NEPC Review: Redrawing the Lines: How Purposeful School System Redistricting Can Increase Funding Fairness and Decrease Segregation (New America, September 2025)

Reviewed by:

Christopher Cleveland and Joshua Almes
Brown University

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National Education Policy Center

Acknowledgements

NEPC Staff

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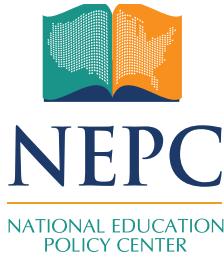
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Summary

A New America report argues that states should improve educational equity by redrawing school district boundaries to reduce within-state fiscal and demographic disparities. The report details three redistricting methods: (1) a "blank-slate" approach that creates new districts from Census tracts, (2) a county-aligned approach that uses county boundaries as district boundaries, and (3) targeted mergers of existing districts. It models each of these approaches and compares them to current district maps. Overall, the report finds that across districts, all three hypothetical models increase the equality of access to local property tax revenue, and all three improve racial and economic integration. Blank-slate redistricting leads to the most significant improvements. Although this review identifies some methodological weaknesses, the report still offers policymakers a framework for a preliminary discussion of how district boundaries shape inequities and, therefore, how redistricting may be a meaningful policy tool for alleviating them. More research and analysis, notably (a) including additional factors that complicate redistricting and (b) comparing redistricting with other approaches to reducing inequities, would strengthen the conversation this report initiates.
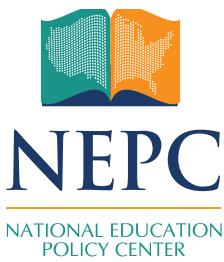
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I. Introduction

Fiscal and demographic inequities across districts are a chronic concern. For decades, education policymakers have debated how to improve educational equity for students, employing strategies including federal desegregation orders, state funding reforms,[1] and expanded school choice through interdistrict enrollment, charter schools, and private school vouchers.[2] A recent report from New America, *Redrawing the Lines: How Purposeful School System Redistricting Can Increase Funding Fairness and Decrease Segregation,* by Zahava Stadler and Jordan Abbott, examines redrawing school district boundaries as another strategy for policymakers to consider.

The report uses states and their districts as units of analysis because those boundaries are significant both politically and fiscally. The report details three redistricting methods: (1) a "blank-slate" approach that creates new districts from Census tracts; (2) a county-aligned approach using county boundaries as district boundaries; and (3) targeted mergers of existing districts. For the new district boundaries created by each of these approaches, the report calculates the percentage improvement for three outcomes: (a) equality across districts of per-pupil local property tax capacity, (b) district representativeness of the state's racial composition, and (c) similarity of district poverty rates to the statewide child poverty rate. To illustrate its findings, the report includes an interactive map and data tool that readers can use to explore the effects of the three redistricting models across 42 states, insights from a super-

intendent experienced in navigating boundary change, and a detailed discussion of possibilities in three states, with a different redistricting strategy considered in each.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report organizes its findings by redistricting method and by state. It compares the highest and lowest rates of economic and demographic integration among districts produced by each theoretical redistricting method (measured in quartiles) with the same rates in existing districts, demonstrating the potential for significant improvements in equity.[3]

The report balances multiple objectives to evaluate and compare the district maps produced by its models.[4] Each map is scored across four dimensions, with the greatest weight placed on per-pupil local property tax revenue capacity, followed by racial and economic demographics, and the roundness of district shapes.[5] The process reconciles these competing priorities through successive pairwise comparisons. Table 1 provides an overview of the primary findings on (a) equality across districts of per-pupil local property tax capacity, (b) district representativeness of the state's racial composition, and (c) similarity of district poverty rates to the statewide child poverty rate across the three redistricting methods. Overall, the most significant improvements result from blank-state redistricting. For example, for per-pupil local tax capacity, this method yields nearly 67% greater access than the current state. In contrast, the merger method yields 63% and the county method 39%.[6]

Table 1: Summary of Results: Gains from Redistricting Models, Compared to Actual District Maps

Outcome	Model 1: Blank State	Model 2: Counties	Model 3: Mergers
A. Per-Pupil Property Valuation (Local Property Tax Capacity)	Average state has 67% percent fairer access to local property tax revenue	Average state has 39% percent fairer access to local property tax revenue	Average state has 63% percent fairer access to local property tax revenue
B. District representativeness of the state's racial composition	Average state has 48% greater racial integration	Average state has 41% greater racial integration	Average state has 48% greater racial integration
C. Similarity of district poverty rates to the statewide child poverty rate	Average state has 65% greater economic integration	Average state has 57% greater economic integration	Average state has 55% greater economic integration

Source: Abbot & Stadler, 2025 (pp. 23–34).

The report acknowledges that the redistricting process is a complex undertaking and illustrates the logistical challenges presented by complex political and practical realities. Despite known challenges, the report contends that, because its findings show redistricting can significantly reduce inequity, redistricting is a practical way for states to fulfill their responsibility to ensure that every child has access to quality public education regardless of where they live.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report posits that district boundaries significantly impede equity because they function like gerrymandered legislative districts, segregating students by race and family income. Based on calculations showing gains from hypothetical redistricting approaches, the report concludes that purposefully redesigning district boundaries can increase equity in district income from local property taxes and in student race and economic composition.[7]

The report proposes that redistricting can accomplish what attempts to reform state funding formulas did not: remedy disparities between the richest and poorest districts. It examines specifically Pennsylvania, where, between 2009 and 2023, legislative efforts to consolidate the state's 500 districts repeatedly failed.[8]

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report is grounded in quality scholarly and government research documenting the persistent racial and economic segregation of school districts. However, it does not engage deeply with the question of who should be responsible for redistricting educational geographies. Notably, Supreme Court decisions such as *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) limit the federal government's authority to redraw district boundaries. While states have the ultimate power to draw and redraw district boundaries, they typically leave the task to local authorities, who may draw lines to preserve their own fiscal or political advantages over adjacent districts.[9] The report cites relevant examples of states that have redrawn boundaries, which have created severe political implications and significant shifts in housing markets.[10] It provides relevant examples of states that have dodged political upheaval by redefining school district boundaries rather than redrawing them, such as Vermont, which uses statewide rather than district-level property taxes to allocate revenue to districts.[11]

The report cites examinations of redistricting throughout history, including district mergers, at times incentivized by states. It also notes that because states have allowed local communities to draw their own district boundaries, segregation of stu-

dents and resources between districts has remained persistent. District secession dynamics, which typically produce one racially segregated and wealthy entity, are politically fraught and continue to challenge boundary consolidation efforts. The report downplays the frequency of secessions, yet secessions are a recent and increasingly frequent trend in today's policy environment.[12,13] The report also cites news coverage and legislative memos calling for district boundary reform through consolidation.[14] These findings align with the report's analysis, which shows that reducing the number of school districts reduces inequality.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report uses the three redistricting methods to project hypothetical scenarios in which states employ school district redistricting. School districts have no legal parameters governing their existence; specifically, there are no rules governing their shape, size, or population. In the absence of rules, the report introduces new redistricting methods that amount to three distinct forms of consolidation. Across each redistricting method, the report follows the following methodological choices, which have meaningful implications for the results and interpretability:

1. *The report uses limited measures of inequality.* The report lacks a baseline inequality measure for each state showing how its resources and population would be organized if it were a single school district. This hypothetical alternative would allow readers to assess the relative impact of the three redistricting methods presented in the report, while accounting for current variation across states in district counts. If reducing a state to a single district, for example, has essentially the same consequences as lowering it to county-sized districts, policymakers could compare the relative political costs. Some other measures of inequality, such as dissimilarity or isolation indices, capture an alternative of a single statewide scenario. Without knowledge of a statewide distribution of people and resources, it is more difficult to interpret the magnitude of redistricting outcomes.

2. *The report conflates redistricting with the number of districts.* There are two issues at hand when it comes to redistricting school districts: the "zoning" of a geography, which is the actual placement of a boundary line, and the number of school districts relative to the population of a state. In the report, the methods redraw existing boundary lines and consolidate states into fewer school districts. As reported, readers cannot assess whether inequality persists between districts because of how they are drawn or because there are "too many" districts to achieve an equitable distribution.

3. *The report's method tries to reduce fiscal and social segregation simultane-*

ously. The report does not examine property valuations, racial segregation, and economic segregation individually; instead, it balances all three simultaneously. This approach differs from explicitly prioritizing one dimension (e.g., reducing fiscal inequity) and then examining how the others respond.

4. *The report forces school districts to be drawn as circles.* The report's method requires newly drawn districts to meet a compactness criterion, measured by the roundness of their shape. It does this to ensure that school districts preserve a sense of "local-ness" in their geometry and to align with tests of legislative gerrymandering, where maps must meet compactness criteria.[15] In reality, there is no inherent reason that school districts should be circular to be effective.[16] Excluding maps below the circularity threshold may result in underperformance in equity. In fact, past studies have shown that irregular shapes are more highly correlated with racial equity,[17] and recent research suggests that non-contiguous shapes can outperform contiguous shapes on racial equity measures.[18]

5. *The report ignores student costs relative to a district's wealth.* School districts incur differential costs beyond the distribution of students across a state, especially for students requiring special education and English-language learners. Other studies have used variables that consider not only the distribution of resources and populations in redistricting but also the distribution of educational costs.[19]

6. *The report assumes that lowering between-district racial composition differences is optimal.* Finally, this report uses redistricting to achieve higher racial equity levels through its specific equity standard. Redistricting to achieve greater fiscal equity is different from redistricting to achieve greater racial equity. In theory, a district could serve an entirely Black student population and have the same local property tax capacity as a district serving an all-White student population. The only barrier to this possibility is property devaluation due to the owners' race/ethnicity.[20] Drawing school districts to limit the existence of majority-Black or majority-Hispanic school districts presupposes that such geographies are inherently problematic, rather than emphasizing that structural inequities, such as racially biased property valuation and local funding mechanisms, drive disparities in resources and outcomes.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

This report offers a helpful starting point for policy discussions focused on redistricting to address fiscal and demographic inequities across districts. However, several complexities temper straightforward interpretation and application.

First, the focus on relative percentage improvements assumes that equity is best achieved by minimizing inequality rather than by ensuring that every district reaches a minimum adequate funding level. One could reasonably argue that guaranteeing adequacy for all students is more urgent than narrowing inequality.[21] Second, bundling multiple changes—reductions in districts, boundary changes, demographic equity, fiscal equity, and the requirement of circle-shaped districts—makes isolating causal effects difficult. And while the report's calculations weighted different factors differently, readers who experiment with the interactive tool cannot determine the weights themselves, making it difficult to see how specific priorities might influence outcomes. Third, the various consequences of redistricting remain uncertain. Districts losing local tax base might resist reform or see program cuts, and newly formed districts might struggle to develop a community identity. Fourth, schools are currently highly segregated, and this may persist even if districts increase overall diversity, because school enrollment policies are generally neighborhood-based.[22] Fifth, housing markets and family mobility respond to changes in school quality, potentially leading to new patterns of segregation or instability.[23]

The report assumes that district boundaries are key to perpetuating inequity, when in fact other policy factors are also at play. For example, the report critiques Pennsylvania, a state that relies on local wealth to determine the level of state education spending. However, there is more to Pennsylvania's story than school district boundaries that differentially capture local wealth: Pennsylvania's funding formula also considers the costs of specific student categories, including special education, poverty, English Language Learners, and students attending cyber schools. These populations are also unevenly distributed across districts, and redistricting would affect the ratio of local resource costs to revenue. In the Pennsylvania context, the problem is that differentially funding districts based on students' educational needs is blocked by policy, not necessarily by the boundary lines themselves. Pennsylvania's "hold harmless" policy guarantees that no district shall receive *less state funding* than it did in previous years.[24] As a result, only 10% of state funding actually flows through the goal-oriented part of the funding formula. While redistricting promises a fairer distribution of students and resources, state-by-state policy considerations require careful context beyond the redistricting presented in this report.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Despite methodological caveats, the report offers policymakers a useful initial framework for considering how district boundaries shape inequities. Instead of claiming that redistricting is a silver bullet, it suggests that intentionally redesigning district boundaries could increase equity in local property tax revenue and in the racial/eco-

nomic demographic composition of districts. These factors make the report helpful in initiating a discussion of the nature of boundary lines as politically and economically meaningful mechanisms in education policy.

There are, however, several other possible approaches to reducing fiscal and demographic disparities, such as reformed school finance systems specifically targeting equity[25,26] or relatively underexplored neighborhood and housing reform measures.[27,28] Additional considerations that complicate redistricting include the possibility of wealthier households exiting newly drawn districts and hold-harmless provisions in state policies that guarantee that districts losing revenue receive the same revenue as they did in the prior year. These dynamics could slow or reduce the potential change.[29] Therefore, much more analysis is needed on how redrawing boundaries can improve equity. This analysis should include complementary measures such as statewide funding reforms that account for student costs, integration with choice mechanisms, coordination with housing policy, and consideration of political realities. The current report offers policymakers a worthwhile start to this effort.

Notes and References

1   For example: Duncombe, C. (2024). *Colorado and Mississippi make big moves in K-12 finance reform*. Education Commission of the States. Retrieved October 12, 2025, from https://www.ecs.org/colorado-and-mississippi-make-big-moves-in-k-12-finance-reform/

2   For example: Indiana Department of Education. (n.d.) Indiana choice scholarship program. Retrieved October 12, 2025, from https://www.in.gov/doe/students/indiana-choice-scholarship-program/

3   Stadler, Z. & Abbott, J. (2025, September). *Redrawing the lines: How purposeful school redistricting can increase funding fairness and decrease segregation* (pp. 24-26). New America. Retrieved October 9, 2025, from https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/redrawing-the-lines-school-system-redistricting-increase-funding-fairness-decrease-segregation/

4   Mock, W.B.T. (2011). Pareto optimality. In D.K. Chatterjee (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of global justice* (pp. 808-809). Springer. Retrieved on November 18, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9160-5_341

5   The report assesses the geometric compactness of districts by measuring their circularity, assuming that more circular shapes are preferable. Present district shapes don't necessarily follow circular patterns, and it is arguable that districts following roads, rivers, or mountain chains might be more "local" than a circular district, especially in considering travel time as a function of spatial efficiency.

    See:

    Fischel, W.A. (2010). *The congruence of American school districts with other local government boundaries: A Google-Earth exploration*. SSRN. Retrieved October 12, 2025, from https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.967399

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Michigan State Law Review, 2014(3), 677–710. Retrieved October 12, 2025, from https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/mslr2014&i=717

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21   While 'equity' is focused on ensuring educational resources are distributed fairly, providing comparable educational opportunities regardless of a student's socioeconomic background or geographic location, 'adequacy' is focused on providing sufficient funding for all students to meet established academic standards or achieve specific, minimum educational results, such as a minimum passing grade on a state achievement test. For example, if it costs $25,000 per student to educate every student in a state adequately, that is different from ensuring that each student has access to $20,000.

See:

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