the most foundational factors perpetuating current inequities.

SCHOOL FUNDING

SCHOOL FUNDING CAUSAL LOOP

State Policy and Local Shifts in Enrollment Leave Disadvantaged Students with Fewer Resources



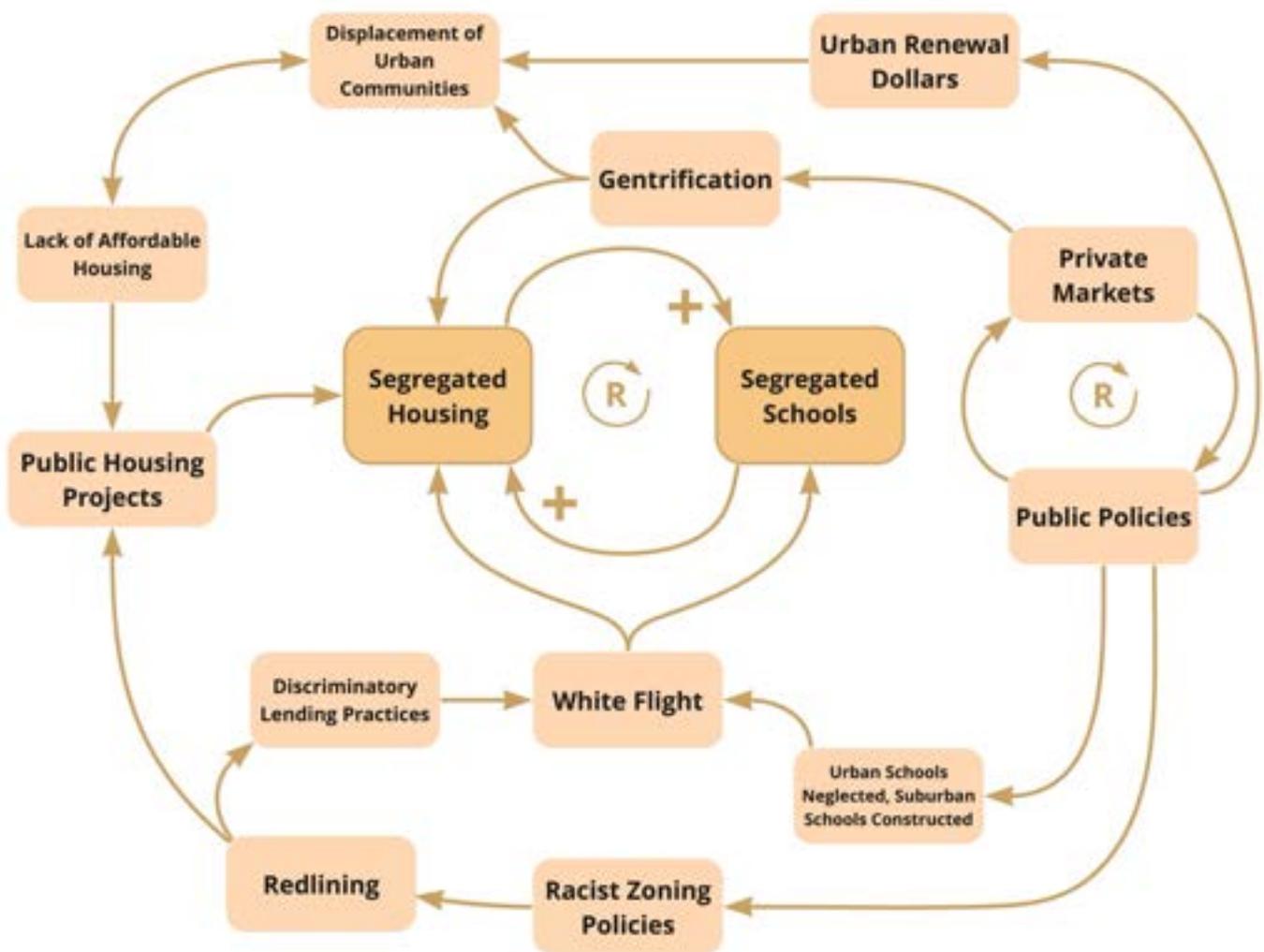
Schools suffer from education funding issues at both local and state levels. Tennessee ranks 44th in the United States in per-pupil school funding.^{iv} The Basic Education Program (BEP), Tennessee’s 30-year-old and recently overhauled school funding formula, does not directly fund individual student needs, leading to inadequate school resources.^v Nashville’s diverse student body is often under-accounted for through insufficient state policy definitions for “low-income,” and census counts miss undocumented students. Thus, while Nashville’s students require higher per-pupil monetary resources than other Tennessee cities, they do not receive the requisite funding.^{vi}

While Nashville has an extensive system of school choice,^{viii} allowing families to send students to schools other than the traditionally assigned public school in their geographical zone, the system disadvantages underprivileged families. Families with limited English proficiency, internet access, and peer group knowledge lack information needed to navigate the complex choice landscape. Transportation limits many lower-income families without access to school buses, cars, or parking fees. Finally, individuals from marginalized backgrounds may feel ostracized in privileged school cultural environments. As a result, school choice in Nashville preserves education inequities more than it mitigates them.

HOUSING

HOUSING CAUSAL LOOP

Segregation in Housing and in Schools Reinforce Each Other



Nashville's history showcases the mutually reinforcing relationship between segregated housing and segregated schools. Public policies and private markets are consistently designed to serve White, wealthy communities. Redlining*, a federal policy that denied Black and low-income residents loans based on their addresses, reinforced housing segregation. The Federal Housing Act of 1943 provided loans incentivizing wealthy White families to move to suburbs. There, the city constructed high-quality schools, moving money away from majority-Black schools in the city and intensifying school segregation.^{ix}

Federal urban renewal grants* incentivized Nashville to bulldoze low-income housing in the downtown area to make space for urban modernization, forcibly displacing communities of color left without affordable housing options.^x Federal public housing and gentrification* concentrated low-income families in racially segregated neighborhoods. Real estate companies donated land to the city of Nashville to build attractive public schools and marketed surrounding neighborhoods to White families, promising homogenous neighborhood schools.

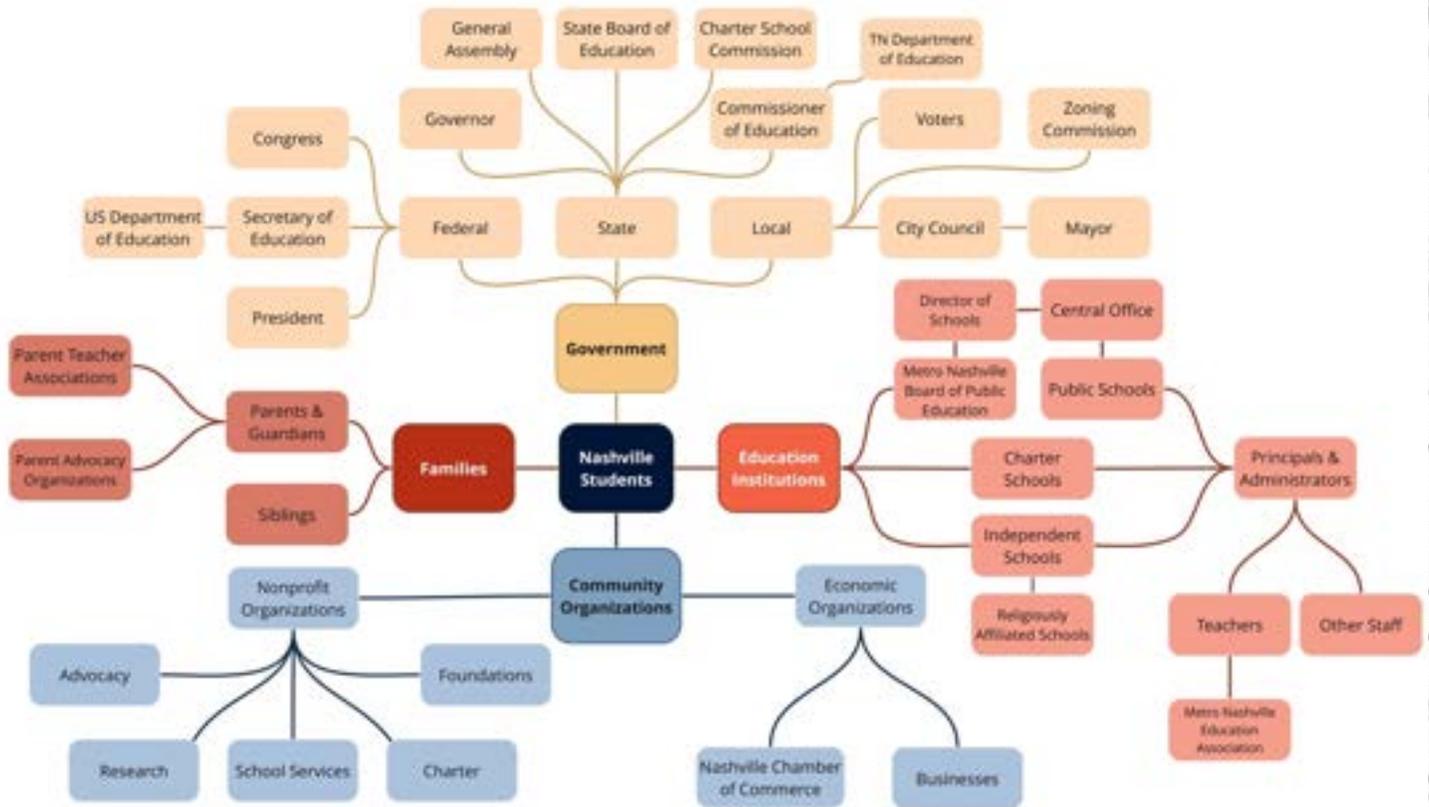
Today, Nashville provides tax breaks to incentivize business development and drive economic growth. These businesses prioritize high-wage, high-skill jobs. Simultaneously, Nashville fails to enact policies supporting the economic security of low-wage workers.^{xi} Nashville currently has no policy in place controlling rent prices, and the state bans Nashville from zoning for affordable housing.^{xii} Tennessee's housing agency offers few tax credits to incentivize developers to build affordable housing in middle-income areas.^{xiii}

Together, the intersecting forces of segregated housing, inaccessible school choice, and insufficient school funding maintain and intensify education inequities.

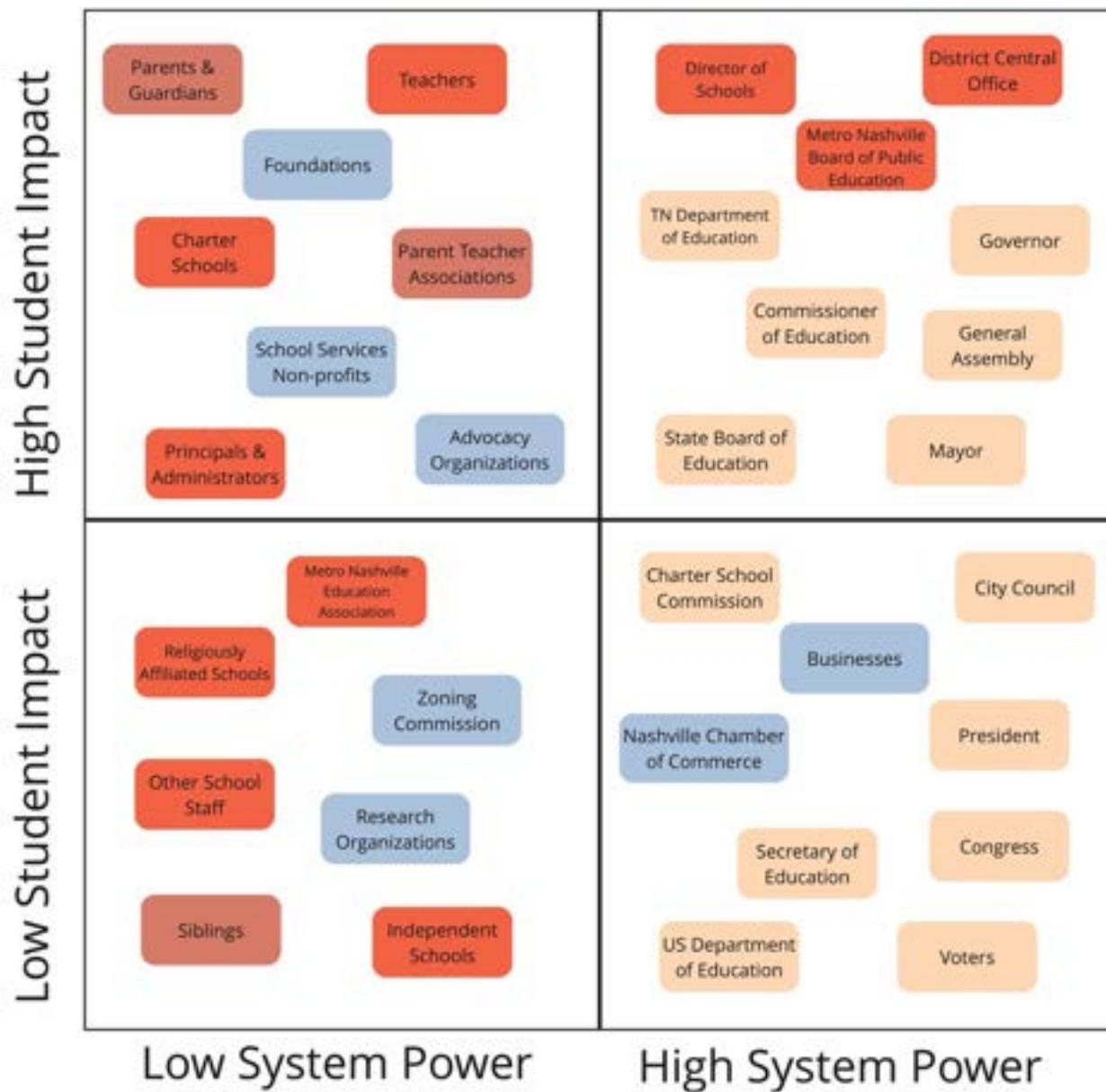
STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Many stakeholders affect the educational experience of Nashville students, despite public education being a government service. Our stakeholder analysis reveals that stakeholders' ability to drive change differs based on the power and degree of impact they have within the system.

STAKEHOLDER MAP



STAKEHOLDER POWER ANALYSIS



STAKEHOLDERS POSITIONED TO CREATE CHANGE

STATE GOVERNMENT

Tennessee state lawmakers hold the power to enact or change policies that impact school funding, curriculum, and accountability*.xiv They must use this position to create the conditions necessary to empower Nashville leaders to create an inclusive education system.

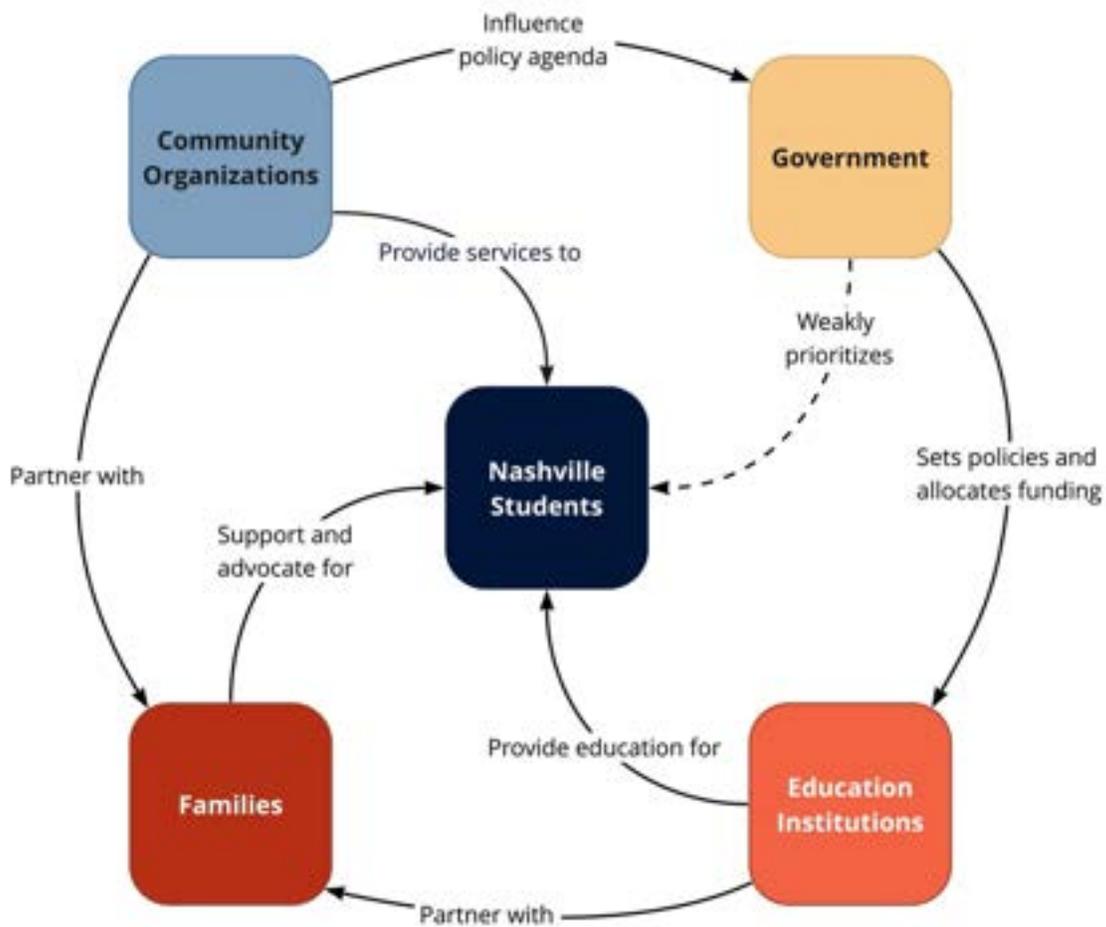
LOCAL OFFICIALS

The Nashville Mayor's Office, the Metro City Council, the Metro Nashville Board of Public Education, and the MNPS Director of Schools set the budget for Nashville's public education system. The district must strategically and equitably allocate its one-billion-dollar annual budget and the \$426 million one-time federal COVID-19 relief funds to grow its staff, build infrastructure, and create programs that directly support students' social, academic, and emotional development.^{xv}

TEACHERS & FAMILIES

Teachers and families have less individual political power, though they possess power when organized around priorities.^{xvi} Across the U.S., teacher unions have gone on strike for higher salaries and parent advocacy organizations have successfully pushed book banning legislation.^{xvii} Strong, well-organized grassroots advocacy from teachers and families can demand change.

STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS



SOLUTIONS LANDSCAPE

EXISTING SOLUTIONS

Nashville's attempts to create more equitable schools began following a federal court order to racially integrate schools in 1971. Since then, the state has provided inadequate education funding, schools re-segregated when race-integration busing* ended, and the district has expanded school choice. We evaluate the existing landscape of solutions for housing, school funding, and school choice.

HOUSING

From 1971 to 1998, federal courts mandated Nashville to bus students to integrated schools to remedy the effects segregated housing.^{xviii} Busing successfully transported students outside their zoned school to facilitate racial integration, but this practice burdened students of color with longer travel than their White peers. Since busing ended in 1998, schools have re-segregated.^{xix}

Nashville has attempted to mitigate segregated housing by zoning for affordable housing as done in Washington, D.C, whose Inclusionary Zoning Affordable Housing Program mandates a percentage of units in new developments to be set aside for affordable housing to promote more mixed-income communities.^{xx} The Nashville Metropolitan Housing and Development Agency can advocate for similar policies, however, the state has implemented roadblocks such as banning Nashville's previous inclusionary zoning policy.^{xxi}

SCHOOL FUNDING

Recently, the Tennessee legislature passed the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement Act (TISA), to replace the 30-year-old Basic Education Program (BEP). TISA uses a student-weighted funding formula*, a more equitable way of distributing state and local funding.^{xxii} The state also invested an additional one billion dollars in public education, but Tennessee still funds education far less than most U.S. states. The school district, however, uses student-weighted funding to allocate more of its budget to schools with higher needs.^{xxiii}

While the relationship between funding and outcomes is not straightforward, evidence suggests that money matters for improving educational outcomes for students^{xxiv}. In California, the Local Control Funding Formula allocates greater resources to districts serving high need populations while giving districts greater autonomy in how to spend funds to best support students. This led to statewide improvements in test scores and graduation rates from 2010-2018.^{xxv}

The city government is responsible for allocating additional money to the district and has traditionally invested more than required by the state to create teacher raises and paid family

leave. The federal government is not a large funder of MNPS, but Title I* funding supplements local funding in schools with high concentrations of students experiencing poverty. However, the funds can go towards any students and any programs at the school, which in some cases lessens direct impact on students with the highest need.^{xxvi} Finally, at the school level, Parent-Teacher Associations raise funds for supplies.

SCHOOL CHOICE

Theoretically, Nashville's many school choice options allow families to find the best fit for their student. Charter schools* and magnet schools are district-level solutions implemented to create more options for students.^{xxvii} While choice is abundant in Nashville, accessing schools outside their housing zone is often unrealistic for disadvantaged families due to transportation barriers. Charter school performance is also varied.^{xxviii}

Outside influences have pushed for expansions of school choice. The first charter school opened in Nashville in 2002. Local charter school advocates like the Scarlett Foundation have successfully increased the number of charters to 34.^{xxix} Nashville also has an impressive array of private schools. In the past decade, Tennessee has tried to enact a voucher program to provide low-income students access to private schools.^{xxx} These programs have strong implications for MNPS funding as students exiting the public system take their public funding with them.

New York City offers universal high school choice based on student preferences and school criteria, in many ways similar to Nashville's goal of universal choice.^{xxxi} However, in New York, choice is supported by robust public transportation infrastructure. This solution is not perfect, though, as low-income students still tend to attend low-performing schools.

GAPS, LEVERS & RECOMMENDATIONS

To cultivate transformative and equitable student growth, we recommend pairing long-term, transformative initiatives with interim actions to address present needs. We propose three levers to dismantle inequity in the school system: encourage family and community investment, pass youth-centered legislation, and foster corporate responsibility that leads to community investment initiatives.

FAMILY & COMMUNITY INVESTMENT

GAP

Nashville has failed to engage disadvantaged families and build community investment in schools among all of the city's residents.

Transformative initiatives:

- MNPS should partner with local museums, sports teams, performing arts groups, and other organizations to utilize under-resourced MNPS schools for pop-up events. This would give the local community access to cultural enrichment events and bring wealthy patrons into MNPS schools, which would make schools valuable community centers for all Nashville residents.
- Nashville should expand public transportation routes so all schools are within easy walking distance of a bus stop to allow more students to access choice schools.

Interim actions to tackle inequity:

- MNPS must revamp its school information webpage to break down the knowledge barrier preventing less privileged families from accessing the school choice system. The district should partner with education-focused nonprofits to disseminate this information to families.
- MNPS and community organizations should collaborate to organize PTA affinity groups (e.g., families of Black students, English Language Learners*, or students with disabilities*, etc.) where families learn and share information in a welcoming and supportive environment. These PTAs could collectively advocate for more funds for disadvantaged students.

Potential roadblocks for implementation:

- In America's individualistic society, the interests of those with power are prioritized over initiatives for community good.

LEGISLATIVE LEVERS

GAP

Lawmakers have consistently passed inequitable funding, housing, and school choice policies that negatively impact disadvantaged students.

Transformative initiatives:

- Tennessee should increase its investment in TISA by \$3.1 billion to put Tennessee at the top of per-pupil spending in the Southeast region.^{xxxii} The state should conduct program evaluations of new district spending on student outcomes.
- State legislators must repeal its policy that prevents Nashville from incentivizing affordable housing developments. They should also offer tax breaks for real estate developers to build low-income housing in middle and high-income neighborhoods, cultivating integrated neighborhoods and schools.

Interim actions to tackle inequity:

- The federal government must dedicate additional Title I funds to bolster in-school wraparound services, such as additional counselors and nurses, to address students' non-academic needs.
- City lawmakers should expand housing vouchers to middle- and low-income families. This would help accommodate rising living costs and make privately-owned rental housing more accessible to these families.
- MNPS should create stipends to incentivize high-quality teachers to teach in low-performing schools.

Potential roadblocks to implementation:

- Tennessee is fiscally conservative and hesitates to allocate more money to education. Nashville and the state government have a strained relationship and often have countering political priorities, leading to stalled progress.

CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY

GAP

The dividends of Nashville's economic growth continued to benefit corporations rather than the city's underserved schools and communities.

Transformative initiatives:

- State and district policymakers should encourage large businesses to expand mentorship and internship programs at the most under-resourced high schools to build sustainable school-to-career pipelines.
- City officials should implement tax breaks and investment mandates to direct businesses to reinvest a percentage of their profit to public schools, via products, services, or fiscal donations.

Interim actions to tackle inequity:

- MNPS can allocate transportation dollars to partner with ride-sharing companies to provide students transportation to access schools outside their zone.
- The federal government should create grants for school-business partnerships, where local businesses provide subsidized pop-up services at schools, such as haircuts, laundry, or groceries.

Potential roadblocks for implementation:

- Businesses are profit-driven and incentives to support local schools must be large enough to sustain partnerships.

INSIGHTS & LESSONS LEARNED

Our research on the education system in Nashville depicts a history of racism and socioeconomic inequity that is maintained and exacerbated to this day, in part by the city's economic focus. The city has invested heavily in a growing downtown city-center, but the increasingly unaffordable cost of living hits historically marginalized communities the hardest.^{xxiii} The benefits of Nashville's economic boom fail to reach many of the district's students. Outcomes have stagnated and disparities between the privileged and less privileged remain. As the city invests in the next high rise, it must face the fact that communities, families, and students historically underserved are left in the rubble.

Nashville must address education inequity using a multi-tiered approach with investment from communities, governments, and businesses. The city must engage all stakeholders to implement long-term transformational change focused on turning schools into community centers, building student-centered public transportation, incentivizing business to invest in school-to-career pipelines, and crafting legislation for affordable housing and full funding for the education system based on individual student needs. In the meantime, the city must make sure students and families can access needed resources through partnerships with PTAs, non-profits, and corporations. After a history of disinvestment in marginalized communities, it's time to intentionally repair the damage.

Our research argues unequivocally; factors beyond the school building, including housing, transportation, and available social services all have profound impacts on students' school experiences. This fact calls for a broad, city-wide vision to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students, no matter their background.

Our report and further research efforts will support future programming at the Oher Foundation and the Nashville Public Education Foundation's Designing the Future initiative.

ENDNOTES

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