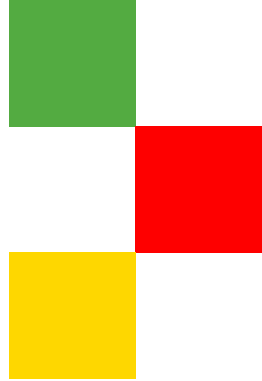




CENTER FOR
POLICY & ACTION

EQUITY IN ACCESS:

Public School
Choice As A Lever
For Achievement



**The National
Parents Union**

FOREWORD



KERI RODRIGUES

Co-Founder, Founding President

Equity in Access:
Public school
choice as a lever
for achieving
an excellent
and equitable
education for
every Child in
America

It is time our education system serves the needs of modern families. In 2023, and as we look ahead to 2024, families should no longer be confined to school boundary lines-- one of the last remaining vestiges of our country's redlined past. Families deserve bold change, and it is incumbent on policymakers to reflect on how limiting student choice options based on zip codes creates unequal access to opportunity for children across the United States.

In representing the concerns of modern families, the National Parents Union is calling for the education system to level up and provide families with the flexibility to choose the school that best suits their child's individual needs, regardless of their neighborhood to ensure that every student has the chance to access a high-quality education.

As schools across the country struggle with historic enrollment declines and an increased desire from parents to reimagine education, **adopting statewide open enrollment policies, recognizing the importance of building new school models, providing parents with data to make informed choices, embracing accountable K-12 scholarship programs and ensuring that all public schools serve all students** are priorities for the National Parents Union and our partners doing this work across the country. In 2024, let's officially get rid of redlines and expand great school opportunities for all kids.

In the year of 2023, there is no reason that the zip code a child lives in should limit their access to opportunity- kids across the country deserve access to a variety of high quality, accountable choices that prepare them for a life of opportunity.

Onward,


Keri Rodrigues

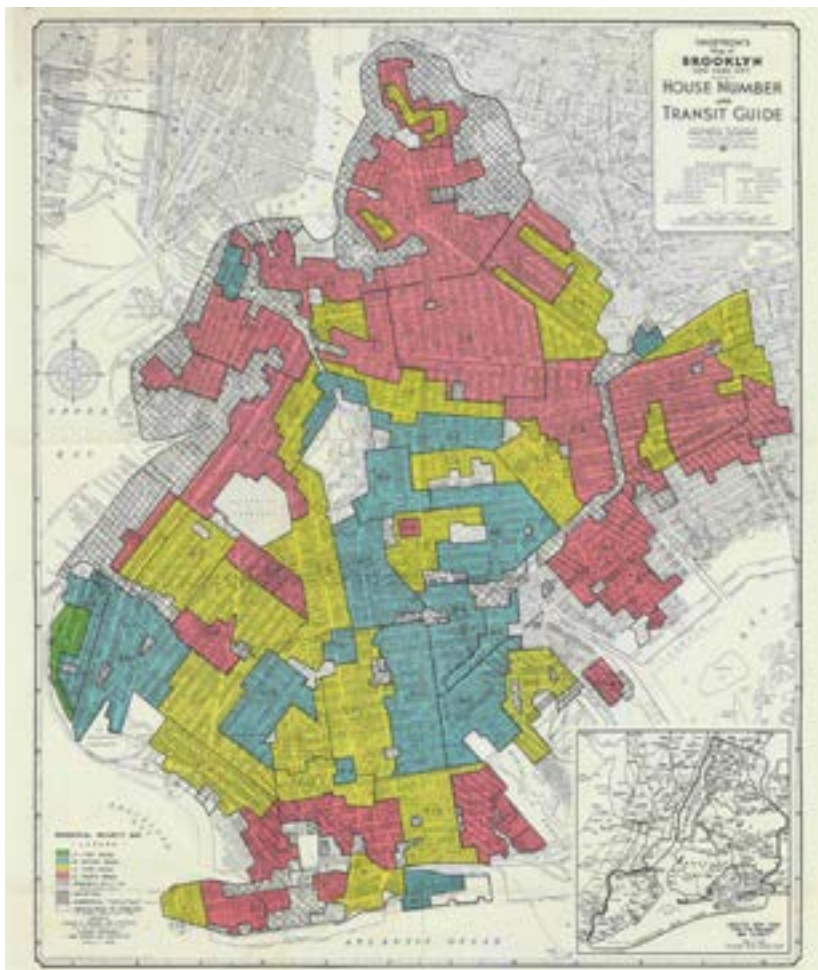
EQUITY IN ACCESS: PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE AS A LEVER FOR ACHIEVING AN EXCELLENT AND EQUITABLE EDUCATION FOR EVERY CHILD IN AMERICA

For too long in the United States, a child's zip code has meant limited **access to education opportunities**. In many school districts across the country, it is a crime to enroll your student in a school that is outside of your geographic boundary.¹ School boundaries mirror redlined real estate areas originally meant to segregate neighborhoods based on race. Some of the last lines that exist as a result of redlining are school district boundaries. Schools in previously redlined neighborhoods are more likely to have low test scores and less opportunities.²

A student's zip code remains the number one factor in how they enroll in school across the country. Despite growing opportunities to choose another option via charter schools, magnets, and public school open enrollment policies, 71% of students attend their assigned public school.³ As a result of residential assignment, those who can afford to move to neighborhoods with better schools, have access to more educational opportunities – creating deep generational inequities that limit social mobility and economic opportunities.

In a 2019 Senate Joint Economic Committee report, the median price of homes in zip codes associated with highly rated schools was four times as much as the median price of homes associated with poorly rated schools.⁴ Schools in previously redlined neighborhoods have less diverse student populations and worse average test scores relative to schools originally ranked as superior by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, the lending mechanism in the 1930's responsible for redlining neighborhoods.⁵

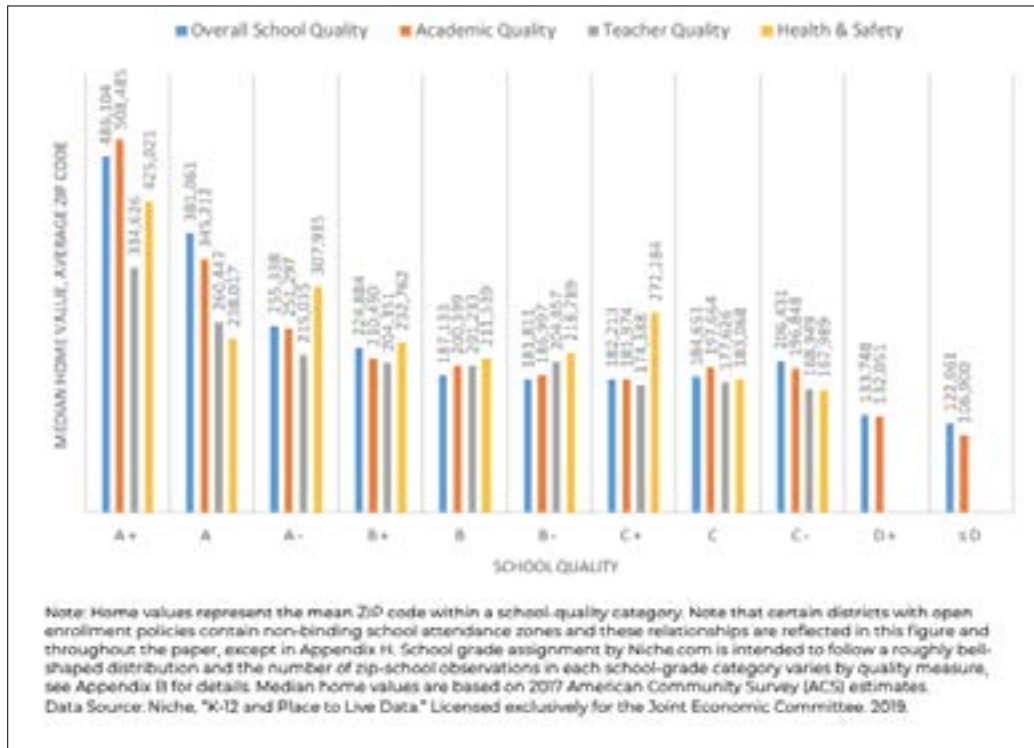
THE 1938 HOME OWNERS' LOAN CORPORATION MAP OF BROOKLYN⁶



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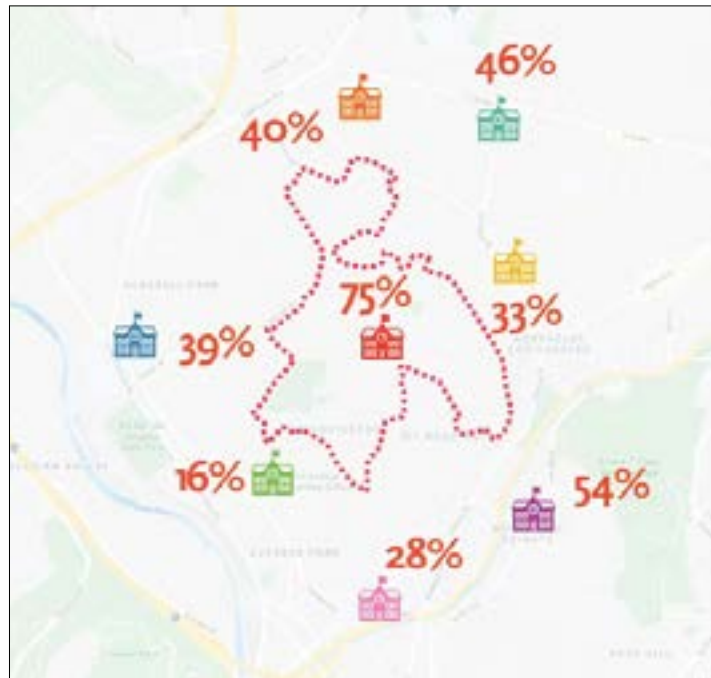
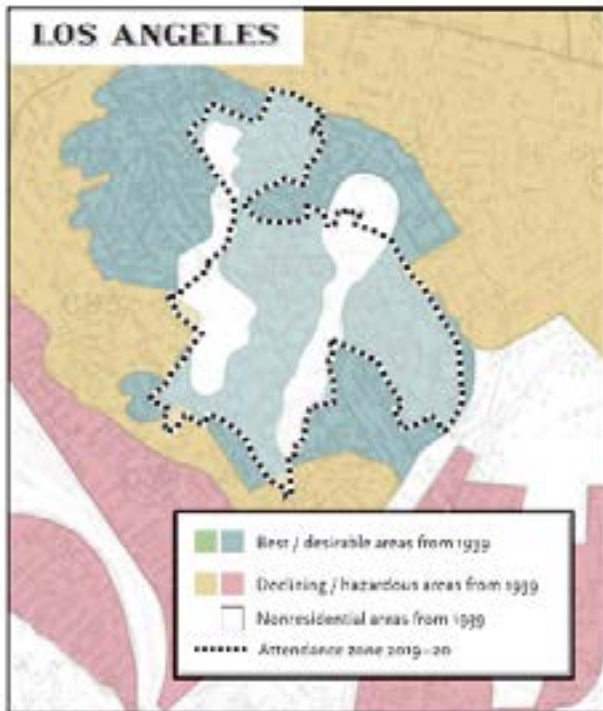
THE 1938 HOME OWNERS' LOAN CORPORATION MAP OF BROOKLYN⁶



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Equity in Access: Public school choice as a lever for achieving an excellent and equitable education for every Child in America

In his book, *A Fine Line*, Education Researcher Tim DeRoche compared the student proficiency data to the redlines drawn in the 1930's. Below is a 1930's redlined map of the Mount Washington Neighborhood, which is in North East Los Angeles.⁷ In the Los Angeles neighborhood detailed below, the previously redlined schools are now school boundaries. In 2023, if you live in the area deemed "superior" by the 1930's Home Owners' Loan Corporation, your students have the opportunity to attend a school where 75% of students are reading on grade level. **If you live just a block on the other side of that 1930's redline, you are forced to attend a school where only 3 out of 10 kids are reading on grade level.**



* % reading proficiency in 2019.

As schools across the country struggle with historic enrollment declines and an increased desire from parents to reinvent education:

- 1. Adopting statewide open enrollment policies**
- 2. Recognizing the importance of building new school models**
- 3. Providing parents with data to make informed choices**
- 4. Embracing accountable K-12 scholarship programs and ensuring that all schools serve all students**

are priorities for the National Parents Union and our partners doing this work across the country.

OPEN ENROLLMENT = OPEN OPPORTUNITY

The National Parents Union supports improving open enrollment policies that include inter- and intra-district open enrollment. Every child should have the ability to enroll in any public school in their state and be provided the transportation and resources to attend.

Embracing open enrollment, which allows students to enroll in any school within their state, serves as a powerful tool for promoting equity and empowerment. While 43 states have some sort of open enrollment, only 11 states have mandatory open enrollment laws and often because of district level boundary policies, the majority of public school children do not have access to schools outside of their residential boundary assignment.⁸

Open enrollment breaks down barriers related to a student's zip code or socioeconomic background. By providing families with the flexibility to choose the school that best suits their child's individual needs, regardless of their neighborhood, it levels the playing field and ensures that every student has the chance to access a high-quality education. Open enrollment policies create opportunities for kids to attend specialized schools and more generally, give families the ability to leave a low-performing school that is likely not adequately serving their kids and find a better option.

Students using Texas' transfer policy were more likely to transfer to school districts ranked as "A" under the state's district report card accountability system and less likely to transfer to school districts with lower rankings, such as "C," "D," or "F."⁹ Similarly, in 2016 and 2021, California's Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) found that nearly all students participating in the state's District of Choice program transferred to districts with higher test scores.¹⁰

Open enrollment policies give families greater access to a variety of school options, creating a more even playing field for families from low-income or marginalized communities. Such policies encourage schools to be more responsive to student and family needs and provide the best possible educational experience. This not only benefits students who already have access to top-notch schools but also forces struggling schools to take necessary steps to enhance their quality and offerings, ensuring that no child is left behind. In this way, public school choice acts as a catalyst for school improvement and accountability, ultimately benefiting all students in the public education system.

Embracing open enrollment policies promotes diversity and inclusivity within schools. Allowing students to cross district and neighborhood boundaries encourages schools to create more inclusive and culturally diverse environments. This exposure to a variety of backgrounds and perspectives enriches the educational experience for all students and prepares them for the increasingly diverse global society they will enter upon graduation. In essence, public school choice is a potent tool for equity, empowerment, and access to high-quality education, fostering a brighter future for our children and strengthening our educational system as a whole.



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NEW HOPES AND DREAMS: EMBRACING ALL SCHOOL MODELS

The National Parents Union supports improving the ability for communities to design and open new schools and create education programming that is responsive to the needs of their kids and communities.

Opening new, creative school models, often through high-quality public charter schools, offers numerous benefits to students and families. There is one public school system in which families should find a variety of high quality educational opportunities so that they can decide which option will best meet the needs of their child. There is no “one size fits all” approach that will meet all of the needs of all of America’s families. So when a school community is not satisfied with their current options or has an idea how they can better meet the needs of children, the design and opening of new public school models can create new opportunities to meet the individual needs of all students and improve student outcomes overall. In Denver, when the district opened new high-quality charter and innovation schools, the district saw an overall increase in student achievement and specifically, increases in student achievement for Black, Hispanic, English language learners and special education students in their district authorized charter schools.¹¹

Lifting barriers to communities opening new schools by creating high-quality charter authorizing practices, community school design models and opportunities and lifting caps that prevent communities from designing their own schools is essential to ensuring that every child, in every neighborhood, has access to a high quality school.

Not only does adding new school options to districts improve student outcomes, they also provide students with options that cater to students’ unique learning needs and interests. For example, students who utilize the common application in Denver Public Schools have access to Science and Technology programs, International Baccalaureate programs, Dual Language models and Art programs, giving students the ability to enhance their learning in areas that interest them.¹² Traditional district schools often follow a one-size-fits-all approach, but charter and innovation schools have the flexibility to design specialized curricula and teaching methods. This customization allows students to choose schools that align with their individual strengths, talents, and passions, fostering a more engaging and personalized learning experience.

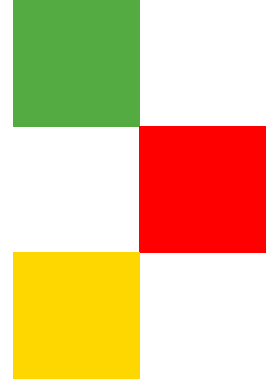
It is also important to note that the charter school authorization process promotes accountability and transparency. Charter schools operate with a contract, or charter, that outlines their performance expectations and goals. If they fail to meet these standards, they can be shut down, ensuring that taxpayer funds are used effectively. This accountability mechanism ensures that students attending charter schools are receiving a high-quality education, something that is not guaranteed in district schools that are allowed to remain open, regardless of performance. Additionally, the autonomy granted to charter schools allows them to respond quickly to changing educational needs and adapt to the evolving demands of the job market, better preparing students for future success.

Overall, the proliferation of creative school models through the public charter school authorization process benefits students by expanding choice, driving creativity in the classroom to meet individual student needs, and enhancing educational accountability.



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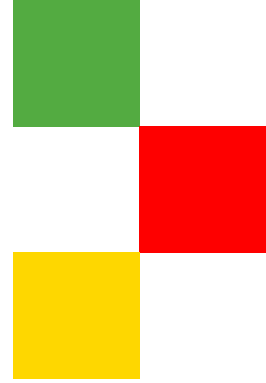
EMPOWERING PARENTS WITH INFORMATION

The National Parents Union supports high-quality assessments that allow us to better support struggling learners, empower families to make informed choices about their school options, and hold systems accountable for ensuring that every child has access to a great school.

Granting parents access to school-level, disaggregated student achievement data is a crucial step in empowering them. Firstly, this access provides parents with a clear and objective view of a school's performance, allowing them to make informed decisions about their child's education. Armed with data on standardized test scores, graduation rates, and other relevant metrics, parents can assess which schools are excelling and which may need improvement. This transparency enables parents to choose schools that align with their expectations and their child's needs, thereby ensuring a more tailored and effective educational experience.

Secondly, access to student achievement data fosters greater accountability within the education system. When parents can easily access information about a school's performance, it should encourage schools to focus on improving their outcomes and serving their students better. Schools that consistently perform well are rewarded with increased enrollment, while those lagging behind are pressured to make necessary changes. This accountability mechanism has the power to drive overall improvements in educational quality, benefiting all students in the process.

Moreover, access to student achievement data empowers parents to advocate for their child's education. Armed with objective data, parents can engage in meaningful discussions with educators, school administrators, and policymakers to address concerns and push for necessary changes in their child's school or district. This active involvement not only improves the quality of education for their child but also contributes to broader improvements in the education system. In essence, providing parents with school-level student achievement data is a powerful tool that equips them to make informed choices, hold schools accountable, and actively participate in shaping the future of education for their children and their communities.



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Equity in Access:
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SCHOOL CHOICE SCHOLARSHIPS: ENSURING EQUITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The National Parents Union supports school choice scholarship programs that provide students with resources to seek other school options, including private school, micro school and homeschool options. We believe these programs must be accessible to families from low-income communities, special education students and other marginalized groups as a priority.

As school choice options continue to expand, it becomes increasingly essential to emphasize equity and accountability as the cornerstones of this evolving educational landscape. Equity must be at the forefront of these reforms to ensure that every student, regardless of their background or socio-economic status, has equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities. By prioritizing equity, we can work to bridge the achievement gap that has persisted in our education system for far too long.

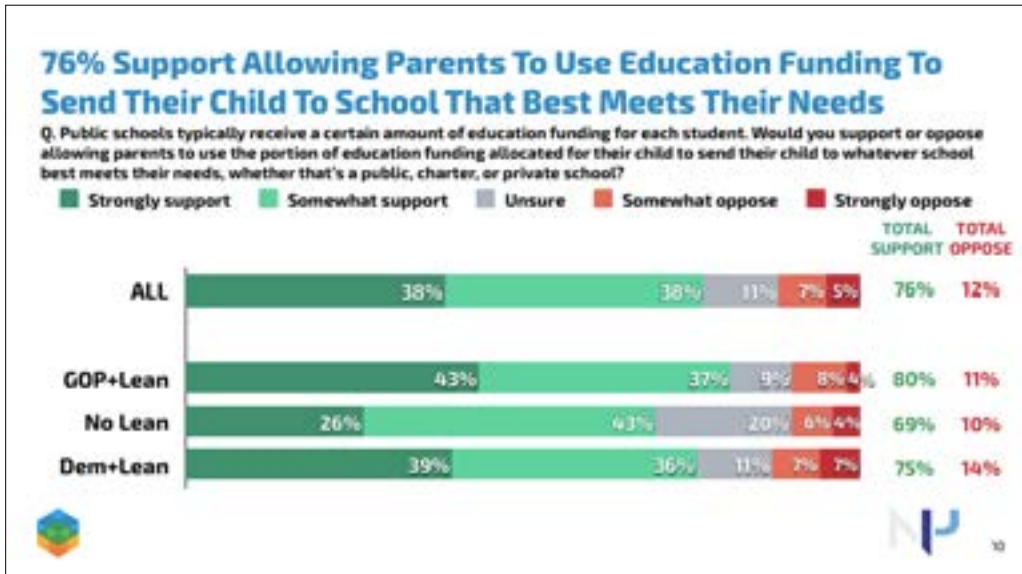
School choice should not exacerbate existing disparities but instead serve as a means to level the playing field. Policies and mechanisms should be in place to guarantee that vulnerable and historically underserved populations have the same access and resources as their more privileged counterparts, thus promoting educational justice.

Simultaneously, accountability is crucial to maintain the integrity of school choice programs. Accountability measures help guarantee that public funds are spent efficiently and that all schools, whether traditional public, charter public, or private are held to high standards of performance. Transparent and objective assessments of student outcomes, teacher qualifications, and financial management are necessary to ensure that schools are delivering on their promises to provide quality education.

Accountability mechanisms also protect against fraudulent or subpar schools entering or staying in the educational marketplace. By combining school choice with strong accountability measures, we can create an education system that not only offers options to parents but also ensures that those options are of consistently high-quality, benefiting all students and society as a whole.

OVERWHELMING SUPPORT OF PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

Not only is adopting school choice policies a matter of equity driven reform, it is also consistently popular among parents and voters. In the chart below, we see strong support across party lines for providing families with the education funds allocated to their student to use in a way that matches the school that the family believes will best meet their child’s needs.



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CONCLUSION

Policymakers in states across the country must examine antiquated policies where students do not have choices beyond their neighborhoods. Advancing school choice for families is a critical tool of empowerment and an advancement of equity.

EXAMPLES OF SCHOOL CHOICE IN ACTION:

COLORADO

Colorado requires public schools to participate in both cross-district and within-district open enrollment. More than 145,000 Colorado students—16% of the state’s public school population—attended a traditional public school **other than their geographically assigned one**.¹³ Schools can only reject transfer applicants under certain circumstances, such as lack of capacity. Moreover, they cannot charge tuition to transfer students.

EXAMPLE OF LIMITED OPPORTUNITY BASED ON ZIP CODE:

FULTON COUNTY, GEORGIA

In January 2023, approximately 400 students were **unenrolled** from Westlake High School in Georgia following a round of address verifications conducted by the Fulton County School District. Citing overcrowding, district officials stated that the number of students enrolled at the high school was higher than the numbers from the feeder middle schools indicated it should be. When questioned by outraged parents, district officials claimed the address verifications indicated the affected students should have been attending other schools in the district.

From the start, however, the verification process was flawed. Parents who submitted the required property and utility documents within the district-set schedule still found their children kicked out of school, despite receiving confirmation from school officials that they should be enrolled at Westlake. And, parents who went to the district headquarters for answers were told to leave or they would be arrested.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ https://availabletoall.org/report-when-good-parents-go-to-jail/?et_fb=1&PageSpeed=off
- ² Vanessa Calder-Brown, “Zoned Out: How School and Residential Zoning Limit Educational Opportunity,” SCP report no. 6-19 | November 2019
- ³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. “Digest of Education Statistics, 2017” (NCES 2018-070). (2019). <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=6>
- ⁴ Vanessa Calder-Brown, “Zoned Out: How School and Residential Zoning Limit Educational Opportunity,” SCP report no. 6-19 | November 2019, www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/f4880936-8db9-4b77-a632-86e1728f33f0/jecreport-zoned-out.pdf
- ⁵ Dylan Lukes and Christopher Cleveland, “The Lingering Legacy of Redlining on School Funding, Diversity, and Performance,” Brown University, Annenberg Institute, EdWorking Papers, 11/2021, www.edworkingpapers.com/ai21-363 (accessed 3 August, 2022).
- ⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/upshot/how-redlinings-racist-effects-last-ed-for-decades.html>
- ⁷ <https://timderoche.com/a-fine-line/>
- ⁸ https://reason.org/wp-content/uploads/public-schools-without-boundaries.pdf?utm_medium=email
- ⁹ Aaron Smith, Emily Sass, Christian Barnard, and Jordan Campbell, Texas Student Transfer Dashboard, reason.shinyapps.io/texas_student_transfer_dashboard/ (accessed 3 August 2022).
- ¹⁰ “Evaluation of the District of Choice Program.” California Legislature, Legislative Analyst’s Office. January 27, 2016, www.lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/3331 (accessed 3 August 2022); “Follow-Up Evaluation of the District of Choice Program,” California Legislature, Legislative Analyst’s Office, February 1, 2021, www.lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4329 (accessed 3 August 2022).
- ¹¹ CREDO Study <https://credo.stanford.edu/reports/item/denver/>
- ¹² <https://schoolchoice.dpsk12.org/enrollment/guide/>
- ¹³ Ragland and Hulse, “Open Doors, Open Districts,” Ready Colorado.”



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