

The Demographics of School District Secession

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Abstract: A school district secession is a political tool that forms new school district boundaries after a formal withdrawal from an existing school district. I investigate whether school district secessions exacerbate racial and economic disparities and explore the underlying school district, community, and socio-historic characteristics predictive of a secession. This paper analyzes the school district secession attempts made since the year 2000 and builds upon past research focused on single district case studies and qualitative accounts. Initial results highlight that secessions create new school districts that have a higher share of white and affluent students on average compared to the districts left behind and that this trend is driven by the attempts located in the South.

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Background

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black students and white students unconstitutional. Despite massive integration efforts taken over the past six decades, the legacy of the *Brown* decision is precarious. Many school districts under court-order to desegregate have been released from oversight, spurred by the Supreme Court decision of *Board of Education v. Dowell* (1991). While court-ordered desegregation plans can be effective in reducing racial school segregation, their impacts fade over time in the absence of continued oversight (Reardon et al. 2012). The *Dowell* decision has paralleled larger trends of low minority-white exposure within school settings. Since the late 1980s, minority students are attending schools with fewer white students (Fiel 2013; Reardon et al. 2000). This trend is significant as school segregation and the racial composition of schools are often cited as mechanisms explaining inequality in educational outcomes (Berends et al. 2008; Card and Rothstein 2007).

While promoting racial equity was the motivation behind *Brown*, patterns of racial segregation in schools are correlated with economic segregation and a large body of research has focused on the consequences of both (for a review, see Reardon and Owens 2014). This article will analyze an understudied lever in the process of racial and economic resegregation: school district secessions. A *school district secession* is a formal withdrawal from an existing school district to form a new school district or re-open a previously closed school district.

The Supreme Court ruled that inter-district segregation remedies are unconstitutional (*Milliken v. Bradley* 1974). Because desegregation efforts cannot be carried out between school districts, the political act of a secession has the power to alter the racial and economic composition of a school district and can threaten current and future integration efforts. Research has illuminated the relationship between fragmented jurisdictional landscapes and high levels of segregation, both between- and within-school districts (Bischoff 2008). However, fragmentation is conceptualized as a race-neutral process while the history of Southern resistance to integration has racialized recent secession endeavors. While often posited, little evidence documents systematic inequalities that arise from changing school district boundaries after a secession.

This study builds upon the current body of research focused on single district case studies of secessions (Frankenberg 2009; Frankenberg et al. 2017) and other qualitative accounts (Siegel-Hawley et al. 2018; Wilson 2016). This study is the first to the author's knowledge to examine the full population of school district secession attempts since 2000. I have two main research aims: 1) describe the demographic characteristics of school districts pre- and post-secession and 2) explore the community characteristics predictive of selection into a school district secession attempt.

While school district secessions are an uncommon occurrence, the secession movement is likely to grow as legal barriers continue to falter and new bills are introduced in state legislatures granting the authority to secede. This political act is a poignant symbol of the fragility of racial and economic integration in our nation. Secession attempts may indicate larger trends such as isolationism, resource hoarding, and signs of racial/ethnic conflict. Studying the process of

school district secession efforts will reveal patterns which have implications extending far beyond our classroom walls.

Data and Methods

School District Measures

I identify school district secession attempts since the year 2000 through the EdBuild database. There are currently thirty states that have policies allowing for a school district secession, and 71 attempts have been made within twenty states (EdBuild 2017). Primary data for this analysis includes the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (NCES CCD). Public school districts from 2000-01 through the 2015-16 school years are used to capture racial and economic changes pre- and post-secession through counts of free and reduced lunch eligibility and the non-white student populations. As local control and academic concerns are cited as alternative motives for pursuing a secession, the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA) is used to provide a range of detailed data on educational outcomes. Nationally comparative academic indicators at the school district level are available for seven consecutive school years from 2008-09 to 2014-15.

Community-Level Characteristics

Beyond describing the variation in student characteristics within districts pre- and post-secession, I explore the neighborhood-level context within school district boundaries. This will allow for an empirical assessment of the salient characteristics predictive of a school district secession attempt. Specifically, I use the Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) files from the 1990, 2000, and 2010 decennial Census and the American Community Survey's 5-year pooled estimates from 2005-09 through 2012-16. Data is interpolated to obtain estimates for the years between Census enumeration. Tables for unemployment, educational attainment, private school enrollment, race/ethnicity, and median household income are used to explore the larger context of school district secessions. Additional data on the presidential vote share is provided by the Library of Congress' CQ Press Voting and Elections Collection. Data is available from 1988-2016 every 4-years at the county-level. These data are interpolated and assigned to school districts nested within counties.

Socio-Historical Context

ProPublica has captured a comprehensive list of school desegregation court orders and EdBuild's database provides data on laws regarding school district secession in each state. These socio-historical indicators will enable me to assess how the legal context impedes or supports the political act of undertaking a school district secession.

Methods

I focus on school district measures, community-level characteristics, and the socio-historical context in which school district secessions are situated. I first examine the average change in school district measures and community-level characteristics pre- and post- secession.

My analysis looks at successful secessions (n=47) and all secession attempts (n=71), which include those that have failed, are inactive, or ongoing. Next, I explore the characteristics that account for selection into the political act of secession. I use a series of state fixed effect regression models to compare school districts involved in a secession to other comparable districts by state. These comparisons will enable an exploration of the predictors of school district secessions and will control for the state-level legal context.

Preliminary Results

To date, I have successfully assembled the data necessary to complete the analyses described above. Initial descriptive statistics on the characteristics of students and communities nested within school district boundaries prior to and after a successful secession are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. Consistent with the popular narrative, secessions create new school districts that have a lower percentage of non-white and free and reduced lunch eligible students on average than the parent district left behind. A regional analysis highlights that this trend is being driven by the school district secessions centered within the South.

Ongoing Efforts

I will expand my descriptive analysis to include secession attempts that have failed, are ongoing, or inactive (n=71). This point of comparison will allow for a more robust understanding of the aftermath of a secession. I will also be developing models to test theoretically guided arguments about the role of school district measures, community-level characteristics, and the socio-historical context in motivating school district secession attempts.

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Table 1. School District Summary Statistics

	All School Districts			Southern School Districts		
	(1) Parent district pre-secession	(2) Parent district post-secession	(3) Seceded district	(4) Parent district pre-secession	(5) Parent district post-secession	(6) Seceded district
<i>Student Body</i>						
Total Enrollment	23,429	22,893	2,459	50,670	45,409	3,845
% Non-White	25.13	28.6	16.75	51.59	53.81	33.56
% Free and Reduced Lunch	47.31	48.61	39.85	56.21	56.45	35.51
N	31	27	42	12	12	15
<i>Community</i>						
Total Population	146,596	157,567	20,571	330,037	308,988	25,416
Households	55,177	59,575	7,209	125,364	118,266	8,954
Republican Vote Share	52.55	52.53	47.66	55.96	55.65	45.41
% B.A. or Higher	24.31	25.21	29.47	26.03	26.02	40.20
% Private School Enrollment	14.66	15.51	17.05	19.22	18.86	26.25
% Unemployed	6.58	7.06	6.60	7.64	7.61	4.24
% Non-White	18.74	21.04	14.41	36.43	38.06	24.36
Median Household Income (2016 Dollars)	51,841	50,849	63,649	52,290	51,457	84,547
Gini	0.4258	0.4352	0.3878	0.4462	0.4485	0.3527
N	30	26	25	12	12	10

Data source: National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (NCES CCD); National Center for Education Statistics Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (NCES EDGE); Decennial Census data and American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates.

Note: The Southern states included in columns (4) through (6) in the sub-analysis are Tennessee, Alabama, and Louisiana.

Note: Statistics are presented within school district boundaries. Republican vote share is measured at the county level and then assigned to the corresponding school district. Educational attainment is for the population 25 years and over. Private school enrollment is inclusive of PreK - 12th grade. Unemployment is for the population 16 years and over in the labor force.

Table 2. School District Means Pre- and Post-Secession

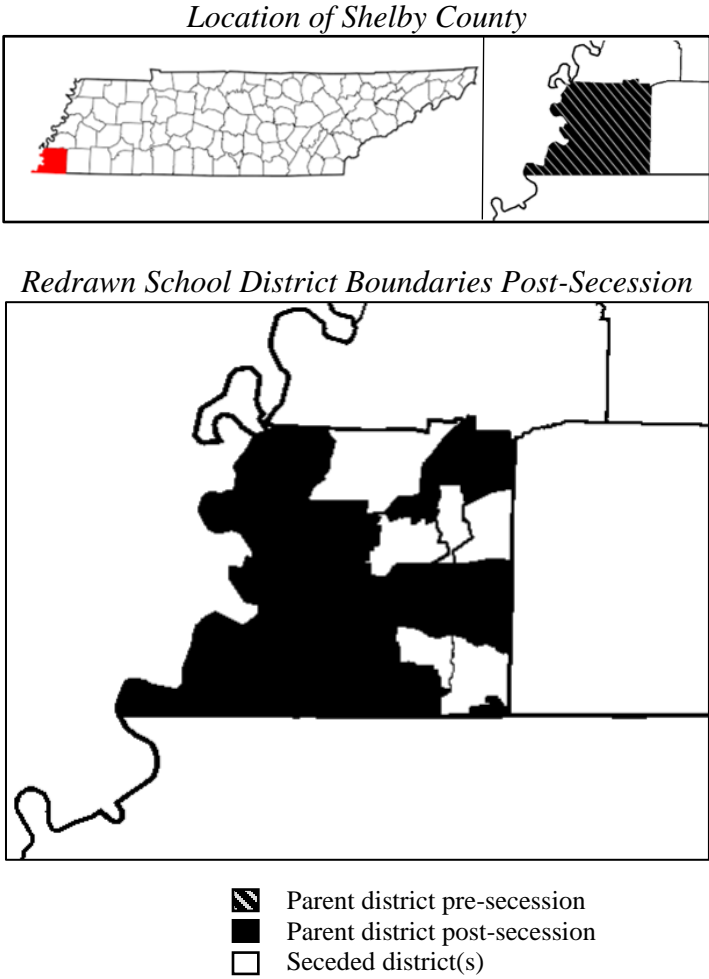
	All School Districts			Southern School Districts		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Parent district post-secession (vs) Parent district pre-secession	Seceded district (vs) Parent district pre-secession	Seceded district (vs) Parent district post-secession	Parent district post-secession (vs) Parent district pre-secession	Seceded district (vs) Parent district pre-secession	Seceded district (vs) Parent district post-secession
<i>Student Body</i>						
Total Enrollment	-3,878	-30,403	-30,950	-5,261	-79,588	-63,851
% Non-White	1.48	-10.12	-15.67	2.23	-26.11	-32.11
% Free and Reduced Lunch	0.90	-8.07	-14.74	0.25	-22.89	-26.27
N	27	42	32	12	15	15
<i>Community</i>						
Total Population	-10,829	-278,687	-225,486	-21,049	-628,899	-512,624
Households	-3,795	-103,516	-85,327	-7,098	-234,110	-194,992
Republican Vote Share	0.46	-0.07	-0.58	-0.31	-0.61	0.00
% B.A. or Higher	0.08	1.85	3.11	-0.01	9.3	11.61
% Private School Enrollment	0.54	1.24	1.33	-0.36	6.45	8.81
% Unemployed	0.00	-1.75	-1.86	-0.02	-5.22	-5.22
% Non-White	0.83	-11.35	-14.14	1.62	-27.66	-34.09
Median Household Income (2016 Dollars)	-820	18,042	20,518	-833	34,073	37,762
Gini	0.0038	-0.0608	-0.0694	0.0024	-0.1148	-0.1197
N	26	23	23	12	12	10

Data source: National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (NCES CCD); National Center for Education Statistics Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (NCES EDGE); Decennial Census data and American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates.

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Figure 1. School District Secession Boundaries in Shelby County, Tennessee



Data Source: EdBuild, “Fractured: The Breakdown of America’s School Districts”

Appendix A. School District Secessions by State, 2000-2017

District	Desegregation Order	Seceding District	Secession Year
Alabama			
Jefferson	Yes	Gardendale	2017
Jefferson	Yes	Leeds City	2003
Jefferson	Yes	Trussville City	2005
Marshall County	Yes	Boaz City	2004
Mobile County	Yes	Chickasaw City	2011
Mobile County	Yes	Saraland City	2007
Mobile County	Yes	Satsuma City	2012
Montgomery County	Yes	Pike Road	2015
Shelby County	Yes	Alabaster City	2012
Shelby County	Yes	Pelham City	2014
Colorado			
East Yuma	No	Idalia RJ-3	2001
East Yuma	No	Wray RD-2	2001
West Yuma	No	Liberty J-4	2001
West Yuma	No	Yuma 1	2001
Idaho			
Grangeville Joint 241	No	Mountain View	2007
Grangeville Joint 242	No	Salmon River Joint	2007
Whitepine	No	Troy	2000
Louisiana			
East Baton Rouge Parish	Yes	Central Community	2007
East Baton Rouge Parish	Yes	City of Baker	2003
East Baton Rouge Parish	Yes	Zachary Community	2003
Maine			
RSU 12	No	Wiscasset	2014
RSU 23	No	Dayton	2014
RSU 23	No	Saco	2014
RSU 24	No	Ellsworth	2014
RSU 24	No	Lamoine	2014
RSU 26	No	Glenburn	2013
RSU 26	No	Veazie	2013
RSU 37/MSAD 37	No	Cherryfield	2013
RSU 51/MSAD 51	No	Chebeague Island	2007
RSU 58/MSAD 58	No	Eustis	2013
RSU 59/MSAD 59	No	Athens	2013
RSU 88/MSAD 24	No	Hancock	2014
SAD 77 Cutler	No	Cutler	2006
SAD 77 Cutler	No	Machiasport	2006
SAD 77 Cutler	No	Whiting	2006
Massachusetts			
Gateway Regional	No	Worthington	2015
Ohio			
Adams County	No	Manchester Local	2004
Middletown City	No	Monroe Local	2000
South Dakota			
Lennox	No	Tea Area 41-5	2003
Tennessee			
Shelby County Schools	No	Arlington	2014
Shelby County Schools	No	Bartlett	2014
Shelby County Schools	No	Collierville	2014
Shelby County Schools	No	Germantown	2014
Shelby County Schools	No	Lakeland	2014
Shelby County Schools	No	Millington	2014
Utah			
Jordan	No	Canyons	2008
Wisconsin			
Shawano-Gresham	No	Gresham	2007

Data source: EdBuild, "Fractured: The Breakdown of America's School Districts"; ProPublica, "School Desegregation Order Data" compiled from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Note: 47 successful school district secessions are presented above.

Note: Applicable school district secession state laws: 1) No school secession provision in LA; 2) Authorization and approval from a statewide entity in ID, ME, MA, OH, SD; 3) Local referendum and negotiation with sub-state entity in AL, TN, WI; 4) Popular approval from both the exiting and remaining district in CO, UT.