

# By DESIGN

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How Nashville  
Created and Sustains  
Inequities in our Schools



Nashville  
Public Education  
FOUNDATION

HELPING CHILDREN THRIVE SINCE 2002

# By Design

## HOW NASHVILLE CREATED AND SUSTAINS INEQUITIES IN OUR SCHOOLS



**T**he documentary *By Design: The Shaping of Nashville's Public Schools* illustrates the ways in which the growth and development of the city of Nashville and the evolution of Nashville's public schools are intrinsically linked. *By Design* explores how schools were designed within a larger system of social structures that collectively inhibit the ability for students of color and their families to gain access to resources that help them succeed. Frankly, we operate in a system that makes it easier for low-income students and students of color to fail. Not unlike other U.S. cities, Nashville was designed to create the inequitable education outcomes we see today. Guided by federal law, Nashville developed against a backdrop of racism and legal segregation that informed the policies upon which Nashville functions to this day. Policies such as federal housing assistance, urban development, redlining, and "intelligent zoning" have segregated the city by race and income, leaving schools responsible for overcoming deep, racially rooted inequities.

Black residents have always sought ways to create vibrant communities in spite of these policies designed to prevent them from thriving. Examples from Jefferson Street, the Edgehill Neighborhood, Pearl and Cameron High Schools, and many others show the resilience and fortitude that Black Nashvillians contributed to the city over generations. Yet the city's inconsistent (and at times utterly absent) investments, coupled with the active removal of key resources from Black neighborhoods, have ensured that deep inequities between white and Black communities in Nashville remain.

While we attempt to no longer govern from racist motivations, we have been unable or unwilling to address the fact that generations of racist policies dictate many of the results we see in our schools. Small scale efforts to reshape the system or drive more equitable policy fail to address the ways in which Nashville's schools are operating as designed. We can continue to address our schools' challenges by targeting resources to individual programs and initiatives, which can yield modest or one-off results. Or we can recognize that social policies outside the school system lead to many of the unacceptable results we see today. At the same time we work to address school conditions, we must also identify and dismantle the inequities baked into our communities that prevent too many of our students from thriving.

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### ***By Design: Building Nashville's Segregated Neighborhoods***

**N**ashville's housing policies have always dictated who could live in which areas of the city, what types of housing and investments would be built in different neighborhoods, and who could have access to direct aid to move to more desirable

housing. Like most urban communities, Nashville leveraged federal housing policy to shape a growing city in the 1940s and 50s. Following World War II, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) perpetuated racial segregation by providing loans to white families to move further out of the city and into newly built suburban communities. In fact, over 95% of all loans encouraging families to move to the suburbs were distributed to white families.

**Redlining - where banks and lenders drew lines around certain residential communities to indicate the perceived risk of insuring investments in those areas** - compounded white flight and intentionally segregated cities across the U.S – and Nashville – by creating maps that systematically labeled predominantly Black communities as too risky for investment. The result limited the opportunities for Black residents to build wealth through homeownership in the same way that white residents could. Additionally, by restricting access to financing, Black Nashvillians faced barriers to reinvesting in their communities.

While redlining and housing policy restricted investments in Black neighborhoods, **mid-20th century urban development decisions actively removed resources from these communities.** During the 1950s, the Capitol Hill Redevelopment Project changed the landscape of Nashville's city center. Supported by a federal Urban Renewal Grant, the Nashville Housing Authority, City of Nashville, and State of Tennessee bulldozed 98 acres surrounding the state Capitol. The project erased over 1,300 homes, deemed not worthy of the valuable real estate next to the Capitol. The city extended the Capitol grounds (as seen today) and constructed new streets and buildings as part of a wider effort to develop downtown Nashville. Hundreds of Nashvillians, the majority of whom were Black, were displaced through these efforts and concentrated in other areas of the city. Similarly, in the 1960s, Nashville chose to place the new Interstate-40 through North Nashville, cutting Jefferson Street in half and decimating the once vibrant and vital neighborhood center.



### THESE THREE ACTIONS...

- 1) leveraging federal housing assistance to encourage white flight
  - 2) redlining Black neighborhoods to prevent investments, and
  - 3) demolishing Black neighborhoods through the guise of urban renewal
- exacerbated and reinforced the segregated city we still see today. And in spite of federal school desegregation orders in the 1950s, this reinforced residential segregation would ensure that school desegregation would be almost impossible to sustain.



## By Design: Creating Nashville's Segregated Schools

In response to the Brown v. Board of Education decision and facing a federal lawsuit, Nashville slowly began formally desegregating its schools in 1957. Shortly after, Davidson County and the City of Nashville consolidated to form Metropolitan Government of Nashville-Davidson County. As Metro experienced rapid growth and a population exodus to the suburbs, proponents of consolidation argued that maintaining two separate governments led to higher costs and consolidation would better organize infrastructure and services for the people of Davidson County. While municipal services did improve, Black residents who had a more significant voice in the former Nashville city government became a marginalized voice following consolidation, limiting Black representation in critical desegregation decisions.

Consolidation also combined the city's two school systems, creating Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS). With an appointed board made up of one Black and eight white citizens, decisions surrounding desegregation were dominated by white priorities. One such decision was the School Board's adoption of "intelligent zoning" to sidestep federal pressure to desegregate Nashville's schools. Intelligent zoning aligned school zones with residential segregation patterns, ensuring that the district could maximize the number of students for a given school based on the race of those students. Intelligent zoning formally connected segregated housing to assigned school zones and further concentrated white students in more suburban and affluent schools and Black students in urban and less resourced schools. These school zones outlined in the desegregation era are not dissimilar to the ones we still use today.

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After many years of deliberate actions to stall integration, a federal court ordered MNPS to implement district-wide busing to meet mandated racial ratios in schools in 1971. Busing cut across entrenched residential segregation patterns and faced intense opposition by many white families. At the height of busing, Nashville was considered a national model for achieving statistical desegregation. However, dozens of new private schools opened their doors to a growing number of families disavowing integration. At the same time, many schools in the city's core that served majority Black students were closed while newer suburban schools were being built. During busing's almost 30-year reign in MNPS, the district lost roughly 20,000 students who never returned. While both white and Black students were bused across Nashville, Black students shouldered more of the burden of desegregation and were bused away from their neighborhoods for many more years of their schooling than their white peers.

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In 1998, Nashville formally ended busing when the federal desegregation case against Nashville was finally settled. The settlement declared the district “unitary,” a legal declaration stating that the district was no longer operating under two segregated systems. To end the lawsuit, the city and district agreed to \$206 million in investments for schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods, which they thought would help perpetuate integration. However, city leaders did not maintain these investments over time.

Without a federal lawsuit mandating desegregation, the system **quickly resegregated.**

## By Design: Instituting Inequitable Student Outcomes

In the past 60 years, city leaders have galvanized on Metro consolidation to set an ambitious agenda for Nashville’s economic growth resulting in significant new developments, businesses, tourists, and money. Yet, the city’s prosperity has not been equally felt across all communities. When you consider the effects of economic growth in the context of historical housing and school zoning decisions, Black and low-income students are disproportionately affected. Thriving Black neighborhoods with strong, yet under-resourced schools, were regularly sacrificed in the name of progress. Displacement of Black residents not only fragmented the community but depleted Black families of both financial and cultural resources. Today, low-income students and Black and

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Brown students are more likely to live in areas of Nashville that were redlined or in neighborhoods that were created for Black residents following urban redevelopment projects. These areas have historically seen less investment and sometimes lack the core services, experiences, or amenities that are readily available in more affluent, often white communities, such as libraries, grocery stores, and access to culturally competent medical care. In other words, a significant number of MNPS students are living in neighborhoods that are not fully meeting their basic needs.



Additionally, decades of devaluation have left neighborhoods vulnerable to gentrification. As the city has experienced tremendous growth, an influx of new residents and a desire to be close to the city center has transformed many predominantly Black neighborhoods with new development that is rapidly increasing property values. The rising cost of living in these neighborhoods has displaced families, causing high mobility rates among Nashville students and effectively concentrating poverty in the few remaining areas that people can afford.

**The result of decades of housing and zoning policy decisions is that Nashville has all but ensured inequitable opportunities and outcomes for our students :**

- » Students of color and economically disadvantaged students are much more likely to have many more principals in their school experience than their white peers
- » Black students are disciplined at nearly three times the rate of their white peers
- » Only 17 percent of Black students are identified as on track or mastered in reading compared to 44 percent of white students in the district
- » Just 20 percent of Black MNPS graduates go on to complete college compared to 38 percent of white graduates

## Designing the Future



Given entrenched city systems that continue to perpetuate segregated neighborhoods and schools, how can we advance more equitable policy that relieves the district and schools of the responsibility to solve these long-standing issues in isolation?

We cannot continue to expect different outcomes if we do not change the way the system is designed. That means changing the way we support children and youth in all aspects of their lives - from their housing options, to how they move about our city, to what enrichment opportunities they have exposure to, to the quality of the schools they attend. As we work to improve schools across the district, we must simultaneously work to create a city that prioritizes its children and youth in all aspects of decision-making. **To design a better future, as Richard Dinkins reflected in *By Design*, Nashville must use its “collective mind to truly not let students fail.”**

### Acknowledgments

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