



# Mothers' perceptions of educational access and engagement in a context of urban austerity

Amy Krings<sup>a,\*</sup>, Hillary Thomas<sup>a</sup>, Shawna J. Lee<sup>b</sup>, Aayat Ali<sup>b</sup>, LaDonna Miller<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social Work, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, United States

<sup>b</sup> School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, United States

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## ABSTRACT

This study sheds light upon mothers' perceptions of educational justice in a context of austerity-based educational reforms. Focus group participants ( $n = 64$ ) described local schools as lacking resources, a shortcoming that contributed to overcrowded classrooms, inadequate transportation, and safety concerns. They were skeptical of elected and appointed state and district officials, who were viewed as misrepresenting the degree of financial strain in the district in order to prioritize financial profit above education services for children. Additionally, respondents struggled to identify opportunities for parent involvement in educational policy making at a state, district, or school level. The shortage of resources, skepticism, and lack of opportunity culminated in what were often described as contentious relationships between parents and school officials. Our results suggest that mothers recognize that they have been disenfranchised as a result of educational reforms. They are more likely to enroll their children and participate in schools when they perceive that there are adequate resources, that children's needs are prioritized above fiscal austerity, and that their opinions are valued.

## 1. Introduction

This study examines the perceptions of parents, most of whom were African American or Latina mothers whose children attended school in Detroit, Michigan to shed light on issues of educational justice and equity in the city. Specifically, we report findings from six focus groups that examined what were perceived to be root causes and potential solutions related to educational improvement in the Detroit. We also asked about perceptions of statewide educational reforms that were implemented in Michigan during the last decade and their impacts on parents' access to resources, decision-making venues, and quality schools. To capture the ideas of parents whose children attended Detroit Public Schools (DPS), as well as those whose children lived in the city but were not enrolled in public schools, focus groups were held in two public schools, a charter school, a private religious school, and a state-controlled school.

Participants told us that they were concerned that the Detroit Public School system lacks access to resources, particularly investments that promote a quality learning environment. Parents were skeptical that the district budget situation was as dire as officials reported. Additionally, parents were unsatisfied with their ability to access decision-making venues, including those related to school and district-wide budgets.

These limited resources and opportunities for meaningful local participation resulted in relationships that were often characterized as adversarial between parents and district or state officials. These themes suggest that urban educational reforms are more likely to result in increased enrollments and strong school-community relationships if they include equitable investments, increased transparency regarding budgeting, and opportunities for collective local decision-making.

### 1.1. Educational inequality

Quality education contributes to healthy youth and communities (Center on Society and Health, 2014). However, educational inequality exists in the United States with disproportionate impacts on people who live in school districts that are predominantly poor and Black or Latino (Aud et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 1998). These inequalities result from a complex history that includes school and residential segregation, racial injustice, and property-tax-based local funding of public schools (Macedo, 2003; Reed, 2001). For example, state and federal agencies contributed to the decline of urban areas, including urban school districts, through exclusionary zoning, policies that prioritized highway construction over public transit, housing policies that favored single-family over multifamily dwellings, and the use of redlining to guarantee

Abbreviations: DPS, Detroit Public Schools; EAA, Education Achievement Authority

\* Corresponding author at: School of Social Work, Loyola University Chicago, 820 N. Michigan, Chicago, IL 60611, United States.

E-mail address: [akrings@luc.edu](mailto:akrings@luc.edu) (A. Krings).

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mortgages in racially homogenous (i.e., White) suburban communities (Burns, 1994; Reed, 2001; Sugrue, 2005). These policies led to reduced public revenues as residents left and property taxes declined. Thus, at the same time that municipalities and school districts lost income, there was a greater concentration of social need (Reed, 2001). These broad factors continue to contribute to urban school districts' struggles to meet basic needs such as paying teachers, purchasing supplies, maintaining buildings, and investing in extracurricular activities as compared with well-off suburban districts that enjoy greater resources and less concentration of need (Macedo, 2003). The culmination of these historic and structural factors reduces the ability of many poor and Black or Latino parents to access quality public schools for their children.

### 1.2. Logic of educational justice

Nygreen (2016) compares paradigms of educational justice that seek to explain and address educational inequity. The most dominant is the neoliberal paradigm, an ideological system as well as a set of political-economic policies that favor the application of market-based principles to all aspects of public life, including education and social services (Harvey, 2005). The logic of neoliberalism suggests that infusing market competition will improve school quality because parents, who in this model can act as consumers, will choose the best school for their children. In this way, the market will “reward” excellent schools with students and the funding that comes with them and it will eliminate failing schools. The logic of neoliberalism also manifests through decision-making structures in which technocratic “experts” make decisions without the infusion of politics, and thereby with limited democratic accountability. Neoliberal principles are embedded within educational policies such as the privatization of educational services, increased reliance on standardized testing, introduction of incentives and sanctions for schools, promotion of school competition, and dismantling of organized labor such as teachers' unions (Nygreen, 2016).

Nygreen (2016) suggests that the neoliberal paradigm differs from a community-based parent organizing logic in terms of how root causes are defined, how parents engage, and what solutions are deemed viable. In contrast to neoliberal logic, the parent organizing approach suggests that systemic injustice is the root cause of educational inequality. This model posits that parent participation in democratic governance and self-determination is necessary to advance educational justice. Consequently, the parent organizing model views parents as experts whose input into educational reforms is valued; this contradicts the neoliberal reliance upon top-down technocratic decision making and parent engagement as consumers.

### 1.3. Educational reforms in a neoliberal context

In Michigan, a logic of neoliberalism is apparent within two important educational reforms: emergency management and the creation of a state-run school district in Detroit. The emergency management law permits state officials to appoint a receiver, known as an emergency manager, whose job is to balance the budget when a city or school district cannot meet its financial obligations (Anderson, 2012; Loh, 2016; Scorsone, 2014). Although emergency managers are charged with balancing the budget, they may not raise taxes nor renegotiate with creditors. In this way, they are incentivized to eliminate or privatize public services, sell off assets such as public land and buildings, and renegotiate collective bargaining contracts. Emergency managers are able to do this without the consent of elected bodies such as school boards, leading some critics to describe the policy as undemocratic (Anderson, 2012; Loh, 2016). Overall, the policy codifies the transfer of political power away from elected school boards, parent groups, and teachers' unions.

Emergency management has also been critiqued as a policy that unfairly burdens the poor and racial or ethnic minorities. Peck (2012)

noted that required cuts in services are geographically bound within cities and school districts, even though the roots of budget deficits emerged, at least in part, within state, national, and even international political and economic decisions that were made outside the control of residents. Furthermore, there are significant racial disparities in the implementation of emergency management laws in Michigan. Between 2008 and 2013, 51% of African American, 16.6% of Latino, and only 2.4% of White residents in Michigan lived in cities that were governed by an emergency manager (Lee et al., 2016). The Detroit Public School District was under state control through emergency management from 1999 to 2005 and again from 2009 to 2016 (Zaniewski, 2015).

Another contemporary and controversial educational reform in Michigan was the establishment of a state-controlled school district, the Education Achievement Authority (EAA). In 2012, the EAA was established to take over and strengthen fifteen Detroit Public Schools that were deemed to be failing by state standards. However, the goal of turning around these schools was largely unmet. In the five years that the EAA was in place, the fifteen schools in the district went from an enrollment of 11,000 students to 6000 students and there were mixed results in terms of academic improvement (Higgins, 2017a). In addition to limited impacts in terms of educational outcomes among students in the EAA district, critics noted that DPS was economically disadvantaged because the district lost the per-pupil revenue associated with students (Hammer, 2011). On July 1, 2017, the EAA district was disbanded and its fifteen schools were reintegrated within the public school district.

### 1.4. Study rationale: parent perceptions of educational quality

While challenges relating to limited resources, competition from charter schools, and underperforming student outcomes are not unique to Detroit, the city may be one of the best known examples of an underperforming public school district in the United States. Research about the cause of these problems and their resolution has been examined (Hamlin, 2017; Hammer, 2011; Hula, Jelier, & Schauer, 1997; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1994; Mirel, Galston, & Guthrie, 1999), but the perspectives of the families who are most affected has been neglected. Thus, the motivation for this study emerged from questions about how parents perceive and navigate the educational system in a context of urban austerity.

Our contribution is to analyze the perspectives of mothers who lived in the city of Detroit and who had direct experience with underperforming schools while the emergency management and EAA policies were in place. We sought to understand parents' ideas about what can and should be done to address substandard schools as well as their thoughts regarding the role of parent engagement. To this end, we interviewed African American and Hispanic/Latino mothers, recognizing that these groups have been disproportionately affected by policies related to poor schools such as the EAA system and emergency management.

This study examines the following questions: (1) How do parents whose children attend school in Detroit describe their education-related experiences? (2) How do parents interpret the role of institutional features (e.g., public, private, and charters) and educational policies (e.g., emergency management and the EAA) as facilitating or detracting from quality education for their children? (3) In what ways have parents sought to influence educational policies?

We used grounded theory to analyze the focus group data, which was informed by our desire to utilize a social justice perspective that provided space for the voices of parents to identify shared experiences and ideas regarding education and to propose potential solutions. Thus, the findings of the study have the potential to inform policy-makers regarding how parents perceive core challenges and potential solutions relating to educational improvement.

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