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Debating Equity through Integration: School Officials' Decision-Making and Community Advocacy During a School Rezoning in Williamsburg, Virginia

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Abstract

We explore puzzling outcomes in a Virginia school district: in 2018, the Williamsburg-James City County School Board voted to redraw attendance boundaries to achieve greater racial and socioeconomic integration among its middle schools, yet abandoned similar efforts for high schools. Drawing on Critical Race perspectives, we conducted a content analysis of archival materials, including school board meeting transcripts, to analyze the conditions under which school decision-makers mobilize to enact equity-oriented policy reforms. We found that school board members abandoned high school rezoning in the face of fierce opposition from white, affluent residents who saw school reassignments as a threat to their entitlements to a highly rated school and to their property values. For the middle schools, board members avoided white families' entitlements, which neutralized opposition, at the same time as strong community advocacy in favor of equity and integration shifted the political landscape. This activated 'interest convergence' among school board members supportive of equity and resulted in the approval of middle-school attendance boundaries that produced greater racial and socioeconomic integration. This case underscores the importance of community advocacy for equity-based reforms; however, the scope of these efforts may be limited to changes that do not substantively threaten white parents' perceived entitlements.

Keywords

sociology, school decision-makers, critical race theory, interest convergence, school rezoning, integration, equity

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Introduction

In 2020, The Century Foundation listed the Williamsburg-James City County School Division (WJCC), which serves 11,000 students in eastern Virginia, as among nearly 200 US school districts that are 'taking active steps to integrate their schools racially and socioeconomically' (Potter and Burris, 2020).[1] Shifting student demographics had produced significant racial and socioeconomic segregation across WJCC middle and high schools. By 2017, at Hornsby Middle, the student population was considerably whiter (68%) with far fewer economically disadvantaged students (20%) than the other middle schools—particularly, Berkeley Middle where only 50% of the students were white and nearly as many (48%) received free or reduced school lunch (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). In 2018, the WJCC school board voted to redraw attendance boundaries so as to achieve significantly greater socio-economic and racial integration across its four middle schools. After rezoning, school demographics converged to 59% and 57% white students and 32% and 41% economically disadvantaged students at Hornsby and Berkeley, respectively (Virginia Department of Education, 2022).

Despite this success, a parallel attempt to achieve integration across the WJCC high schools was abandoned. In 2016–2017, Jamestown, the most highly rated school, had an overwhelmingly white (70%) and affluent (just 21% economically disadvantaged) student population compared to that of Lafayette (54% white, 39% economically disadvantaged) (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). However, these levels of high school segregation were left untouched, as the School Board declined to redraw attendance boundaries.

How should we understand the divergent outcomes of these two efforts to use school attendance boundaries to address racial and socioeconomic inequities? What lessons do they hold for other equity-based school reforms? These questions speak to broader issues in rapidly diversifying communities in the United States. In such communities, decision-making regarding school attendance zones offers significant possibilities for promoting racial integration and equity, but deep public controversies complicate such efforts (McDermott et al., 2015; Richards and Stroub, 2015). Low-income communities of color have mobilized across the United States to advocate for school improvements and racial equity (Nygreen, 2017; Warren and Mapp, 2011). However, redrawing school attendance boundaries often spurs furious opposition to school reassignments from white, middle-class parents (Bartels and Donato, 2009; Wells and Serna, 1996).

In this work, we analyze the conditions under which school decision-makers mobilize to enact policy reform in favor of racial equity. To this end, we adopt an interpretative approach to analyze the frameworks and meanings that both school officials and community actors (including parents, residents, and community organizers) employed during this public controversy—and the interactions between them. To explore the divergent outcomes of school decision-making at WJCC, we conducted a content analysis of school board meeting transcripts, anonymous responses to community surveys, and public debates pertaining to school rezoning on social media and in local news outlets.

In our analysis, we draw on Critical Race Theory and its assertion that successful school reforms to advance racial equity are only likely to occur when such policy changes 'converg[e] with the interests of whites' and do not 'require the surrender of racism-granted privileges' (Bell, 1980: 523). As Turner (2015) suggests, even when school decision-makers see themselves as advocates for racial equity, they are unlikely to mobilize for policy changes that they view as challenging 'acceptable norms within the community' (p. 8). Moreover, the advocacy of race and class-privileged parents to protect their entitlements often stymies policy-makers' mobilization in support of equity (Henig et al., 1999; Lewis and Diamond, 2017; McDermott et al., 2015).

We argue that the case of WJCC is illustrative of the conditions under which school decision makers will mobilize to enact equity-based reforms in two ways. First, our findings confirm those

of Critical Race theorists: the successful mobilization of policy-makers to advance racial equity is most likely to occur when it does not substantively threaten the perceived entitlements of white people. At WJCC, white, affluent parents and residents zoned for Jamestown High understood school reassignments as a threat to both their access to a high-performing school and their property values. In response, these parents and community members organized fierce opposition to rezoning, framing it as harmful (even 'catastrophic') to students, while denying or dismissing the existence of school disparities. Ultimately, the WJCC school board sided with these opponents and decided to abandon high-school rezoning. In contrast, white, affluent families perceived the middle school rezoning as a minimal threat to their entitlements and accepted middle school reassignments as necessary due to the construction of a new school. School officials further neutralized opposition by proposing attendance boundaries that preserved 'neighborhood schools' in white, residential sub-divisions, which created political space for school board allies to pursue racial and socioeconomic integration.

Second, our case reveals that, while 'interest convergence' may be necessary, it is not a sufficient condition for the mobilization of policy-makers in favor of racial and socioeconomic equity. In the case of the middle schools, the strong community advocacy of The Village Initiative, a Black-led community organization, and its supporters activated 'interest convergence' by signaling broad community support for equity and integration and expanding the boundaries of acceptable community norms. The Village Initiative actively promoted school rezonings to address educational disparities and to increase diversity. Paired with neutralized parent opposition, this advocacy shifted the political landscape and galvanized school board members to mobilize as 'willing collaborators in educational change' (Turner, 2015: 34). These findings point to the importance of community advocacy as a crucial mechanism for spurring reforms to address school inequities, but also to the limits of such reforms for achieving broad structural change.

The Impossibility of Policy for Racial and Socioeconomic Equity?

School policymakers in the United States face numerous challenges as school populations diversify, but schools also become increasingly segregated by race and class (Frankenberg and Diem, 2013; Holme et al., 2014). A growing body of research has begun to focus on policymakers' decision-making within gentrifying urban school settings and suburban areas undergoing rapid demographic shifts. The research on school-district-level decisionmakers, including superintendents, school boards, and central office administrators, has revealed school policymaking as an interpretative, social process replete with meaning-making (Honig, 2009; Rorrer et al., 2008; Turner, 2015). School decision-makers draw on pre-existing 'frames' to make sense of 'problems' and possible solutions in schools (Best, 2013).

While such work has emphasized the professional and organizational meanings with which school policy-makers grapple as they weigh policy changes, we follow scholars who also situate these decision-makers within the broader political context of school policy-making, including the influence of community actors who can promote or resist change (Frankenberg and Diem, 2013; Trujillo, 2013). That is, school policymakers' decisions take place 'within a set of relationships that are characterized by unequal resources and power relations; actors operating within broad political, social, and economic contexts; and complex racial interests' (Turner, 2015: 9).

Taking account of this broader institutional and social context, scholars in education offer ample evidence for why school decision-makers frequently fail to pursue equity in their policy-making. Despite some recent changes, school system policymakers, and, particularly school board members, across the United States disproportionately hail from privileged racial and class backgrounds as compared to the families in their districts (Maeroff, 2011). As these policymakers engage in

meaning-making around long-standing inequities and new demographic changes, they often demonstrate deep investment in interpretative frames that normalize white cultural norms, behaviors, and ways of knowing (Evans, 2007). Indeed, even liberal policymakers often draw on frames of color blindness and 'myths of meritocracy' that mask and perpetuate white advantage, construct students and parents of color as 'deficient', and allow whites to maintain their 'possessive investment' in the status quo (Donnor, 2012; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Lipsitz, 2018).

Moreover, even if school policymakers make efforts to pursue equity-oriented school reforms, they face substantial opposition and forms of influence that stymie these endeavors. Much work has revealed how race and class-privileged parents mobilize to constrain equity-oriented policymaking, including integration efforts (Henig et al., 1999; Lewis and Diamond, 2017; McDermott et al., 2015), while parents and community members from historically disadvantaged groups exert minimal influence at best over school board decision-making (Finnigan and Lavner, 2012; Nygreen, 2017). Such dynamics are intensified in 'enclave schools', which emerge from residential patterns of racial segregation and where the 'student population is significantly whiter and more affluent in an individual school(s) than the district as a whole' (Frankenberg and Diem, 2013: 120). As Frankenberg and Diem (2013) find, not only do parents from enclave schools often mobilize against equity and diversity, but elected school board members can come to perceive their own interests in relation to this 'small, unrepresentative segment of the district's population' (p. 119).

School decision-makers also deliberate in the shadow of broader conflicts over race, equity, and integration at the national level. McDermott et al. (2015), for example, note that recent court decisions have created a judicial pattern favoring race-neutral education politics and policies. This pattern can cause school decision-makers to avoid possible conflict by designing race-neutral policy alternatives to race-conscious integration, despite evidence that such interventions may be less effective (Reardon et al., 2006) and equally politically divisive (McDermott et al., 2015: 513). As private consultants play a growing role in the field of education and public policy more broadly, they, too, can exert significant influence over political debate (Gunter et al., 2015: 519). As we will show, consultants hired to guide school rezoning at WJCC sowed apprehension as they signaled the potential controversies created when districts used school rezoning to promote racial and socioeconomic diversity.

Collaborating for Equity-Oriented Policy?

Given the deeply entrenched institutional structures and ideologies as well as active mobilizations that reproduce school inequalities, under what conditions do school decision-makers create policies aimed at advancing equity goals? While political and institutional actors often reinforce inequity, school policymakers' meaning-making 'does not straightforwardly mimic that of political forces' and decision-makers 'sometimes resist external actors' meanings' (Turner, 2015: 34). As Turner (2015) demonstrates, policymakers can act as 'willing collaborators in educational change' who develop critical perspectives that lead them to challenge these forces (p. 34). School decision-makers, however, tend to operate within the 'bounds of what they perceive to be acceptable norms within the community' and are apprehensive of retaliation when they traverse these boundaries (Turner, 2015: 8). Thus, a critical component to advancing equity-informed policies is shifting the political context through 'the organization and political action of local residents who value and are willing and able to struggle for greater openness, inclusion, and equity in their communities' (Turner, 2015: 34).

The presence of policymakers who are receptive to equity-based orientations creates an opportunity for community-based organizations who represent historically marginalized groups. Their advocacy can play a key role in engaging these policymakers as active collaborators in the pursuit of racial and socioeconomic equity. Community-based organizations can present new interpretive frames that

further develop policymakers' critical perspectives and widen the boundaries of community acceptability in ways that can empower policymakers to challenge colorblind, meritocratic frameworks.

Notwithstanding, as Critical Race theorists argue, policymakers' decision-making often hinges on 'interest convergence' (Bell, 1980). That is, decisionmakers are most likely to act to remediate racial injustices when they 'interpret their own interests as aligned with those of working-class and poor people of color' (Bell, 1980; Turner, 2015: 8–9). Thus, initiatives aimed at achieving equity are most likely to achieve success when policy reforms avoid threatening race and class-privileged students and families' access to resources perceived as 'white property' (Harris, 1993) such as highly rated schools or advanced programs (Bell, 1980; Lewis and Diamond, 2017). While leveraging 'interest convergence' represents a strategic way forward in some school districts where community advocates and policymakers look to implement equity-based reforms, its limitations are a sobering reminder of the need for structural change to achieve educational equity for students from marginalized communities.

Methods

To address our research question, we compiled a data-set of publicly available archival materials pertaining to school rezoning at WJCC, all of which were published or posted between February, 2017 and February, 2018. We analyzed the transcripts of 10 school board meetings, including the 'citizen comments' of 81 community members. In addition, we compiled content from the web-site 'Say NO to WJCC High School Redistricting', which was created by a group of parents to coordinate opposition to high school reassignments, and we collected social media posts related to rezoning from two public Facebook groups—381 posts on the 'WJCC Parents and Community' page and 50 posts on 'Parents for Educational Progress', a group dedicated to opposing high school rezoning. Our data-set also included 43 news stories and 10 opinion pieces that appeared in 2 local news sources (the *Virginia Gazette* and *WY Daily*) as well as 20 entries in an anonymous community forum called the *Last Word*, printed in Williamsburg's *Virginia Gazette.* Finally, we analyzed publicly available, anonymous responses on four surveys administered by the school district, which elicited public feedback on rezoning criteria (626 responses) and on specific proposed attendance boundary maps for the high schools (677 responses) and middle schools (381 and 101 responses).[2]

We coded and analyzed our data using the software program Dedoose. In all, we coded 2976 'excerpts' from the archival materials. We developed different coding guides for public commentary and news reports on one hand and school officials' discussions at school board meetings on the other. In both cases, we completed independent, open coding of a sub-set of 10% of the data through which we identified the most salient themes and developed a preliminary coding guide. Next, we met to discuss the conceptualization of codes and their application, and we refined our coding guide by adding new codes and splitting or collapsing existing ones. To address inter-coder reliability, we then used the refined coding instrument to conduct focused coding of the same subset of data and compared the results. After achieving an acceptable level of reliability, we coded the remainder of the dataset.[3]

In the case of public commentary and news media texts, we developed 11 conceptual codes, 4 of which captured references to official rezoning criteria: capacity, longevity, proximity, and neighborhood concept. We used the code 'diversity/equity' to designate references to the official criterion of 'socio-economic balance', but also other references to race/class diversity and equity in schools. Additional codes that emerged from our open coding process included 'alternative solutions' (proposed ways to address capacity and other issues while leaving high school attendance zones unchanged), 'contesting school board process and data' (critiques of school officials' decision-making or the data that they used), 'financial concerns' (references to costs to the school division and

tax-payers), 'property ownership' (references to participants' status as a homeowner), 'redistricting history' (references to past school rezonings), and 'student well-being' (references to students' emotional, academic, social, and physical well-being). To track school officials' decision-making processes as they related to community advocacy and public engagement, we also applied codes that captured the five official criteria for rezoning as well as 'redistricting history'. Additional conceptual codes that emerged from the data included transparency, consultant's influence, engagement with public feedback/concerns, and student impact (references to students affected by rezoning).

Our positions as 'observing participants' in the public debates surrounding the proposed school rezoning also inform our analysis (Stuesse, 2016). At the time of this research, the first author's two children attended Lafayette High, and the second author's oldest child was about to start kindergarten. We were active members of the Village Initiative, spoke at school board meetings in favor of rezoning for diversification and equity, and attended most of the 10 school board meetings and consultant-led 'community dialogues' where we took detailed fieldnotes.

Background: The WJCC School Division

Home to Jamestown, Virginia, the site of the first English settlement in the United States, as well Williamsburg, the capital of colonial Virginia, Greater Williamsburg brands itself as the 'birthplace of a nation'. Today, the Williamsburg area is not only a well-known historic, tourist site, but also a popular retirement destination. Over the last 30 years, expanding residential and commercial development and double-digit population growth, particularly in the surrounding James City County (JCC), have transformed Greater Williamsburg from a small town to a low-density 'suburb without a city'.[4] Such non-urban 'gentrification' and accompanying rising housing costs have produced a bifurcated, service-driven labor market with accompanying stark inequalities between wealthy, white retirees and professionals and more racially diverse service workers, including immigrant laborers from Latin America. WJCC public schools serve the children of families across this wide socio-economic spectrum. Birth rates in Greater Williamsburg have also given rise to a local demographic trend mirrored at the national level—in WJCC school-age children are increasingly more racially and culturally diverse, and growing proportions come from economically disadvantaged families (Sampson, 2014; Turner, 2020).[5]

Over the last 15 years, as enrollments at WJCC have diversified, the schools in the district have also undergone a process of racial and socio-economic segregation, resulting in high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students and those of color at particular schools (e.g. Lafayette High and Berkeley Middle) and the emergence of 'enclave schools' (e.g. Jamestown High and Lois Hornsby Middle) with disproportionately white and affluent student populations. Two prior school rezonings in the 2000s as well as growth in the northern areas of JCC zoned for highly rated schools, like Jamestown High, fueled this process (Doiron, 2018).

Racial and socioeconomic segregation were most pronounced between the two enclave schools, Jamestown High and Hornsby Middle, and their considerably more racially and socio-economically diverse counterparts, Lafayette High and Berkeley Middle. In the fall of 2017, 21% of Jamestown's students were economically disadvantaged, defined as their qualification for free and reduced lunch, versus 39% of students at Lafayette High (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). That year Jamestown's student body was 70% white and 21% Black or Hispanic; compared to 54% white, and 36% Black or Hispanic at Lafayette (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). Levels of segregation were even more stark at the middle school level. At Berkley, the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch (48%) was over twice as high as at Hornsby (20%), and 50% of Berkeley students were minorities compared to only 32% at Hornsby (Virginia Department of Education, 2022).

The WJCC school board is composed of seven members, two of whom are appointed by the City Council of Williamsburg, where poverty rates (20.7%; pop. 15,425) far exceed those in the neighboring, wealthier, and more populous JCC (6.5%, pop. 78,254) (US Census Bureau, 2020). Notably, school board members from the City of Williamsburg (hereafter: the City), do not face re-election pressures, unlike those from JCC where voters from five jurisdictions elect school board representatives.

In the months leading up to the school rezoning debate, several school officials, including particular board members and the superintendent, had demonstrated interest in addressing school equity. In February 2017, a new superintendent had taken the helm and, within the first month of her tenure, had introduced an 'Equity through Engagement' series at School Board meetings to highlight issues like 'Empowering English Language Learners' and 'Supporting the Literacy Needs of Special Education Students' (Williams, 2016). Furthermore, three JCC school board members elected in 2016 and 2017 enumerated issues such as 'school equity', 'closing the achievement gap', and 'minority achievement' in their platforms (MacKinnon, 2016; Williams, 2017). And the public comments of board members in support of equity issues appeared in local newspapers, such as those of a City-appointed school board member who raised concerns that 'our housing patterns are economically segregated' (Fearing, 2017). Thus, particular school officials' stated receptivity to issues of equity presented the potential for 'interest convergence'.

School rezoning, however, was initially proposed, not as a means to address equity and diversity, but, rather, to reduce overcrowding. To accommodate growth in the student body, a new middle school was under construction, requiring school reassignments the very next academic year. The high schools were also overcrowded, particularly Jamestown High, where capacity levels had reached 112%, and 18 teachers were sharing classrooms. However, the construction of a new high school in the immediate future appeared unlikely with an announcement by the state of Virginia that it would not release funding for capital improvements in 2017. In this context, the JCC Board of Supervisors—one of the two local governing bodies that controls school funding in WJCC—sent a strong message to school officials, recommending the removal of construction costs for a new high school from its 2018 Capital Improvement Plan and, instead, addressing overcrowding through rezoning (WJCC School Board Meeting, 2 May 2017).

This motivated some board members to push for high school rezoning alongside that of the middle schools. In summer 2017, the WJCC School Division contracted a consultancy firm at a cost of $150,000 to guide the rezoning process for *either* middle schools alone *or* both middle and high schools (Vernon-Sparks, 2017). In addition to '[d]evelop[ing] a public relations plan [. . .] and coordinating and facilitating community engagement sessions', the firm was tasked with making recommendations to the school board about the criteria for rezoning and producing proposed maps of school attendance boundaries for community input and board approval (James City County, 2017).

And yet, as the school board prepared to enter deliberations, guided by the consultancy firm, there was no consensus about high school rezoning. Four JCC-elected members expressed early opposition to changing high school attendance boundaries, while the three remaining members stated that 'doing nothing' was untenable and expressed strong reservations about 'adding capacity' through mobile classrooms. By June 2017, facing these mounting pressures, the WJCC school board began discussing the process for undertaking the middle school rezoning, whether or not to include high schools, as well as what criteria to use in redrawing attendance boundaries.

Decision-Making in the Shadow of Potential Controversy

As the school board took up these discussions, it was clear that the history of prior rezoning efforts reverberated throughout their deliberations, and the continuing resonance of this history not only

impacted the positions of those on the board, but essentially helped foreclose on the possibility for interest convergence in the case of high school rezoning. In particular, the School Board's discussions were haunted by the community controversies and fierce parental opposition that emerged during two prior WJCC rezonings in 2007 and 2010 when a sizable, largely white neighborhood was 'split', and children residing there were assigned to different schools. As the 2017 rezoning got underway, coverage in local newspapers further heralded the impending controversy, dubbing it 'a highly emotional process' (Fearing, 2017).

This history and continued references to it clearly influenced the positions of members of the board. In particular, one JCC board member, Jim Kelly, had served on the school board during the 2010 rezoning and resided in the neighborhood that had been most impacted by these two previous 'redistrictings'. At early meetings, and in his bid for reelection, he expressed hardline opposition to high school rezoning, arguing it would create unnecessary 'churn' in the community without sufficiently addressing capacity issues (WY Daily, 2017). This position was shared by three other JCC-elected members, who never wavered in their opposition to high school rezoning. The four constituted a voting majority.

In addition to the specter of fiery parental opposition, school board members confronted subtle warnings from the consulting firm regarding the risks associated with using rezoning to address racial and socioeconomic 'imbalances' in school enrollments, further dampening any prospects for 'interest convergence'. As experts charged with guiding the rezoning process, the consultants' presentations to the school board frequently highlighted examples from other school districts across the country. Consultants signaled the risk involved in using diversity as a criterion for rezoning by referring to it as a 'hairy discussion point' with the potential to create counterproductive 'trade-offs' among the rezoning criteria. For example, at a September 3rd presentation to the school board, the consultant described another school district's efforts to ensure socio-economic integration as 'thou shalt be within three percent of the district-wide average [of economically disadvantaged students]'. He cited this as an example that limited 'options development' and could negatively impact the process.

Another way that the consultants subtly invoked potential controversy and risk was through meaning-making that equated school reassignments with 'disruption' and 'harm'. At a September 5th school board meeting, Lisa Ownby, a JCC-elected school board member, expressed that, for her, the most important priority was to 'minimize disruption' but that 'balancing SES numbers' was also important. The consultant quickly retorted, 'I can promise you that they [the two priorities] are conflicting'. By harnessing meanings around 'student impact' as inherently negative and harmful, the consultant reinforced an association between addressing school segregation levels (which requires reassigning some students) and 'student hardship'. And, as we will show, the idea of school reassignments as detrimental to student well-being was a trope that parents and residents drew on heavily in their defense of existing high school attendance boundaries.

Community Advocacy: Expanding the Boundaries of Community Acceptability

While the stage was being set for the school district's implementation of school rezoning, The Village Initiative and its supporters began organized advocacy efforts, speaking regularly at school board meetings in favor of including diversity as a criterion for rezoning and using attendance boundary changes to address school inequities. Importantly, these early efforts inserted equity, diversity, and educational disparities into public discussions.

The Village Initiative argued for equity and diversity as rezoning criteria, not only at the middle school level where school reassignments were required in order for the new school to open, but

also at the high school level where advocates argued rezoning would address inequities within and across the schools as well as bring the benefits of diverse learning environments to all students. Advocates from the Village Initiative and their supporters, as well as other leaders in the Black community, attended the public hearing on criteria for rezoning and spoke in favor of addressing educational disparities and racial and socioeconomic segregation through rezoning. As one parent advocate maintained,

> We cannot deny or minimize the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students in the student body as a whole. [. . .] This gap is disproportionately affecting students of color [. . .] [It] is exacerbated by a system that results in a concentration of economically disadvantaged students together. [. . .] To do the hard work toward a more fair, equitable, and balanced system, I hope that the school will [. . .] work [so] that the schools reflect our community and its diversity.

Another parent and member of the Village directly challenged the notion that students from the same neighborhood (in a context of high levels of residential segregation) should be zoned to the same school as well as narratives about the disruption and harm that rezoning would cause students:

> Like many people in this room, I purchased my home because of the schools that we're zoned for. However, I know that if we are zoned into another school she [her daughter] will be ok. Our children are resilient. They will not be traumatized by rezoning. We cannot allow the makeup of our schools to be determined by a few neighborhoods. We must do what's best for the entire community, even if we inconvenience some students. Studies have shown that greater economic diversity benefits low-income students without negatively affecting high-income students. Students learn most from people who are not like them, and many times this includes people who don't live in the same neighborhood.

The community engagement of The Village Initiative and its allies received a positive response from specific board members who publicly and privately encouraged this group to continue their advocacy. One result from the early and consistent mobilization of community advocates in favor of addressing school inequities was a transformed political context for school decision-makers oriented toward equity. While white, affluent parents' mobilization was still expected, board members could feel emboldened by the presence of an organized community coalition that actively promoted equity-oriented initiatives.

Divergent Trajectories: Threats to Perceived Entitlements and White Parent Mobilization

When it came time for school officials to select criteria for use in school rezoning, the superintendent put forward three criteria to the school board—capacity (utilization of facilities and school enrollments), longevity (the length of time before another rezoning would be necessary), and proximity of residential areas to schools. After considerable discussion the board added two additional criteria: 'neighborhood concept', described as an 'attempt to assign entire neighborhoods to the same school(s)'; and 'socio-economic balance', meaning that percentages of students who received free or reduced lunch at each school should approximate district-wide proportions.

As the public debates around these criteria took shape, they coalesced around 'neighborhood concept' (which came to signify 'neighborhood schools') and 'socio-economic balance' (which signified equity and diversity), with those opposed to altering school attendance boundaries championing the former and those who supported diversity and integration arguing for the latter.

However, the debates over middle school rezoning were far less contentious and involved significantly lower levels of community engagement. Over one hundred people attended the community dialogues on high school rezoning where the consultant presented proposed attendance boundary maps for public feedback, compared to just 19 who attended those for middle school rezoning. Likewise, the survey on high school maps garnered over twice as many responses as either of the middle school surveys (1681 vs 751 and 249). While middle school rezoning discussions revolved around criteria and map preferences, public debates about the high schools rapidly polarized into support for or opposition to altering school attendance boundaries.[6]

The fact that a brand-new school was in play in the middle school rezoning lessened the perceived stakes of school reassignments, as rezoning did not threaten white families' access to a singular 'best' school and could, in fact, result in their assignment to a state-of-the-art, new school. While middle-school parents also debated 'neighborhood schools' versus 'socioeconomic balance', there was minimal outspoken resistance to the idea of using rezoning to address educational disparities. Even when parents and neighborhood residents expressed a preference for remaining in their current school, the possibility of a brand-new school seemed to offset opposition as evidenced by these parents' survey responses:

> I want the best education available for my children. This option pulls my child away from Hornsby for his final MS year, which for my military child means a 3rd new middle school. The redistricting in general is upsetting, but if he had to move schools, I would prefer the new one in hopes it will be better. (Parent, middle school map survey)

> New school means everyone starts fresh. No established cliques. Everyone is in common ground and although it is still change, it is change for every student attending. (Parent, middle school map survey)

Unlike opponents of high school reassignments, parents weighing in on middle school rezoning did not tend to openly deny—and even recognized—the existence of inequities. Indeed, over half of survey responses to the final attendance boundary map that was approved by the Board, made positive mention of the criterion 'socioeconomic balance'. Examples include:

> It is imperative that our schools reflect the diversity in our community both from the perspective of children who would benefit from services such as AP classes, but also from the perspective of children who are from families who are working so hard to support themselves that they may not have time to respond to the school board—or the energy to care. (Parent, MS map survey)

> Developing a school system and community that is more racially and economically integrated will make for better school experiences for students and help support public schools as vital institutions for democratic life in the community. (Parent, MS map survey)

Thus, parents and residents seemed to recognize the need for addressing racial and socioeconomic segregation at the middle schools—or at least did not speak out against it.

At the high school level, in contrast, white, affluent parents and residents organized strong opposition to rezoning, and especially to using it to achieve racial and socioeconomic integration. In this case, 'displaced' students would not be assigned to a new school, but instead the majority would move from the highly rated, disproportionately white and affluent, Jamestown High to the oldest and most diverse high school, Lafayette. In this context, parents and residents mobilized the idea of school reassignments as detrimental to students' well-being and as potentially 'causing irreparable damage' (Chew, 2017). A parent's 'citizen comment' at the public hearing on rezoning

is instructive for its use of the trope of 'disruption' and 'harm' to argue against addressing educational disparities through redrawing attendance boundaries:

> I believe that there should be equal access for all children, no matter what their socio-economic background and their station in life. [. . .] With that being said though, I do not support redistricting as a strategy to achieve educational equity. I feel like that it is a disruptive strategy that disrupts community. It disrupts neighborhoods, it disrupts relationships . . .

Similar to Supreme Court decisions regarding desegregation, in this example, 'harm' and 'damage' to privileged students 'operate as ideological and epistemic instruments to construct White people as a population needing protection from policies meant to proportionately expand students' of color access to quality learning environments' (Donnor, 2012: 536).

Opponents also argued strongly for keeping students from the same neighborhood together, since 'splitting' neighborhoods would disrupt students' friendship networks and destroy community bonds, and, therefore, would exert a negative impact on 'community'. For example, in the survey on rezoning criteria, parents referred to neighborhoods as offering 'lifelong friendships in a great community', and advocated for 'keep[ing] our students together as they move through middle school and leav[ing] them at JHS [Jamestown High School]'. Importantly, in these public discussions parents and residents used the term 'neighborhood' to refer to residential sub-divisions (with names like 'Governor's Land'), which in JCC, in particular, are race and class-segregated and largely composed of single-family homes.

By extolling the benefits of 'community' in these named sub-divisions, parents and residents also put forward a definition of 'neighborhood' that they equated with markers of white, middle-class values and cultural norms, including participation in HOA-organized recreational activities and membership in swimming pools. Indeed, after a meeting in which the two school board members from the City raised questions about the best way to operationalize 'neighborhood' as a criterion for rezoning attendance boundaries, one resident wrote in a survey response, 'I don't really feel it should be that difficult to define a neighborhood. One HOA equals one neighborhood'. Of course, this definition excludes more diverse residential communities such as apartment complexes, trailer parks, as well as those not governed by HOAs. In this way, parents accorded specific meanings to 'community' and 'neighborhood', which naturalized white private property ownership as a crucial source of long-term relationships and identities, critical to both students' school success and social advancement.

Parents and their neighbors zoned for Jamestown also used color-blind narratives to deny the existence of educational disparities or to argue that they were the result of deficient parenting and, therefore, could not be remedied by changing school attendance boundaries. During the citizen comment at an October, 2017 school board meeting, one parent called 'redistricting' 'a solution in need of a problem', while another parent argued in an op-ed that '[w]e do not have a crisis that needs to be solved' and 'equalizing free and reduced-price lunch rates' was an unnecessary and disruptive effort 'to fix a problem that does not exist' (Chew, 2017). Parent advocates, like these, referred to the use of rezoning to achieve integration as 'forced relocation', 'social engineering', or 'experiments' that 'would do irreparable damage to the students caught up in the maelstrom'.

Furthermore, opponents invoked their status as homeowners to argue that they deserved to remain assigned to this high-performing school. Parents and residents mentioned the 'careful research' and responsible decision-making that went into buying a home in the 'right' neighborhood, implying that purchase of a home in such neighborhoods also buys the right to a 'good school':

> When choosing where to live in the beautiful Williamsburg community there were several factors that came into play, but as parents, our primary focus was on the school district. We chose to buy a home in Governor's Land [a gated community] because of the research and care we took in evaluation the elementary, middle and high school that our children will attend. It comes at a great distress to us that there may be plans to redistrict the Governor's Land families to LHS [Lafayette High School] [. . .] An investment in a home is a crucial decision for a family and it is not reasonable to make this change in the school district for our families who factored in the schools when purchasing our homes". (Parent, criteria survey)

Such meritocratic arguments also imply that those who cannot afford a home in these racially homogeneous, high-cost neighborhoods, did not work hard enough. As one parent remarked on a survey, 'Enough with you people screwing around with maps in the name of equality. It's NEVER GOING TO BE EQUAL. Want a better school for your kid? WORK HARDER and achieve it!' [parent, criteria survey, emphasis in original]. As Donnor (2012: 195) argues, the deployment of such discourses of individualism and choice 'evoke a set of mythic beliefs' that enable white people to oppose efforts to equitably expand social opportunity and to justify an inequitable educational status quo.

School Board Mobilization and Policy Reform

In response to opposing community advocacy by white, affluent parents on one hand and The Village Initiative and its supporters on the other, school board members mobilized—some in favor of equity and integration and others to protect white entitlements to the 'best' schools. This polarization among the board members was starkly revealed at the contentious October 3rd meeting as the board debated whether or not to rank the five criteria for rezoning. Specifically, a JCC board member, Jim Kelly, argued for the prioritization of 'neighborhood concept' as 'a higher level of criteria'. Echoing the discourses that parents and residents employed about community, Kelly argued for the importance of neighborhood boundaries since, 'There's a sense of community there'. He went on: 'I think we need to show respect for the folks in the county [JCC] that, you know, they live in a neighborhood so that they . . . they all know everybody in the neighborhood that goes to whatever elementary school, whatever high school, whatever middle school. So [. . .] I don't know that I would break up a community [. . .] I think going into it [rezoning] we need to have some respect for the county and the fact [. . .] they are very subdivision—neighborhood-driven'. As the October 3rd meeting progressed, Kelly declared that he would not vote for any proposed map that 'split neighborhoods'.

Meanwhile, the two board members from the far more economically diverse City and one member from JCC argued for 'bumping up' the socioeconomic balance criterion (Cook, Hummel and Ownby, School Board Meeting October 3rd, 2017). Previously, city-appointed board members had questioned if using residential developments as school attendance boundaries was 'good public policy' as it potentially 'allow[ed] private development to determine public policy' (Cook, School Board Meeting, 11 July 2017).

In a pointed example of these positions, in a discussion about the criterion of 'proximity' at the October 3rd meeting the chair of the board, Kyra Cook, who was a City appointee, called direct attention to patterns of social inequality reflected in existing attendance boundaries: 'We're already not taking kids to their closest school. Currently we're doing it for socio-economic segregation, right? I mean that's just how we're doing it right now and I would like to change that for socio-economic integration'. Cook's direct references to the 'socio-economic segregation' resulting from previous school board decision-making garnered a rebuke from Kelly—"Those are awful big words

there, madam chair". Amid the controversial deliberations surrounding school rezoning, Kelly's cutting remark seemed aimed at policing the boundaries of community acceptability, which Cook's direct reference to race and class inequalities appeared to traverse. In the end, the school board declined ranking the five criteria, since there was no consensus about prioritization.

Despite board members' differing positions regarding rezoning criteria, the protection of 'neighborhood' boundaries was (rather silently) built into the proposed maps that the consultancy firm designed. Of the 12 proposed attendance boundary maps presented to the school board (6 for both the middle and high schools, including a map of unaltered high school attendance boundaries), only 1 contained any additional 'neighborhood splits' that would affect the large, well-known, subdivisions where upper and middle-class white people resided. That map was quickly ruled out by the board and was never presented to the community. Meanwhile, the proposed maps of attendance boundaries for both the middle and high schools contained wide variance in levels of socioeconomic integration. Thus, despite the consultant's warning about 'rigid' criteria, all the proposed maps *rigidly* adhered to the 'neighborhood' criterion by consistently avoiding additional 'neighborhood splits', a factor that was never compromised for the sake of achieving greater integration or even more balanced enrollment numbers. It became the unspoken, sacred criterion.

When it came time for the school board to select an attendance boundary map for the high schools, the four board members from JCC made it clear that they would not support redistricting of any kind. On 12 December 2017, the school board decided against rezoning the high schools and instead opted to expand the capacity of Jamestown High by adding trailers, incurring a substantial cost (LaRoue, 2017).[7] In doing so, the board rejected the zero-financial-cost option of rezoning and instead chose to invest more money to leave high school attendance boundaries (and levels of racial and socioeconomic segregation) unaltered, a decision that an anonymous commentator in the local newspaper called, 'supporting classism in order to keep one of the schools as a top-tier school in Virginia' and creating 'a road map toward resegregation of W-JCC Schools' (The Virginia Gazette, 2018).

The middle school rezoning, however, took a different trajectory. Officials presented the middle school rezoning as necessary and inevitable due to the opening of a new school and, thus, a politically neutral, foredrawn conclusion. Furthermore, by presenting proposed maps of attendance boundaries that left large, overwhelmingly white sub-divisions intact with all students from the same neighborhoods assigned to the same school, school officials avoided direct challenges to the entitlements of white, property-owning parents to 'neighborhood schools'. This further neutralized opposition.

The lack of opposition from white parents and sustained advocacy and pressure by The Village Initiative galvanized allies on the school board to pursue equity and integration. The consulting firm had proposed three maps of possible middle-school attendance boundaries, none of which achieved significant racial and socioeconomic integration. The difference in populations of economically disadvantaged students across the schools in the proposed maps ranged from 15% to 29%—with the top of the range slightly *greater* than in the original attendance zones (28%) (School Board Meeting, 2 January 2018). In this context, board members who had previously expressed interest in equity-oriented initiatives appeared emboldened by the advocacy efforts of The Village Initiative and its supporters. A city-appointed board member recognized, 'We've also heard from a whole lot of community members about the need for equity in our schools. I mean a lot of broad-based community support for that' (Hummel. School Board Meeting, 28 November 2017). With a perception that the boundaries of community acceptability had been broadened and that there was a coalition behind them in support of equity, city-appointed and one JCC board member successfully pushed other board members to vote in favor of demanding a fourth attendance boundary map that would achieve greater socioeconomic integration across the middle schools. The consultant was tasked with

creating a fourth map in which the difference between percentages of economically disadvantaged students across the middle schools would be no more than 10% (School Board Meeting, 12 December 2017). This map was ultimately selected, and board members framed this decision as aligned with community support for greater 'socio-economic balance'. In the words of one City-appointed board member:

> A lot of people like the idea of trying to balance our schools, but the reason for not doing the high schools . . . [. . .] is that [. . .] a new school wasn't being created that wasn't forcing redistricting to have to happen. And in this case, we do have a middle school that's coming online and we are forced to redistrict, so why not take this moment and, and start everyone out as close to an even playing field as we can?

This successful reform not only brought about greater parity in the percentages of economically disadvantaged students across the middle schools (i.e. 48% at Berkeley and 20% at Hornsby before rezoning and 41% and 32%, respectively, afterwards), but it also brought significant racial integration (i.e. 68% white students at Hornsby and 50% at Berkeley before rezoning and 59% and 57%, respectively, after) (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). In the absence of heated public controversy, board members were unanimous in their support of a map that rezoned the middle schools to boost socioeconomic integration across the four schools—but which also did not cross-cut any additional white neighborhoods.

Conclusion

Our analysis of school district leaders' decision-making reveals an explanation for the divergent outcomes in these two efforts to use school attendance boundaries to address racial and socioeconomic inequities. In line with Critical Race Theorists, in the case of the high school rezoning we found that school decision-makers were unwilling to enact reforms that traversed the boundaries of community acceptability, especially with regard to white, middle-class property rights as entitlements to 'good' schools. To protect their perceived entitlements, privileged parents and their neighbors vociferously exercised their power to influence rezoning decision-making. These parents and residents successfully harnessed frameworks that obscured the role of systematic inequalities in students' lives, while naturalizing the privileges of white, economically advantaged families as beneficial and, indeed, meritorious. In the end, the school board chose to maintain segregation and overcrowding, rather than reassign high school students.

Nonetheless, the case of this public controversy demonstrates that community-based advocacy for equity-based reforms 'mattered' considerably in impacting school officials' decision-making. By drawing public attention to educational disparities at WJCC, community advocacy helped propel equity and diversity into public discussions of school rezonings, resulting in broad, public acknowledgment of resource inequities, educational disparities, and levels of socioeconomic and racial segregation across the schools in the district. Local media outlets ran news stories that highlighted these disparities and used the frame of diversity and race in their coverage. And in the middle school rezoning anonymous parent surveys also adopted the frames of 'diversity' and 'equity'. Thus, while addressing equity through high school rezoning created deep controversies, it was through these very contestations that public awareness of educational disparities grew, creating pressure for school officials to acknowledge and address these 'problems' through middle school rezoning and even subsequent reforms. In the years following the rezoning, school officials introduced measures aimed at addressing such educational disparities across WJCC schools. They integrated 'school equity' as a major theme within the strategic plan, and they introduced a new budget that took student vulnerabilities into account when allocating school funding.

By highlighting the importance of community advocacy, our analysis builds on Critical Race theory by specifying the conditions under which interest convergence can be triggered to result in policy change. The advocacy of The Village Initiative reshaped the boundaries of perceived 'acceptable norms within the community' by establishing equity and diversity as central to the debate over rezoning, which activated school board members who became 'willing collaborators in educational change' (Turner, 2015: 8, 34). These board members mobilized to take a strong, public stance in favor of integration by sending the consultant back to the drawing board to produce a map that would deliver 'socioeconomic balance'.

Notwithstanding these gains, as this case and Critical Race theory has demonstrated, successful policy reforms aimed at racial equity are unlikely to meet with success unless they converge with the interests of white privilege. In the current moment in WJCC and across the US conservative, white advocates have mobilized to attack schools' efforts to integrate racial history into their curricula and to implement equity-oriented measures, such as 'social-emotional learning'. With the interests of white supremacy increasingly expressed both openly and, indeed, violently, it seems highly unlikely that interest convergence will present a viable way forward, as the 'common ground' between white privilege and those seeking educational justice for marginalized and vulnerable students appears to be rapidly shrinking. In such a context, it becomes vital for community advocates in support of equity to enact an anti-racist praxis to challenge color and class-blind narratives that equate property ownership and neighborhood residence with deservingness, while also holding decision makers accountable to the principles of equitable public education for all students.

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Notes

1. Data are from a total of 907 school districts and charter schools.
2. To address repetition in participants' responses to the proposed high school and middle school maps, we drew a systematic and proportionate sample of responses to each map. We oversampled responses to the maps that the school board ultimately selected—the map of current high school attendance boundaries (p. 235) and Map #4 of the middle school maps (p. 101). In the former, participants did not merely assess the map, but clearly voiced their support or opposition to rezoning. Since the latter reflected the greatest socioeconomic integration, it drew responses that most clearly articulated views on 'socioeconomic balance'.
3. We allotted each researcher a portion of the data to either assign codes as the 'primary' coder or to conduct a blind check of these applications as 'secondary' coder. Any differences were later reconciled, in most cases opting for more inclusive coding assignments.
4. Between 1990 and 2000 the Williamsburg-James City County area grew 30% from 46,500 to 60,100 inhabitants and 35% in the next decade to reach 81,076 with most of the growth occurring in JCC

(Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, 2013). Since that time, population growth has slowed to 13%, and currently, there are ~93,700 inhabitants in Williamsburg-James City County (US Census Bureau, 2020).

5. Between the 2008–2009 and 2020–2021 academic years, the percentage of white students at WJCC schools fell from 69% to 55%, and that of 'economically disadvantaged' students rose from 23% to 38% (Virginia Department of Education, 2020).
6. This was especially true during the heated discussions surrounding the possible high school rezoning, which were further fueled by the school board's decision not to address specifics regarding the implementation of rezoning, such as whether or not rising seniors would be 'grandparented' into their current school assignments.
7. A one-time cost of $111,000 was estimated along with monthly expenses of $1700 until a new high school was built (LaRoe 20178).

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