



## Suburban Schools:

# The Unrecognized Frontier in Public Education

# About This Report

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## ABOUT THE CENTER ON REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

Cover photo: Highline Public Schools

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, big cities have been the most consistent focus of investment and controversy in American public education. The challenges for big cities are obvious. Increasing numbers of foreign-born students and students living in poverty, coupled with dramatic declines in the numbers of native-born middle-class students mean that cities face an unprecedented array of educational needs and great uncertainty about how to meet them. Debates about how to make city public schools effective, particularly about whether to shore up existing arrangements or experiment with new ways of running and overseeing schools, have been intense.

While urban schools continue to warrant attention, school districts in many suburbs just outside the central city's limits (inner-ring suburbs) have similar trends but have received less notice. These school districts—from Prince George's County, Maryland to Reynoldsburg, Ohio, and Aurora, Colorado to Burien, Washington—have also experienced population changes as dramatic as those in big cities.

Some might argue that inner-ring suburbs undergoing population changes have been lucky to avoid the battles over education policy, teacher strikes, and state interventions. But for suburbs with growing numbers of disadvantaged students, neglect has not all been benign. Many suburbs are economically distressed and not well equipped to handle major new challenges. Even suburban school systems that were effective for the groups that moved there after World War II are likely not prepared to meet the new array of student needs or to find solutions to unprecedented problems.

**Many suburbs are economically distressed and not well equipped to handle major new challenges.**

In this essay we review the evidence on these points, consider the strengths and weaknesses of inner-ring suburbs when faced with new challenges, and suggest ways leaders—local, state, and philanthropic—can help suburban schools adapt to the challenges they face.

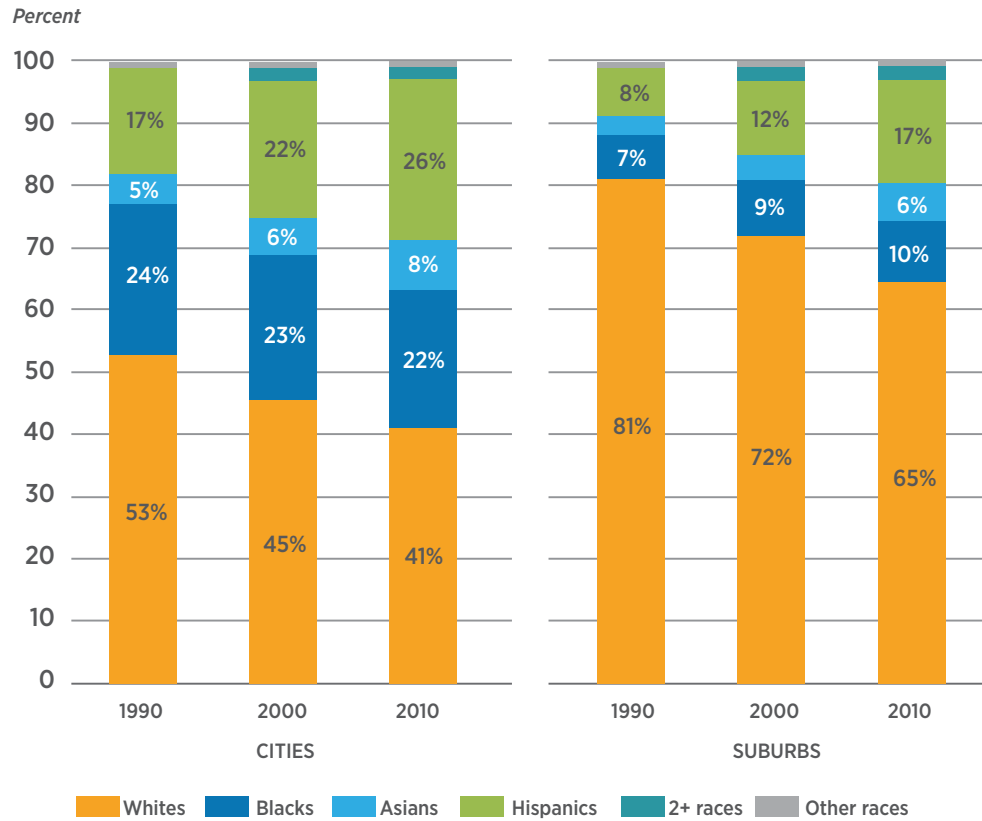
## Changing Student Needs

Public school populations are rapidly becoming more impoverished, especially in suburbs. Starting in 2013, students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) constituted a majority of all public school students in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> City school populations remained the poorest on average (60 percent FRL compared to 40 percent in suburbs and 25 percent in rural areas), but suburban poverty is rising faster.<sup>2</sup>

**Populations living below the federal poverty line grew twice as fast between 1970 and 2010 in suburbs as in cities, and almost three times as fast between 2000 and 2012.<sup>3</sup>**

Take Highline Public Schools, which serves over 19,000 students in Burien, Washington, between the major urban hubs of Seattle and Tacoma. That district serves higher proportions of FRL and language minority students, and students of color, than most of the big cities to the north and south of it. And these phenomena are new: since 1998 the proportion of Highline's FRL students increased by over 25 percentage points, and the number of English language learners (ELLs) grew from 7 percent to 21 percent.<sup>4</sup> Nationwide, as shown in the *New Republic* chart below, suburbs are becoming increasingly diverse.<sup>5</sup>

**City and Suburb Racial Profiles, 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas, 1990-2010**



Source: 1990-2010 U.S. censuses.

Mesa, Arizona, a suburb outside of Phoenix, saw its percentage of FRL students grow from 40 percent to 57 percent between 2003 and 2013. In the same period, Prince George’s County, Maryland, saw its FRL rate rise from 44 percent to 59 percent, only two percentage points lower than in nearby Washington, D.C.<sup>6</sup>

Poverty is not the only population shift to pose challenges. The ELL population has been growing steadily for well over a decade and if the growth trend continues, it is expected to double by 2025.<sup>7</sup> According to a recent study of ELL students, “The biggest growth [in ELL students] is taking place in rural and suburban school systems.”<sup>8</sup> Five suburbs of Boston saw increases in ELL populations from 50 percent to 200 percent between 2006 and 2010.<sup>9</sup>

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Though suburbs near the Mexican border might have only one or two foreign language groups, other suburbs have scores. Refugee resettlement has increasingly shifted toward “new destination” metropolitan areas where larger shares of the foreign-born population live in inner-ring suburbs.<sup>10</sup> For example, in Kent, a suburb of Seattle where residents speak more than 120 different languages, the ELL student population grew from 1,000 students in 1995 to nearly 4,000 in 2015 in a district of 27,000 students.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in Minnesotan suburbs, half of the ELL population are refugees. These



victims of war and famine (e.g., from Laos, Somalia, Ethiopia) are likely to face more challenges than just navigating language barriers.<sup>12</sup>

To further compound the challenge, the vast majority of ELLs are from families that are struggling economically and have parents with disproportionately low levels of education. In every state, nearly 60 percent of ELLs live in families whose income falls below 185 percent of the federal poverty line.<sup>13</sup>

## Strengths and Weaknesses of Suburbs

The suburbs experiencing the swiftest growth of poverty and language minority populations are seldom either wealthy or economically stable. Rather, they are subject to vicissitudes in demand for low-cost labor and as a result, feature smaller houses, apartments, and fewer amenities than more affluent and stable locales. Thus, as Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube conclude, “suburbs became poorer not only because long-term residents suffered economically, but also because of the in-migration of lower income families and new immigrants, many of whom were drawn by the continued suburbanization of jobs or the promise of affordable housing.”<sup>14</sup>

Poverty is a hardship anywhere, but suburbs face special challenges, as Kneebone and Berube have shown:

- Many antipoverty support services (outside K-12 education) are concentrated in the inner city or urban core.<sup>15</sup> Organizations working in suburbs are stretched over much wider geographic areas.<sup>16</sup>
- Poor residents in the suburbs often lack a car and are not well served by public transportation. This limits access to jobs, social and medical services, and schools.<sup>17</sup>
- Distressed suburbs have decreased tax bases, even as the demand for social services grows.<sup>18</sup>
- Suburbs have less philanthropic support, as regional and national foundation grant processes are often focused on inner cities.<sup>19</sup>

Suburbs also have weaknesses—which are offset in some cases by strengths—in the ability to finance education, the talents of educators, and community politics.

**Financing.** A growing student population brings additional state funding and creates opportunities for experimentation and starting new schools. It is possible to start a new school or instructional program without closing an existing one.

But growth requires new spending on everything from facilities construction to teacher hiring and program development. Any revenue increases linked to increased enrollment—whether from the state or local property taxes—are likely to come after, not before, new groups of students arrive. Moreover, extra funding for FRL or ELL students often doesn’t fully cover the costs of creating new schools or transforming existing ones. Additionally, suburban districts are often not contiguous within one suburban city, as in the case of Highline Public Schools, which serves the cities of SeaTac, Burien, and Des Moines, making it hard to generate support for bonds and levies.

**Educator Talent.** Suburban districts also lag behind urban districts in familiarity with the challenges posed by poor and disadvantaged students. The suburban teacher workforce was developed in the 1950s and 1960s to serve a more affluent and homogenous, mostly native-born, white student body. New populations pose unprecedented challenges.

Abrupt changes in the student population can lead to cultural mismatches and misunderstandings. When teachers have negative perceptions of students, it can adversely impact student behavior

and lead to measurable declines in achievement.<sup>20</sup> Teachers unfamiliar with low-income or minority students are likely to view them as not ready for school or unprepared for grade-level work.<sup>21</sup> Cultural differences can easily be mistaken as expressions of learning or emotional disability.<sup>22</sup> Race continues to influence teacher perception of students potential.<sup>23</sup> Such problems are serious enough in cities where teachers and students are thoroughly familiar with one another; they will surely challenge many inner-ring suburban schools.

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The influx of large numbers of English language learners, student refugees, and students whose families struggle with poverty will require school districts to adapt and shift resources. For example, many suburban teachers are not prepared to teach students whose first language is not English. As teaching expert Jere Brophy writes, “Most rural and suburban school districts today... [have taught relatively] small numbers of ELLs. ... Resources do not permit the development of separate programs that exclusively target ELLs ... and many districts do not even have a full-time ESL teacher. In fact, ESL teachers often travel great distances between assigned schools to meet their students for brief periods of instruction.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise, schools with homeless students will need to assign more work to be completed within school, since homework is a difficult activity for these students.<sup>25</sup>

Suburbs will depend heavily on incumbent educators’ ability to adapt to new student needs, but growth can allow hiring teachers from new talent pools—with experience in urban education, from the same minority groups as the new students, and with ESL training.

**For teachers and principals, suburbs are becoming high-demand environments. Pay and benefits must be attractive.**

Suburbs historically offered superior teacher salaries, but city schools have achieved parity in many metropolitan areas.<sup>26</sup> Some central cities (e.g., D.C., Atlanta, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Chicago) already boast higher salaries than their suburbs.<sup>27</sup> Suburbs also used to offer better maximum salaries for the most experienced teachers. Although that is still true in the New York City and Chicago areas, in a recent national study, high-poverty suburbs offered worse maximum salaries than cities and wealthier suburbs.<sup>28</sup>

For most suburbs experiencing population change, building a quality teacher force will require raising salary levels via combinations of local tax increases and campaigns for more generous state support.

**Community Politics.** Any locality that is not the metropolitan media center has the advantage of not constantly being in the spotlight and the subject of news stories about everything from school failure, health and safety problems, and clashes among board members. This can make it easier for education leaders to project a consistent message about priorities and goals, especially in informal settings like community and civic group meetings.

Suburban leaders seeking to try out new approaches to schooling, including charter models designed for diverse suburban populations, might be able to do so with the support of the local

business community, which depends on local customers rather than big businesses that look outward to Wall Street and world markets. Leaders and innovators in suburbs can also hope for less intransigent opposition than has arisen in many central cities, where politics can be complex and polarized. However, in the words of one superintendent, complaints—too much testing, not enough free time for students, not enough recess, the evils of charters—have crossed the city line and can now be heard in suburbs.

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But as superintendents have told us, suburbs can also be dominated by “legacy” groups—families with longstanding ties and a history of civic activism. These leaders might want to keep issues they consider low priority (e.g., education of non-native speaking children) off the public agenda. As one superintendent noted, “the local power structure doesn’t exactly seek out immigrant and minority businesses. That leaves these newcomers and people of color walled off... The conversation about the [future] is happening in chamber and rotary meetings and key sectors of the community are being left out.”

School system superintendents can be major public figures in suburbs as the head of one of the locality’s largest single employers. But incumbent superintendents’ backgrounds and experience might equip them more for internal leadership of a traditional school system than for transformative change and political leadership.

## Risk and Opportunity

Rapid population change in inner-ring suburbs creates a true crisis—a situation with both risk and opportunity. Suburban education leaders face daunting challenges that have brought down many better-resourced big-city systems. However, they also have opportunities: suburbs are growing and not yet stymied by politics or labor issues.

Local government, businesses, philanthropy, and states can also make important contributions in changing suburbs.

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**Mayors, local civic groups, and businesses** can support smart changes in their suburban schools by campaigning for funding to make salaries and benefits competitive. They can also press superintendents and school board members to rethink the traditional boundaries of the local public education system so that:

- Neighboring districts can share resources and collaborate on planning for population changes.
- Chartering can be used to create schools for which local school districts are not responsible or inclined to provide staffing.

- Individuals with rare skills (e.g., the virtuoso math or physics teacher) can serve students in many schools.
- Schools—within a suburb and across districts—can share technology platforms and co-invest in enrichment programs.
- Schools can link students to special education services, but can also use their funds for interventions that can preempt the need to label students.
- Students, especially in high school, can learn how the local economy works by interning, apprenticing, and getting certifications with local businesses.
- Schools can freely contract with providers of all kinds of services, and easily switch patronage when better options come along.

To accomplish such changes, local government and civic leaders need to weigh in on school board elections and superintendent hiring, and insist that candidates recognize emerging challenges and be open to innovative solutions.

**Philanthropies, both national and local**, can get ahead of a trend by supporting innovation and experimentation in a new, relatively unspoiled environment. Local foundations in particular can support serious work on a challenge that, if neglected, can create financial, human resource, and social justice crises for their communities.

Philanthropies can also help state and local leaders understand the changes that are happening so they can identify gaps between existing capacities and emerging needs. Data systems built for central-city school systems need to be reproduced for suburbs so that government leaders can:

- Track trends in student population by ethnicity, income, language, and location.
- Assess the size and skill mix of their current workforces in light of students' changing needs.
- Identify schools, whether district or charter, that are succeeding with the new populations, and reproduce those schools where new students are struggling.
- Support collaboration between similarly affected inner-ring suburbs and central-city school systems on analysis of needs and remedies and identification of high-performing school models.
- Encourage research and information sharing on how localities can adapt to new needs without greatly increasing the size and cost of central office bureaucracies.

**States are now well-positioned** to support such efforts in the suburbs, as they must revise their accountability systems in light of the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, now known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). States have an opportunity during these revisions to be responsive to the changing nature of suburban education. For example, states could measure the change in diversity of the student population in terms of its size and rapidity. If a school system experiences a surge, for example, in ELLs or low-income students, the state could exempt the school system from certain consequences (e.g., takeovers, mandatory closures) or rigid or obtrusive state law (e.g., prohibitions on charter authorizing, class size, teacher assignments) for an adjustment period so as to allow the system a chance to be dynamic and innovate.



## Conclusion

Inner-ring suburban leaders can benefit from the experience of central cities that, like Denver, D.C., and New York City, have found ways to steadily increase achievement and graduation rates for low-income and migrant students.<sup>29</sup> These leaders can also find suburban exemplars: Duncan Klussmann, superintendent in the Houston suburb of Spring Branch, Texas, or Calvin Watts, recently moved to Kent, Washington, after transforming the schools in Gwinnett County, Georgia. They are pursuing what we call a portfolio strategy, which seeks to develop new schooling options, whether district-run or chartered, to meet new needs, to give parents the ability choose which of those options is the best match for their children, and to attract and keep excellent educators by offering an attractive bargain—for example, freedom in exchange for demonstration of results.<sup>30</sup>

**Inner-ring suburbs offering comparable degrees of commitment to experimentation and innovation could become the leaders in education innovation, creating school and school system models that big cities might emulate.**

Suburban leaders—mayors, city planners, county officials, school board members—could all help their school systems by supporting the portfolio strategy and making sure the next superintendent hired is one who believes the system should be a driver of experimentation and improvement, not a monopoly provider of an unchanging set of schools.

## Endnotes

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30. Find more on the portfolio strategy and the experience of localities pursuing it [here](#).