
Social Stratification and Educational Opportunity in Urban School Systems

Jiayi Li*

University International College, Macau University of Science and Technology, Macao 999078, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Based on the empirical and theoretical studies from 2020 to 2025 at home and abroad, this article will examine how social stratification affects educational opportunities in urban schools. Racial economic segregation, that is, the spatial agglomeration of racial and ethnic minority students in high-poverty schools, has become the main way for structural inequality to be converted into unfair education. The analysis is carried out in four aspects of the spatial and institutional mechanism of school segregation, the impact of socioeconomic status and family background on academic performance, the effect of school resource allocation and funding fairness, and the stratification effect of market-oriented education policy. According to evidence from quasi-experimental and longitudinal studies, access-oriented reforms of the traditional model are powerless to alleviate the long-standing problem of educational inequality, so it is necessary to introduce structural interventions targeting segregation, funding disparities, and institutional tracking practices to advance educational opportunities in cities. The final section of this paper summarizes the deficiencies in previous research and points out the directions for policy-making in current urban school reforms.

Keywords: social stratification; educational opportunity; urban schools; school segregation; racial economic inequality; resource allocation; school choice policy

Online publication: February 26, 2026

1. Introduction

Urban schools find themselves in a peculiar and frequently unfeasible position. Urban schools are expected to function as engines of social mobility, yet they frequently reproduce the very class structures they are tasked with dismantling. Today, this problem feels even more urgent. Race and income continue to deeply divide neighborhoods, and these divisions extend beyond the boundaries of the schoolhouse, defining the environment within.

The years spanning 2020 to 2025 marked a significant shift in how these issues were conceptualized and analyzed. Advances in longitudinal administrative data and causal inference methodologies have yielded a more precise understanding of how schools transmit inequality across generations. Then the pandemic happened. The pandemic was a harsh, unforeseen experiment that exposed the system's inherent flaws. It proved what many already suspected: a student's success depends on a lot more than just what happens within the classroom walls.

This paper examines how four interconnected forces—segregation, family background, funding, and policy—interact to perpetuate existing educational hierarchies. First, the intersection of racial concentration and poverty is the “master

mechanism” here; any adequate explanation of urban educational outcomes must account for the intersection of these two dimensions^[1, 2]. Second, the way we distribute school resources still leaves the most vulnerable kids behind, and it’s a problem rooted in race in a way that looking at “class” alone doesn’t fully explain^[3, 4]. Finally, this paper contends that market-based reforms have failed to dismantle existing educational divisions. Rather than fostering integration, such policies have effectively re-sorted students into configurations that reproduce prior patterns of stratification^[5, 6].

2. Theoretical Framework

Educational inequality has traditionally been examined through two distinct analytical lenses that, until recently, have remained largely disconnected from one another. One group focuses on how schools mirror the outside world’s hierarchies—the structural tradition of conflict theory and Bourdieu. They argue that schools mostly just pass down class advantages while using the language of “merit” to make the whole thing look fair. The other group, mostly economists and quantitative sociologists, digs into the data to track exactly how a family’s socioeconomic standing changes a kid’s path from preschool to college.

Take the work of Rich and Owens^[7]. They’ve moved past the simple idea that a neighborhood is one thing and a school is another. Instead, they talk about “neighborhood-school structures.” Residential location and school attendance are inextricably linked through the interaction of housing policy and school choice regulations. Families aren’t just “in” a neighborhood; they are navigating a system that is often designed to keep existing social gaps right where they are.

On the data side, Reardon and his team found something that shifts the whole conversation: the “achievement gap” in segregated schools is driven almost entirely by racial economic segregation. It isn’t just about the racial mix of the students; it’s about the fact that minority students are disproportionately packed into high-poverty schools. This finding illuminates the limitations of past desegregation efforts: absent concurrent interventions to disrupt concentrated poverty and redistribute material resources, demographic restructuring alone proves insufficient to produce lasting reductions in achievement gaps.

But there is also a human element here—an active one. Bourdieu’s ideas are still essential because families don’t just passively accept whatever education they receive. Posey-Maddox and others^[8] have shown how well-off families engage in “opportunity hoarding.” They use their social standing and connections to navigate school choice, influence how a school is run, or carve out homogeneous spaces for their kids. It’s a strategic game.

3. Patterns of Stratification in Urban School Systems

Over the past five years, scholarly understanding of student sorting mechanisms within urban school systems has grown considerably more refined. The takeaway is fairly consistent: racial and economic segregation works like a funnel, concentrating disadvantage in ways that predictably undermine a student’s entire career.

Reardon’s team conducted the primary research in this area. They analyzed eleven years of test scores from almost every public school district in the U.S. Their work shows that segregation doesn’t just predict how wide achievement gaps are by third grade—it predicts how much faster those gaps will grow by the time kids hit eighth grade. The mechanism underlying this pattern warrants particular attention: the observed effects are attributable not to the racial composition of the student body per se, but rather to the concentration of poverty that racial segregation produces. Segregation systematically shoves certain students into schools defined by intense economic hardship. **Figure 1** illustrates a direct correlation between housing patterns, segregation, concentrated poverty, and ultimately, a decline in school quality and poor academic results.

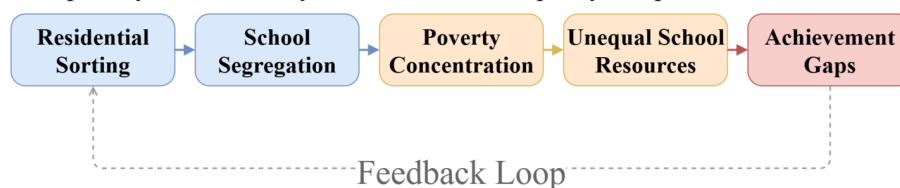


Figure 1. Causal Pathway from Residential Segregation to Educational Outcomes in Urban School Systems.

Jang^[2] points to a frustrating trend: while residential segregation and income gaps have technically declined nationwide, racial economic segregation in schools has actually stuck around—and in some ways intensified—between 1991 and 2022. This trend is especially true in the big metropolitan areas that define the urban landscape. Interestingly, much of this change is happening within the districts themselves. It’s not just a city-versus-suburb issue anymore. Attendance zones, magnet schools, and “school choice” are essentially acting as filters, re-sorting students and keeping these hierarchies alive at the sub-district level.

Research has also yielded a more comprehensive understanding of the cumulative nature of these disadvantages over time. Michelmore and Rich^[9] tracked nearly 130,000 Michigan students from kindergarten all the way to college. Instead of just taking a one-time snapshot of a student’s background, they looked at the whole journey. The numbers are staggering. Over 90 percent of Black students in their study dealt with economic disadvantage at some point during school, compared to about half of White students. Cross-sectional analyses capture only a snapshot of disadvantage, obscuring the cumulative burden of these conditions over time. However, when researchers modeled the joint effects of family, school, and neighborhood contexts simultaneously, observed test score gaps diminished by more than 60 percent. This finding underscores the structural origins of educational inequality, reframing it as a product of institutional and environmental forces rather than family-level deficiencies.

As shown in **Table 1**, the trend is clear. All these recent studies—measuring everything from achievement gaps to resource levels—point to the same conclusion. Urban systems that serve mostly minority and low-income kids are dealing with a stack of disadvantages that reinforce each other. It’s not just poor luck or random variation. This imbalance is the result of a system that has been built and rebuilt to maintain social stratification.

Table 1. Key Empirical Findings on Urban Educational Stratification (2020–2025)

Study	Year	Dataset / Scope	Key Finding	Effect Size or Metric
Reardon et al. ^[1]	2024	U.S. public school districts, 11 yrs, grades 3–8	School poverty mediates virtually all of segregation’s effect on achievement-gap growth	~100% of segregation effect explained by racial economic segregation (poverty pathway)
Jang ^[2]	2024	Longitudinal Imputed School Dataset, 1991–2022	Racial economic segregation persists despite national declines in residential segregation	Within-district segregation increasing in major metropolitan areas
Michelmore & Rich ^[9]	2023	Michigan statewide admin. data, ~130,000 students, K–college	Cumulative disadvantage predicts gaps; three-context controls reduce score gap by > 60%	> 90% of Black students experienced economic disadvantage vs. ~ 50% of White peers
Weathers & Sosina ^[3]	2022	School Funding Fairness Data System, national sample	Racial segregation independently drives funding disparities beyond SES segregation effects	Significant net racial segregation coefficient on per-pupil revenue, net of controls
Jackson et al. ^[4]	2021	U.S. public schools, Great Recession natural experiment	Spending cuts reduce test scores and college enrolment; largest impacts in high-poverty areas	~ 7% mean per-pupil spending cut → significant decline in test scores and college-going rates
Biasi ^[10]	2023	20 U.S. states, 7 cohorts, 13 finance reform events	Finance equalization causally increases intergenerational income mobility	+ 5.6 percentile income rank gain per SD reduction in wealth-spending correlation
Singer ^[5]	2025	Detroit mixed-methods: surveys + interviews	Charter schools enrol fewer deep-poverty students; SES stratification persists within disadvantaged groups	Stratified enrolment driven by geography, social networks, and school selection practices
Bethhäuser et al. ^[8]	2023	Meta-analysis: 42 studies, 15 countries (COVID-19)	Learning deficits concentrated among low-SES students; arose early and persisted without recovery	Pooled effect: Cohen’s d = -0.14; SES gradient significant across all subject areas

4. School Resource Allocation and Funding Equity

While a student’s geographic location may present inherent disadvantages, the level of school funding largely determines the institution’s capacity to mitigate those effects. Recent empirical research has established that school spending is not merely an ancillary benefit but a critical determinant of educational outcomes, particularly for students already grappling with the compounded effects of segregation and poverty.

The Great Recession provides a instructive case study of this dynamic. Jackson, Wigger, and Xiong found that when states cut funding, districts that relied on that money the most—usually urban ones—took a massive hit. Test scores dropped, and fewer kids went to college. However, the brunt of the pain fell disproportionately on students in high-poverty areas. It’s a clear sign that “fiscal austerity” isn’t neutral. It’s a mechanism that predictably widens the gap for the very students who are already struggling.

On the flip side, Biasi^[10] showed that fiscal equalization policies produce measurable gains in intergenerational social mobility. Severing the link between district property wealth and per-pupil expenditures yields significant improvements in the adult income rankings of low-income students. Specifically, reducing that wealth-spending link by one standard deviation led to a 5.6-percentile jump in expected income for those at the bottom of the ladder.

However, a critical complication emerges: income-based interventions alone are insufficient to remedy these funding disparities. Weathers and Sosina examined national data and discovered that racial segregation independently causes funding gaps, regardless of neighborhood poverty levels. Black and Hispanic students are getting less funding because of how district lines are drawn and how property taxes work. It’s a racial issue embedded in the political economy of the system, and “income-blind” reforms simply won’t reach the root of it.

As **Table 2** demonstrates, these inequalities manifest across key resource indicators—from teacher quality and class size to technology availability. The disparities across high-poverty/high-minority districts aren’t random. These resource disparities reflect the segregation patterns documented above. Far from constituting an incidental byproduct, funding inequity represents a central organizing principle of urban education—one systematically reproduced by the very fiscal mechanisms intended to sustain it.

Table 2. Comparative Resource Indicators: High-Poverty/High-Minority vs. Low-Poverty/Low-Minority Urban Districts

Resource Indicator	High-Poverty / High-Minority Districts	Low-Poverty / Low-Minority Districts	Primary Source
Per-pupil expenditure (inflation-adjusted, USD)	\$8,200 – \$10,500	\$11,800 – \$15,400	Weathers & Sosina ^[3] ; Biasi ^[10]
Teachers with advanced degrees (%)	28% – 38%	52% – 67%	Reardon et al. ^[11]
Teachers with < 3 years experience (%)	32% – 44%	14% – 22%	Reardon et al. ^[11]
Student-to-teacher ratio (core subjects)	22 – 27 : 1	16 – 21 : 1	Jackson et al. ^[4]
Schools offering ≥ 1 AP/IB course (%)	42%	89%	Jang ^[2] ; Singer ^[5]
Per-pupil state revenue as % of total revenue	61%	39%	Weathers & Sosina ^[3]
Digital device access (devices per student)	0.61 : 1	1.04 : 1	Betthäuser et al. ^[8]

5. Policy Interventions and Their Limitations

Over the past two decades, market-based reforms—including charter schools, school choice policies, and open enrollment systems—have been widely embraced as a solution to the inequalities produced by neighborhood-based school assignment. The theory suggested that we could overcome the structural obstacles schools face by relying on parental agency and competition. However, recent research presents a stark reality. Instead of breaking down these walls, market mechanisms often interact with existing inequalities in ways that just reinforce the status quo.

Take Detroit. Singer looked at its choice-heavy market and found that charter schools actually enroll fewer kids from the deepest levels of poverty than local neighborhood schools do. This happens even when the schools are technically serving the same low-income or minority populations. It's not just one thing; it's a mix of geographic barriers, reputations built on test score "signals," and subtle enrollment pressures. These forces naturally favor families who have the social connections and logistics to navigate a complex system. It isn't a failure of the parents themselves—it's a design flaw in the "choice" system that creates a tiered hierarchy among people who are already disadvantaged.

A more subtle, and often overlooked, mechanism also operates within this dynamic. Ukanwa, Jones, and Turner found that even when race isn't the explicitly stated goal, the way parents pick schools can lead straight back to segregation. In their experiment, Black and White parents weighed priorities differently. Black families, trying to locate a way to offset structural disadvantages, focused heavily on performance ratings. White families prioritized geographic convenience and shorter commutes. But since those performance ratings are often just a reflection of which kids are already in the building—a legacy of decades of lopsided funding—both groups end up gravitating toward the same few schools for entirely different reasons. Rational individual choices are, ironically, producing resegregation as a structural outcome.

As shown in **Figure 2**, it's essentially a self-reinforcing feedback loop. Existing stratification influences the signals of school quality, which in turn affects parents' choices, thereby reinforcing the original stratification. It happens regardless of whether anyone has specific "racial intentions." Unless market-based policies are built with deliberate guardrails—things like weighted lotteries, free transportation, or better information equity—they aren't going to correct urban education. In fact, they might just make the divisions deeper.

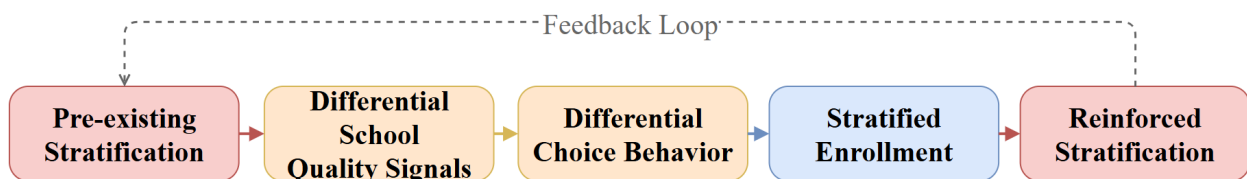


Figure 2. Self-Reinforcing Feedback Loop Between Social Stratification and School Choice in Urban Systems.

The way COVID-19 hit schools really showed how existing cracks in the system determine who survives a crisis. Look at the meta-analysis by Betthäuser, Bach-Mortensen, and Engzell—they looked at 42 studies across 15 countries, and the data is pretty clear: kids from low-SES backgrounds took the biggest hit. These deficits showed up almost immediately after schools shut down, and they haven't really gone away; there's been no real recovery. Urban schools were basically the epicenter for this. They stayed closed the longest, and their students were already dealing with the worst of it—cramped apartments, spotty internet, and families losing income. This provides compelling evidence that inequality is not merely an incidental outcome but a foundational feature of the institutional structure—one that systematically deepens with each exogenous shock or policy failure.

6. Discussion

The evidence presented throughout this paper demonstrates that urban educational inequality is not merely a collection of discrete institutional failings, but rather a deeply embedded structural phenomenon. A few things stand out. First, these disadvantages don't just happen in parallel—they pile up. It's a chain reaction where residential segregation pushes kids into segregated schools, which then creates a concentration of poverty that wears down the actual quality of the schooling. As Section 3 highlights, the real predictor of racial gaps from kindergarten through college isn't necessarily how dire things are at one specific moment, but rather the total amount of time a student spends living and learning under those conditions.

Second, race and class must be analytically distinguished; conflating the two obscures their distinct and interacting roles in educational stratification. Race and class are distinct, and attempting to replace one with the other fails to grasp

their significance. Weathers and Sosina found that racial segregation creates funding gaps regardless of the socioeconomic mix, and Reardon’s work shows that family income alone doesn’t explain why racial achievement gaps persist. If a policy treats race as just a stand-in for poverty, it’s going to overlook the specific ways the system holds certain students back. It is possible to intervene on the economic dimensions of educational inequality while leaving underlying racial disparities substantially unchanged.

Finally, the evidence suggests that focusing on individual choices or “access” isn’t enough. Giving families more school choices, handing out laptops, or teaching “social-emotional” skills might feel productive, but if the underlying structure is broken, these fixes are usually temporary at best. The data on school finance ^[10] points to a more lasting solution: we have to modify how resources are distributed. If we want to actually close these gaps, the money and support have to follow the disadvantaged. It’s about changing the foundation, not just the people standing on it.

7. Conclusion

The central thesis of this paper is that urban educational outcomes are shaped by the convergence of four structurally linked forces: residential location, family resources, funding systems, and policy frameworks. They’re also deeply tied to race in a way that simply giving people more “access” or “choice” won’t solve. The evidentiary record identifies racial economic segregation as the primary mechanism driving educational inequality. Resource disparities within schools serve to amplify this effect, a pattern that cannot be adequately explained through class-based analyses alone.

Several important gaps in the literature warrant further investigation. First, while the relationship between concentrated poverty and depressed educational outcomes is well established, the specific institutional mechanisms through which this effect operates remain inadequately theorized and empirically underspecified. Second, the overwhelming preponderance of evidence derives from U.S. contexts, raising questions about the generalizability of these findings to urban systems characterized by different demographic compositions or alternative models of school finance. Third, existing research has insufficiently attended to the intersectional dynamics of educational inequality—specifically, how dimensions such as gender, immigration status, and disability intersect with race and class to produce distinctive patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

The policy implications of this analysis are clear, regardless of the challenges that may arise during implementation. In order to make significant progress, meaningful progress requires structural reforms, including genuine desegregation, equitable school funding, and the elimination of tracking systems that sort students into differentiated instructional pathways within the same institution. Conversely, expanding school choice without accompanying equity safeguards, or continuing to tie school funding to local property wealth, serves only to perpetuate existing patterns of educational stratification.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Reardon SF, Weathers ES, Fahle EM, et al., 2024, Is separate still unequal? New evidence on school segregation and racial academic achievement gaps. *American Sociological Review*, 89(6): 971-1010.
- [2] Jang H, 2024, Racial economic segregation across US Public Schools, 1991–2022. *AERA Open*, 10: 23328584241282274.
- [3] Weathers ES, Sosina VE, 2022, Separate remains unequal: Contemporary segregation and racial disparities in school district revenue. *American Educational Research Journal*, 59(5): 905-938.

- [4] Jackson CK, Wigger C, Xiong H, 2021, Do school spending cuts matter? Evidence from the Great Recession. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 13(2): 304-335.
- [5] Singer J, 2025, School choice, socioeconomic status, and stratified enrollment in urban districts: Evidence from Detroit. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 47(3): 821-846.
- [6] Ukanwa K, Jones AC, Turner BL, Jr., et al., 2022, School choice increases racial segregation even when parents do not care about race. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119(35): e2117979119.
- [7] Rich P, Owens A, 2023, Neighborhood–school structures: A new approach to the joint study of social contexts. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 49(1): 297-317.
- [8] Betthäuser BA, Bach-Mortensen AM, Engzell P, et al., 2023, A systematic review and meta-analysis of the evidence on learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7(3): 375-385.
- [9] Michelmore K, Rich P, 2023, Contextual origins of Black-White educational disparities in the 21st century: Evaluating long-term disadvantage across three domains. *Social Forces*, 101(4): 1918-1947.
- [10] Biasi B, 2023, School finance equalization increases intergenerational mobility. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 41(1): 1-38.

Publisher's note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.