We started with a question.

Why are our schools the way they are and what’s preventing some of our students from thriving in school? While we had some theories, we began to realize that we didn’t have a solid understanding of why certain policies and decisions were put in place decades ago and the effect of those policies and decisions on our students today.

Fast forward two years and hundreds of conversations later, and By Design: The Shaping of Nashville’s Public Schools was born. With this one-hour film, we hoped to create a shared understanding among Nashvillians of how we got to where we are as well as to provide space for conversations about where we go from here so that all our students can thrive in school.

About the Film

By Design: The Shaping of Nashville’s Public Schools is a documentary produced by the Nashville Public Education Foundation examining historical moments of public schooling in Nashville dating back to the 1800s. The film is intended to educate city leaders and the community and to generate awareness and advocacy to stimulate policy solutions for a better public school system where all students thrive. Learn more and watch the film at https://nashvillepef.org/by-design.
A Roadmap for Telling your City's History of Public Schools

Understand your intentions
Think critically about why telling the history of schools is important to your city and what actions you want your audience to take.

Do your research
Leverage historians, authors, reporters, and other experts who have a deep knowledge of your city's political, social, educational, and cultural history.

Use local voices to find the story
Personal narratives of the lived experiences related to your city's story - such as the students who originally integrated Nashville public schools featured in By Design - are invaluable. Use these interviews to guide the themes and takeaways.

Identify the right moment
Every community has unique political forces that affect public discourse. Evaluate your local context for complementary conversations, willing collaborators, and influential community leaders to determine community readiness.

Land the plane
Telling the history of your city's schools is not the end game. Determine what other actions need to happen - town hall convenings, discussions with policymakers, student voice events, etc. - to leverage the story to drive change.