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## FIVE WAYS TO ENCOURAGE EQUITABLE SCHOOL REZONING



It is not unusual for districts to rezone school attendance boundaries due to growth, enrollment loss, or, more rarely, efforts to encourage desegregation. However, though not necessarily uncommon, the process is often difficult and fraught.

In two articles recently published in the peer-reviewed journals *AERA Open* and *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, NEPC Fellow Genevieve Siegel-Hawley and her co-authors Kimberly Bridges, Andrene J. Castro, Mitchell Parry, and Shenita E. Williams, all of Virginia Commonwealth University, draw upon rezoning experiences of the Henrico County and Richmond Public Schools in Virginia to explore the perils and promise of this process.

The researchers take a qualitative approach, analyzing the results of stakeholder interviews, written public comments, and public meetings. Their findings suggest several pieces of advice for educators, policymakers, and families who find themselves engaging in the rezoning process and are seeking fairness and equity:

- 1. Ignore race and socioeconomic status at your own peril.** In our country, school zoning boundaries are typically based on geographical considerations, with children who live in the same neighborhoods attending the same schools. Because neighborhoods are often racially and socioeconomically segregated, race and class are necessarily involved. When leaders fail to engage directly with these issues, some stakeholders may use coded language to object to changes that would further racial or socioeconomic integration, claiming their concerns are really about “quality” or “intimacy” or “local control” and not about race. In trying to avoid integration, these stakeholders may create inaccurate narratives around students of color and the schools

they attend while at the same time shifting attention and support away from integration-related goals.

- 2. Move forward by looking back.** This is probably not the first time your district or school has rezoned. It is critical for stakeholders to understand what happened the last time school attendance boundaries were changed in order to avoid repeating or compounding problems of the past. In Richmond Public Schools, for instance, an earlier rezoning had a “contentious, opaque policy process that led to the closure of a majority Black school and more segregative attendance boundaries across the city,” the article authors noted. In addition, some stakeholders viewed the most recent rezoning efforts as an outgrowth of Massive Resistance, the series of state laws passed to prevent school integration in the South in the wake of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. This historical context shaped the degree to which Black stakeholders in particular felt able to trust that the new process would be fair.
- 3. Is residential choice really “choice”?** During a rezoning process, stakeholders who support the maintenance of segregated neighborhood schools may loudly and frequently portray housing decisions as the result of free choice. However, the choice of where to live is necessarily constrained by economic and racial considerations, as well as discrimination. A low-income family may be unable to afford to choose a neighborhood zoned to the district’s best-resourced schools. Families of color have been and continue to be impacted by the nation’s long and ongoing history of redlining, exclusionary covenants, and [subtler, contemporary forms of housing discrimination](#). The researchers encourage leaders to “challenge conceptions of belonging and exclusion embedded in residential choice by addressing barriers to fair housing for families of color and common assumptions about race and school quality undergirding these narratives.”
- 4. Ensure everyone is heard.** Traditional methods of community engagement tend to overrepresent input from White and affluent parents who are more likely to have the resources, knowledge, and time to game traditional feedback mechanisms, dominating meetings and submitting multiple public comments per stakeholder. For example, one affluent White parent attended and participated in every community meeting, including meetings intended to provide opportunities for monolingual Spanish speakers to voice their opinions. “School board and district leaders should disrupt traditional norms of engagement by, for example, prioritizing input from underrepresented communities and youth, attending to the hypervisibility of White community members, or correcting racialized discourses in real time,” the researchers write.
- 5. Develop rezoning policies that use clear metrics to track progress toward reducing racial and economic segregation.** Otherwise, the new boundaries may make segregation worse, or stall integration’s progress.

## NEPC Resources on School Segregation

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