

**One District, Two Futures: Unpacking the Memphis-Shelby County Schools Merger  
through a Historical and Philosophical Lens**

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### **Introduction**

The merger of Memphis City Schools (MCS) and Shelby County Schools (SCS) was one of the most significant education consolidations in U.S. history (Dillon, 2012). It aimed to improve education by streamlining resources but faced challenges. Some of these challenges are: community resistance, unequal resource distribution, and weak leadership. The issues listed reflect systemic struggles in Tennessee's largest school district and require a deeper examination (Memphis Shelby County Schools, n.d.). How has the merger of Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools impacted student outcomes, and what role has leadership and community resistance played in its success or demise? This paper proposes two philosophical perspectives on the merger while looking through a Deweyan lens, while also examining the history of the merger. The philosophical perspective will emphasize equity. The historical perspective will contextualize the merger. One philosophical perspective sees this as a necessary step toward equity, and the other as something that disrupts and exacerbates disparities. Grounding this topic in philosophy and history will allow transparency on why the outcomes of the merger remain contested.

### **Applying Dewey's Democratic Theory to The Memphis-Shelby County Schools Merger as a Step Toward Equity**

John Dewey contends in his work that democracy is not simply a political system but a way of life (Dewey, 1916). This way of life requires active participation and community engagement. According to Dewey, education should be a space where everyone involved in the school collaborates and solves problems together. In theory, the Memphis City Schools and

Shelby County Schools merger should have promoted equity through redistributing resources and integrating schools from a socioeconomic standpoint. It should have promoted equal access to education. It could have provided underfunded schools with greater resources. However, from a Deweyan perspective, justice is not only about access to resources. It is about creating an environment where students, parents, and adults in the community have a say in their educational experience (Dewey, 1916).

The consolidation of the MCS and SCS merger was driven by financial disparities within Memphis City Schools because of the rise of taxes countywide in 2010 - suburban residents were essentially financially supporting Memphis City Schools (Bauman, 2017). The suburbs, which were primarily composed of Shelby County Schools, tried to create legislation to separate Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools to limit funding to Memphis City Schools (Zubrzycki, 2021). As a result, the Memphis City School District decided to surrender its charter in 2010 because Memphis City Schools wanted to be more financially stable (Action News 5, 2010). In essence, Memphis City Schools ran out of money and had no choice but to surrender its charter. From a Deweyan perspective, this could have been a great opportunity for education to serve as the potential to create equal opportunities for individuals in education (Dewey, 1938). This merger created a new opportunity that would have been great for experiential, interactive activities rooted in a real-world context for activating civic participation in students.

Proponents of the merger argue that it was necessary to address longstanding inequities between urban MCS and suburban SCS (Stephens, 2015). The demographics of Memphis City Schools were overwhelmingly students of color because of systemic themes such as segregation, desegregation, and “white flight” (Anderson, 2012). As a result of systemic issues, the youth of

the MCS district was low-income and plagued by crime. The unification of MSC and SCS should have aimed to create a more equitable distribution of resources that would enhance educational opportunities for disadvantaged youth (Grossman, Puckett & Vaduganathan, 2016).

Others believed that this merger could create exceptional leadership for a once-disadvantaged youth and create lasting change for systemic issues (Rushing, 2017). The new district had the opportunity to address inefficiencies and implement more rigorous accountability measures. The new district also had the opportunity to use resources to create a better academic environment for students. While MCS leadership instability posed a challenge, over time, tremendous strides could have been made toward a more equitable learning environment for all. School leaders and policymakers had the chance to promote integrated learning under a single administrative umbrella that would have unified urban and suburban learning environments (Siegel-Hawley, Diem, & Frankenberg, 2018).

## **Perspective 2: The Merger as a Disruptive Force**

Critics made arguments that the merger introduced a tremendous number of challenges without addressing pre-existing issues (Stephens, 2015). Leadership instability and political disputes hindered effective governance, which created uncertainty for teachers, students, and parents (Stephens, 2015). The historic leadership instability of Memphis City Schools has carried into the post-merger as Memphis-Shelby County Schools has seen a revolving door of superintendents. First, in 2023, with corruption allegations with Joris Ray, later with several interim superintendents, and now the firing of Dr. Marie Feagins with only an 8-month tenure (Daily Memphian, 2023; Muckerman & Finton, 2025).

A key argument against the way that the merger was structured is that Shelby County schools did not absorb Memphis city schools. Memphis City Schools dissolved itself and forced Shelby County schools to take a much larger and more complex system without the leadership authority to effectively manage it (Siegel-Hawley, 2018). If the merger was structured in a way that was a true takeover where established leadership of Shelby County schools maintained control and implemented reforms the transition could have been smoother. Shelby County Schools has had a long strong history of leadership with well-maintained schools. Under Shelby County schools leadership the district could have Incorporated Memphis city schools students and resources in a way that prioritized long-term planning rather than immediate reactionary decision-making.

Another crucial aspect of Shelby County school's track record is having higher student achievement, better teacher retention rates, and strong financial management (Campbell, 2014). The merger could have leveraged Shelby County School's leadership to create a better educational system. If the merger had positioned Shelby County Schools as the governing body overseeing the transition, there could've been a more structured approach to examining equities. But then that also raises the question, what about systemic inequalities? If Shelby County schools had predominantly been White, and Memphis city schools had been predominantly black, how would have Shelby County schools managed these disparities? Would they have implemented reform or created policies to withhold systemic injustice?

These leadership disruptions reinforce the perception that the suburban municipalities (Arlington, Lakeland, Collierville, Germantown) that seceded from the merger avoided chaos as they aimed to retain local control of their schools and budget. One of the advantages of

municipalities succeeding was consistent leadership. MSCS has struggled with keeping superintendents and board members - this lack of leadership creates abrupt policy shifts, adverse decision-making, and lackluster school operations (Testino, 2023). Suburban districts have benefited from stable governance allowing for great academic performance in schools. According to Dewey, leadership should be collaborative and adaptive to changing circumstances (Dewey, 1916). Weak leadership and the Memphis Shelby merger exacerbated the already existing challenges within the district. This creates a lack of quality leadership that struggles with different educational cultures and creates a good strategy for success (Turan & Bektas, 2013).

### **Leadership and Community**

The application of putting the leadership role as central in an educational environment is important (Christison & Lindahl, 2012). Without proper leadership the school climate becomes tumultuous. Such turmoil among the establishment corrodes a cohesive educational vision and erodes trust in educational personnel. The most common sign of leadership instability is the side effect of inconsistent policy implementation. This makes it difficult to achieve long-term educational goals (Christison & Lindahl, 2012). The absence of study leadership also leads to confusion and faculty and staff, it weakens morale. For instance, with the firing of Marie Fagans the policies that she started to implement at the beginning of the school year have been abandoned and it is a fight to find new policies to implement to justify the jobs that are at stake. All of which hinders the creation of a student centered learning environment.

Because there was community resistance in the merger it further complicated any progress that could have happened. Dewey emphasized that there must be social cohesion in democratic education. Does cohesion argue that there needs to be a system that has discourse to

function equitably and that all parties involved in education need to be engaged in shaping policies (Dewey, 1916). However, there was a tremendous amount of resistance from suburban municipalities who wanted to control their own schools and budgets. This further highlighted divisions both racially and socioeconomically (Grossman, 2016). Does community resistance and lack of leadership further suggest democratic discourse, shared vision, and people willing to address existing structural inequalities?

The community resistance to the merger also highlights a broad concern about power, control, and most importantly educational equity. Many Memphis suburbs resisted the merger and feared it because they were afraid that it would lead to a decline in educational quality and the resources that they had, which would negatively impact their children (Action News 5, 2010). In some respects, this is justified because of how Memphis-Shelby County Schools has displayed leadership since the merger (i.e., high superintendent turnover rates). However, this sphere, whether it is justified or not, is a deeper systemic and philosophical question about public education. Should school districts prioritize local autonomy even at the risk of perpetuating inequalities, or embrace regional collaboration for the greater good? Dewey's vision of democratic education would argue for a balance that ensures all communities have voices in decision-making while handling the equitable distribution of educational opportunities.

### **Reflection on the MSCS Merger Through a Deweyan Framework**

Ultimately, his democratic theory gives a great framework for evaluating the Memphis–Shelby County merger (Dewey, 1916). However, the merger between Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools remains a critical case study in education history and policy. The study of this merger will offer insights into the complexities of district consolidation and the lasting

effects of systemic issues in the United States. Some see the merger as a step toward greater equity; others argue that it disrupted the educational climate without achieving its intended goals.

The long-term effects of this merger continue to be debated, making it a relevant opportunity for continued research. From a Deweyan perspective, additional considerations should be learned from this merger when policymakers are looking at future district consolidations. Through a democratic process, this could ensure careful planning, adequate stakeholder engagement, and the distribution of equitable resources. If all of this is achieved through the Deweyan process it can help mitigate potential negative outcomes and create equitable access to education for all students.

### **Introduction to Merger History**

What sparked the merger between MCS and SCS was primarily driven by financial considerations (Grossman, 2016). Legacy Shelby County Schools was looking to get special funding by formalizing a special district, which would limit funding to MCS. There were shortfalls in MCS's budget and talk of a lack of funding from local sources, which prompted the MCS board to opt in December of 2010 to surrender its charter - this effectively forced the merger with SCS (Action News 5, 2011; Politiface, 2012). This move was strategic as it aimed to stabilize the financial situation of MCS. By integrating the county's resources, MCS would effectively take over Shelby County Schools because it was a larger school district. However, the merger garnered a tremendous amount of resistance from Shelby County Schools and from suburban municipalities within Shelby County. Residents and community leaders were concerned with the potential redirection of their tax revenues to support the financially struggling MCS.



The municipalities feared that the merger would dilute their local control and increase financial burdens without any added benefits (Dillon, 2011). The Transition Planning Commission (TPC) was formed to oversee the mergers and implementations. Notably, the Commission was cochaired by individuals with prior affiliations to MCS, which raised concerns about biases in decision-making processes (Kiel, 2020). Many critics argue that because of this, it would sway the Commission recommendations, which would serve the interests of MCS over SCS. This paper will explore the historical trajectory that led to the MCS-SCS merger. This paper will also look at the socio-political factors that influenced its implementation and the impact on student outcomes.

### **The Historical Background Of Memphis: Segregation and White Flight**

The desegregation of Memphis City Schools began on October 3, 1961. Thirteen black American first-grade students enrolled in four previously all white elementary schools. These schools were: Bruce, Gordon, Rozelle, and Springdale. These thirteen students are known as the “Memphis 13”. This first step was met with minimal attention from the public, and there was no significant violence, which is contrary to desegregation efforts in other southern cities (Action News 5, 2016). Despite the peaceful nature of the initial integration, the process of desegregation of Memphis schools was slow and met with resistance. Broader integration efforts created challenges. By the early 1970s federal courts issued a mandate to bus students throughout the city to achieve racial balance in schools. This effort was met with tremendous opposition from white families. This decision at the federal level resulted in over 30,000 students leaving the public school system. This is a phenomenon commonly referred to as “white flight” (Barger, 2009; Kiel, 2008).

The federal government's implementation of busing policies accelerated the phenomenon known as white flight. Many families were relocating into suburban areas and enrolling their children into private schools. Private institutions like Briarcrest Christian School were established during this time period. These private institutions are referred to as a direct response to desegregation mandates. These schools were sometimes referred to as segregation academies because they provided white families an alternative for seeking to avoid integrated public schools. This exodus of white students from Memphis City Schools led to a dramatic shift in demographics in the public school system. By the late 1970s the student population at MCS had become predominantly black which led to declining enrollment and resources (Kiel, 2008).

The demographic change in Memphis from white flight stimulated economic challenges. Because of white families moving to the suburbs the city's tax base subsequently eroded. This led to a decrease in funding for public services including education. The urban decline further exacerbated disparities between MCS and the surrounding suburban school districts. Because of the combination of white flight to suburban Memphis/Shelby County and the rise of private schools, it created a complex backdrop for the eventual merger of MCS and SCS. It is crucial to understand that the historical context is important for analyzing the motivations behind the merger and the challenges thereafter.

Looking beyond 20th 20th-century educational policy there have always been structural inequalities within Memphis that have deep historical roots. These historical roots date back to public health and governance crises in the 19th century. In 1878, there was the yellow fever pandemic, which resulted in over 5000 dead Memphians (Crosby, 2007). Thousands of once citizens of Memphis left the city. Molly Caldwell Crosby (2007) highlights in her book *The*

*American Plague* the outbreak not only devastated Memphis's population but exacerbated racial and socioeconomic divides. Black Americans who worked in lower-paying public jobs were disproportionately affected. This is because they lacked access to adequate care. Following this epidemic, Memphis lost its city charter and was governed by the state for nearly a decade, a theme that we are seeing currently with the state wanting to take over Memphis-Shelby County Schools. During this time, essential services became increasingly fragmented.

The yellow fever epidemic initiated an early form of white flight that reshaped the city's racial and spatial landscape. In response to the outbreak thousands of White middle and upper-class residents evacuated the city, never returning. Crosby (2007) notes that the epidemic “emptied Memphis of its elite,” which led to a significant loss of both political leadership and economic capital (p.172). The booming Metropolitan area was vacant of critical leaders to help shape economic progress. Many black Memphians remained, either by necessity or because they were barred from relocating. They became the foundation of a new post-epidemic urban population. Subsequently, white residents disproportionately returned to the surrounding suburbs rather than the urban core.

In early 1968 Memphis became the epicenter for the civil rights movement when over 1,300 black American sanitation workers initiated a strike. What sparked the sanitation workers' strike was the tragic death of workers. This highlighted the hazardous working conditions these workers had to labor in. The workers demanded better wages, safer working conditions, and unionization. Mayor Henry Loeb refused to acknowledge these demands, and it only intensified the strike and drew national attention. The event that transpired in 1968 marked a pivotal moment in Memphis's struggle for civil rights. In support of the sanitation strike, Dr. Martin

Luther King Jr. traveled to Memphis and delivered his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech on April 3rd, 1968. He gave this iconic speech at the Mason Temple in Memphis. This emphasized the interconnectedness of civil rights and economic equity. Tragically, the following day, Dr. King was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. This not only highlighted volatile racial tension nationally, but also in the Memphis area. Following Dr. King's death, there was an outpouring of grief and anger, which led to riots in numerous cities across the United States. In Memphis, the sanitation workers' strike concluded on April 16th, 1968, with the city agreeing to recognize the union, improve wages, and working conditions. Memphis saw a significant victory for labor rights.

This precedent created patterns for suburbanization that would accelerate in the mid-20th century. These historical accounts highlight that early migrations were echoed by and later exodus of white families from Memphis city schools during federally mandated desegregation efforts in the 1970s. The cultural memory of these crises, combined with ongoing fears about integration, reinforces long-standing preferences for racial and economic separation in educational spaces in the Memphis Shelby County area.

### **Rising Memphis City Schools Challenges (1980s-2000s)**

By the start of the 1980s, Memphis City Schools faced challenges that came from historical segregation and modern urban decline. The theme of white flight of middle-class families from Memphis in the 1970s and 1980s left behind a student population that was predominantly black American. Because of the long-standing history of Memphis being a racially tense area, black families were the most economically disadvantaged. Daniel Kiel (2008) explains, “white flight altered the demographics and tax base of the city dramatically, creating a

school system segregated by both race and class” (p. 267). His economic shifts only exacerbated a deep crisis of poverty.

According to Pohlmann (2008), by the 1990s, more than 70% of students in MCS qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. The statistics were widely used for poverty and education in educational policy research. There was a deep concentration on poverty, which created additional strain on educational resources and challenges for teachers and administrators. There were compounding effects of economic hardship on learning during this time. In addition to demographic pressure, MCS also had a series of leadership transitions and administrative instability. There was a large turnover rate for superintendents, often serving short tenures. The district also failed to maintain continuity in vision and policy implementation. Grossman, Puckett, and Vaduganathan (2016) point this out in their case of Memphis education reform. This instability made it difficult to sustain meaningful forms or build long-term trust.

Academic performance then began to lag behind state averages throughout the 1990s and 2000s. According to Tennessee Department of Education data, MCS schools frequently ranked among the lowest performing in the state for the T-CAP (Tennessee Standardization Assessment) exams. Because of this, MCS schools frequently faced increasing scrutiny from state and federal agencies on topics like accountability and student outcomes. As a result of this, Memphis became a target for various educational reform initiatives. Some of which include philanthropic organizations like the Gates Foundation.

Public confidence in the MCS district eroded, and reports emerged of insufficiencies, mismanagement of funds, and tension between the school board and superintendent that contributed to the narrative that MCS was failing and needed radical reform (Grossman, 2016).

These factors combine with persistent resource disparities, one compared to its neighbor, Shelby County schools, built the momentum for the dramatic step MCS would take in 2010 - the decision to surrender its charter and force a merger.

### **The Meger: Politics, Race, and Power**

In December of 2010, Memphis City Schools decided to surrender its charter. This effectively forced a merger with the Shelby County Schools system. This decision was started by the concerns that Shelby County Schools might seek special school district status, which would subsequently limit funding and resources for MCS. Dissolving its charter, MCS wanted to integrate a unified county system that would garner equitable resource distribution (Anderson, 2012). The Tennessee legislature responded by passing Public Chapter 1 (2011), which established procedures for the merger, including the creation of the Transition Planning Commission to oversee the consolidation process (Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury, 2012).

The role of the Transition Planning Commission (TPC) was to oversee the merger that adhered to specific legislative requirements of Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-2-502(b). The TPC was structured as a 21-member body that had varying stakeholders, which was intended to reflect a broad spectrum of community interests. However, this created controversy because many of these members of this commission had significant ties to Memphis City Schools, which raised concerns about bias, favoritism, and nepotism (something that MCS has historically struggled with) (Stephens, 2015).

Legal challenges arose and a federal judge ruled in 2011 that the merger was lawful. This subsequently set the stage for unifying the school district (Action News 5, 2011). The suburban communities within Shelby County openly opposed the merger. The concerns of suburban

Shelby County were centered around diminished local control and the potential for decline in educational quality. Other community interests were concerned with integrating schools with vastly different demographic profiles. The response to the merger was that six suburban municipalities (Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville, Germantown, Lakeland, and Millington) sought to create their own independent school districts. Initially, legal challenges prevented this from happening. Specifically, a law was written in 1998 that prevented independent school districts, Opinion No. 12-39 in the State of Tennessee Attorney General's office (Tennessee Attorney General's Office, 2012).

However in 2013 Tennessee legislature enacted laws that permitted the creation of new municipal school districts statewide (Tennessee Secretary of State, 2013). After the fact, the six municipalities created their own school districts and commenced operations in the 2014/2015 fiscal school year (Siegel-Hawley, Diem, & Frankenberg, 2018). These successes highlighted the racial and economic divisions in the city as suburban districts served more affluent and predominantly white populations. This further distanced them from the urban Memphis which was a predominantly black population. Ultimately the merger further highlighted Memphis's fragmented educational landscape.

### **Post-Merger: Turmoil and Leadership Crises (2014-Present)**

Following 2013 the newly unified Memphis-Shelby County School (MSCS) district faced tremendous leadership instability. This period has been plagued by frequent superintendent turnovers and administrative restructuring. Because of the disease of lackadaisical leadership, there have been challenges in maintaining consistent educational policies. Grossman (2016) highlighted that the merger brought the two districts together with two very different district

cultures, policies, and expectations. This creates complex governing challenges. Grossman (2016) states that "many interests, practices, and players were deeply entrenched in the Memphis schools," which made cohesive leadership hard to ascertain.

In 2022 Joris Ray the Superintendent of Memphis-Shelby County Schools, resigned amid allegations of misconduct (Testino, 2022). This further led to the disruption of district leadership (Testino, 2022). After the resignation of Joris Ray, the search for a new superintendent was protracted. This further reflects the amount of deep division within the school board. In 2024, Dr. Marie Feagans was appointed as the new superintendent who bringing experience from Detroit Public Schools. The emphasis of Feagans was that of community engagement and transparency. She initiates comprehensive strategies that involve stakeholders (Testino, 2024).

With just an eight-month tenure, Dr. Feagans was fired, which has eroded public trust in MSCS. Community members, teachers, and parents have expressed concerns publicly and have voiced a lack of vision that has impacted administrative turnover and student outcomes. Subsequently, after the firing of Dr. Feagans, the state of Tennessee started writing legislation to take over the Memphis Shelby County Schools district.

In contrast to MSCS, the six municipal school districts that were formed following the merger (Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville, Germantown, Lakeland, and Millington) have great leadership stability and student achievement. These districts have been able to maintain consistent superintendent and administrative teams. Siegel-Hawley (2018) writes that the suburban districts have leveraged their autonomy and tailored their education strategies to their specific community needs. This has led to far greater cohesive governance structures.

## **Conclusion**



The merger between Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools can be considered a critical event in American public education. This paper has highlighted that the merger revealed deep-seated tensions of race, politics, economics, and governance. This historical and philosophical exploration has traced a scarlet thread through the origins from which the issues of this merger have followed. From the 1878 yellow fever epidemic (Crosby, 2007) through the segregation efforts of the 1960s and 19970s (Kiel, 2008; Pohlmann, 2008) to the challenges faced by the 2013 merger (Grossman, Puckett, Vaduganathan, 2016; Siegel-Hawley, 2018). Taking both of these perspectives into account creates a deeper understanding of the role public education has played in bridging or widening social divides in the Memphis area. The Memphis-Shelby County Schools merger serves as a powerful case study for policymakers worldwide to inform future efforts for stronger school systems.

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