

SELECTIVE ADMISSION CRITERIA THAT PUSH OUT LOWER-INCOME STUDENTS

Gentrifying America's school system

Building new public schools and closing others is the latest tool for American mayors to reverse 'white flight' and bring middle-class families back to the cities. As a result good city schools are getting whiter

Richard Keiser | Original text in English

WHEN MIDDLE-CLASS families, mostly but not exclusively white, move from the suburbs to the city to enrol their children in modern schools, property values rise; coffee shops, upscale supermarkets and boutique shopping appear; and rapidly rising costs pressure lower-income renters to move. Meanwhile policing and safety increase with the presence of these privileged residents. This revanchist process of displacement and neighbourhood transformation is called gentrification.

Gentrification is hardly new. City mayors and national leaders from Washington DC have used many strategies to concentrate low-income residents into spaces of low land value, once called ghettos, and to cleanse areas that are closer to downtowns, waterfronts and parks that will attract higher income taxpayers. From the 1930s to the 1970s, American presidents promoted a policy labelled Urban Renewal that used wrecking balls and bulldozers to demolish housing in poor communities, displacing hundreds of thousands, and clearing the way for private developers with government subsidies to create new housing that was unaffordable for almost all former residents.

Governments and the media saw this as a renaissance; many, including James Baldwin, renamed it 'Negro removal', which rhymed with urban renewal and seemed a more honest description. New highways and bridges were used to displace poor Black (and some poor white) communities and create an unworkable, easily policed divide between increasingly crowded areas inhabited by poor people and vast tracts cleared for the middle class. The effort to slow down their exodus to the suburbs led mayors in allegedly bankrupt cities to find money to demolish housing and clear land for sports stadiums, hotels, convention centres and tourist zones like Baltimore's Harborplace.

When the poor were forced to flee to other parts of the city that had lower rents and dilapidated properties, they were less visible to those whom the mayors were trying to attract, middle-class suburbanites and rich tourists. Many of these strategies are less effective today than they once were. Residents who once believed that the benefits of demolition and reconstruction would be shared with those who were displaced are now leaders in the resistance to these strategies, which yield benefits for the privileged and worsen conditions for those already struggling.

Schools a pull back to the city

City schools that do a poor job educating students have always been one of the most significant reasons that white families chose to live in the suburbs. Middle-class families have moved to the suburbs of Chicago, Atlanta, Philadelphia, New York, Detroit and Washington DC for similar reasons. In many American suburbs, public (state) schools range from good to excellent because they are funded by local property taxes. However, in large cities, like Detroit or Philadelphia, the number of families who are lower-income or poor outnumber the rich.

But taxation does not provide enough to pay for good schools throughout the city, and wealthy urbanites send their children to private schools that are more expensive than many universities. Previously, a middle-class family considering a move from the suburbs to the city either paid for expensive private schooling, searched for public schools with special classes solely for advanced students (often called AP or IB classes) or postponed the move to the city until their children moved away for college.



Opening a new public school should not yield a pool of students that is any different from a nearby school that it replaced. Charter schools are taxpayer-funded public schools that operate with different rules from regular neighbourhood schools; most do not produce test scores that are any higher than other urban public schools. But the new schools, including many charters, that have opened near the border between poor neighbourhoods and downtown areas are different. These schools have typically required minimum test scores in reading and maths that are higher than the average scores for schools in the area, making more than half of the local students ineligible for admission.¹

These different rules and procedures for admission have enabled city leaders to rebrand the new schools so they are attractive to middle-income families. This rebranding was produced by city leaders who drew distinctions between failing schools characterised by violence and dysfunction and the new public schools with selective admissions criteria.² By removing low-income students with test scores below the threshold and replacing them with students from other urban or suburban areas with higher test scores, city leaders created the appearance of improvement in scores and education. This generated media attention affirming that the school's teachers have produced success. Test scores appear to have risen; in fact, high-scoring students have been imported and low-scoring students have been excluded.

Higher barriers for students

School officials in cities where poor Black and Latino populations border thriving downtown areas have pursued similar school policies as part of a strategy for urban gentrification. Additional strategies for creating schools with high test scores include exclusion of children with too many absences at a previous school, offering no curriculum for students whose first language is not English, providing no services for disabled students, and advising students with disciplinary

issues to leave the school rather than face expulsion.³ Some schools require parents to get a letter of recommendation from a school counsellor. Many end the school day early, so a parent must be available to pick up a child, and many provide no after-hours programming where children can wait safely for parents until the workday is over. Others require a parent to volunteer at school or attend meetings.

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These demands deter single-parent families and those with both parents working from sending their children to such schools, while middle-class, two-parent families can more easily manage the requirements. Yet another tactic for getting parents of struggling students not to choose a new charter school is by requiring that all students in the new school take some classes in a language other than English.⁴

In Atlanta, white upper middle-class parents did not wait for action by city officials. Faced with the choices of expensive private schools or finding a home in the suburbs, they created a new charter public school. The new school was 50% Black; the Atlanta public school is 87% Black.⁵ White families in all these cities claim that they want to live in socially and economically mixed communities,

but the evidence shows that they do not want to send their children to schools where most students are non-white.

The average test scores of the older schools falls further because their highest-performing students switch to the charters, in a process called 'creaming'. These struggling schools also face declining enrolment numbers when families are forced to move further away because gentrification of the neighbourhood leads to higher rents. Within ten years, the city closes many of these schools due to the drop in enrolments; the properties are then sold, often to developers, who undertake new construction that amplifies the process of gentrification.

Policies that result in the closure of poor-performing schools and the creation of new housing opportunities for the middle class are enabling American cities to transform public perceptions of the school district to attract richer, white families from the suburbs to the city by creating schools with higher white populations and higher test scores.⁶

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Above Schools lead push for a return to the city: seniors in an English 4 class at a charter school, Castlemont High, Oakland, California, 8 May 2018

¹ Mary Pattillo, *Black on the Block: The politics of race and class in the city*, University of Chicago Press, 2007 ² Maia Cucchiara, 'Rebranding urban schools: Urban revitalization, social status, and marketing public schools to the upper middle class', *Journal of Education Policy*, vol 23, no 2, 2008 ³ Sarah Karp, 'One in 10 charter school students transfers out', *The Chicago Reporter*, 11 September 2010 ⁴ Brian Robinson, 'Code-word for getting whiter: Parent experiences and motivations for choosing schools in a gentrified Washington DC', *Journal of School Choice*, vol 15, no 3, April 2022 ⁵ Katherine B Hankins, 'The final frontier: Charter schools as new community institutions of gentrification', *Urban Geography*, vol 28, no 2, 2007 ⁶ Rachel Weber, Stephanie Farmer and Mary Donoghue, 'Why these schools? Explaining school closures in Chicago, 2000-2013', Great Cities Institute, University of Illinois at Chicago, November 2016



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