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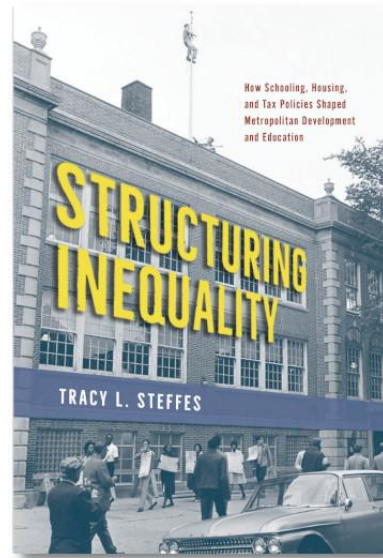
Steffes, T. L. (2024). *Structuring inequality: How schooling, housing, and tax policies shaped metropolitan development and education*. University of Chicago Press.

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As someone who was educated in the public schools of Long Island, New York, and who later was an educator there, I often reflect on both my experiences as a beneficiary of the region's excellent schools growing up in the 1950s and 1960s and a subsequent, rewarding career teaching in seven of the more than 100 school districts there. Tracy L. Steffes's *Structuring Inequality: How Schooling, Housing and Tax Policies Shaped Metropolitan Development and Education* intrigued me, because I was also aware of several struggling Long Island school districts, usually serving predominantly people of color, but I never fully understood why they were struggling. I hoped that Steffes's historical study of how policy shaped Chicagoland's development would not only explain Chicagoland but also provide insight into similar patterns on Long Island.



The book consists of eight chapters distributed among three parts, followed by an appendix that includes tables of demographic characteristics of select Chicagoland places over time and a summary of educational inequality in the suburbs of Cook County, Illinois, during 1960-61. What follows immediately are some of the author's main points.

In the first part, Steffes sets the stage with a story about the White upper-middle-class suburb of Deerfield, Illinois, where, in 1959, news of the breaking ground of a new subdivision that would be racially integrated brought resistance. The seeds for this resistance were sown in the 19th century through state policies that helped structure inequality in public schools and metropolitan space. These pre-World War II suburbs were industrial suburbs, residential suburbs for those who commuted to Chicago, or an industrial suburb to work, and small rural-suburban fringe communities oriented toward agriculture. These communities were predominantly White. Black and other people of color (BIPOC) were consigned for the most part to certain areas in Chicago. Post-World War II suburban development built on this foundation of inequality.

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Schooling played an important role in suburban competition, racial stratification, and the hoarding of opportunity and wealth by White people, while containing people of color in lower-resourced and often urban communities. Unequal distribution of housing benefits, such as federally insured financing, made homeownership more accessible to working-class and middle-class families than to people of color. Racialized policies and standards facilitated White families' flight to the suburbs which were not as available to Black families. This boom only made inequality worse.

Federal housing and education policy implementation exacerbated already existing structural inequality in Chicagoland. With many small, independent governments that caused inefficiencies, expenses, and inequality, neither state nor federal policy was able to ameliorate economic and social inequality regionally. Instead, local property wealth incentivized local governments to shape development to increase property values. This competitive metropolitan system leveraged state law to make it easier for the already advantaged to pull farther ahead and those with less to fall farther behind.

Coincidentally, from 1901 to 1955, the Illinois state legislature had not once reapportioned itself. Rural legislators protected their interests and autonomy. Rural and suburban legislators' animus toward Chicago grew. Suburbanites associated the city with social disorder and problems they wanted to avoid. Racially diverse Chicago was characterized as inferior, and the predominantly White suburbs were regarded as wholesomely American. These arguments revealed how public goods were reinterpreted into private benefits and equated freedom with consumer choice. These ideas were the forerunners of hallmarks of the later neoliberal era. Opponents of metropolitan government saw threats to their freedom to economically and racially segregate.

In the second part of *Structuring Inequality*, the focus shifts to the struggles of Chicagoland in the 1960s and 1970s. The Civil Rights movement challenged the various intersecting spatial, racial, and socioeconomic inequalities of the metropolitan area. At the same time the movement met deeply rooted, taken-for-granted and longstanding structural inequalities, for which the state previously had not taken responsibility to address.

Policy fights were brought about by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Liberal reformers tried to implement school desegregation, fair and affordable housing, and school-finance and property tax reforms in this unfriendly environment. The state's deference to local autonomy facilitated the continuation of practices that the reform movement intended to address. The resistance to change defined racial discrimination narrowly, distinguished it from economic discrimination, and attacked affirmative integration and race-conscious policies as government overreach. These policy fights were instrumental in later efforts for interconnected housing and educational systems to reinforce each other's actions and thereby sustaining metropolitan housing and educational inequality.

The third part of *Structuring Inequality* focuses on the 1980s and 1990s, a time of fiscal constraint. Efficiency and effectiveness replaced equity and democracy as

essential foci. During this era, structural inequality issues were marginalized and reframed as problems to identify and address rather than as a symptom of a larger problem. Reforms toward structural equality and equal educational opportunity were set aside in favor of standards-based education reform and choice policies to incentivize better student performance.

Metropolitan inequality was also marginalized in a bipartisan framing of fiscal constraint and austerity, and the embrace of market models for addressing social problems. When aid was cut back, federal and state governments devolved more responsibility to local governments and school districts of disparate wealth after decades of attempts to improve the equitable distribution of resources. The fiscal constraint and market models retrenched and reshaped the government's role in social policy by decentering racial and economic inequalities in education as problems to fix through public policy. This shift protected those who saw overspending as the source of the problem, instead of a deeper problem of inequitable apportionment of tax burdens. Property-tax administration practices allowed some taxpayers to avoid paying their fair share, and tax breaks to businesses for restricted revenue available for other public purposes, such as schools.

In this neoliberal era, interconnected housing and educational systems continued to promote structural inequality by reinforcing each other. This is achieved through state education policies designed to compare, rank, and value schools, a practice that in many ways still exists. Political, policy, and ideological roots lie in forgetting foundational inequality and decentering structural inequality as obstacles to student performance. Instead, economy and rankings prevailed over values such as democracy, community, equity, and justice. The benefits of development in Chicago and other neoliberal cities flowed to the top, exacerbating inequality in the city. This inequality ran parallel with a deepening inequality in the suburbs, which intensified into the early 21st century. Calls for educational excellence, such as *A Nation at Risk*, the *No Child Left Behind Act*, and educational standards-based reforms, de-emphasized equity and essentially positioned those lower on the socioeconomic ladder to fail. Then they were blamed for their failure.

Steffes concludes with a cautionary and hopeful note. The author recommends revisiting Civil Rights-era commitments, especially in education and housing, as both are inextricably intertwined. What we should have learned from the past should also help us do better this time by embracing integration as a transformative experience for all rather than as a one-way assimilation of communities of color into White spaces.

Steffes also offers the following observations that would expand this review beyond any reasonable length if considered in detail, but which are too important to ignore:

- Work within institutions and systems rather than dismantle them.
- Liberalism and capitalism are flawed and corrupted by White supremacy and corporate power; localism has been the mechanism for exclusion.
- Return state government into metropolitan history and denaturalize localism.

- Neoliberal policies have individualized social problems...by giving the most “freedom” to those with the most capital.
- Public policy should mitigate, not aid opportunity hoarding.
- Challenge narratives about inequality and reassert government’s responsibility in promoting public welfare and collective goals.
- Grassroots activism will be met with resistance and attempts to minimize and erase challenges to the *status quo*.
- Policy decisions that shape revenue and its equitable distribution must prevail.
- Groups on the losing end of policies that “forget” inequality have neither forgotten nor stopped fighting against racial and economic inequality.
- With clarity that reveals itself over time, we might be able to imagine what might be possible and recognize our collective agency to make different choices.

Tracy Steffes has filled in the gaps that normally go unnoticed in some historical accounts that typically celebrate policy milestones yet ignore or underplay forces that either limit or completely undermine them. This story has been echoed repeatedly by BIPOC for decades and not heeded by White people. One can only wonder how history might have unfolded differently if White supremacy were not a factor.

The similarities between Steffes’s account and my experiences on Long Island and metro Phoenix are striking. She echoes similar historical studies, such as Tim Keogh’s 2024 history of suburban Long Island. Keogh also ascribed the roots of inequality on Long Island to times well before World War II, when local farmers raised crops, the urban elite had vacation homes or commuted by rail to work in the city, and their employees lived in nearby enclaves that became and remain some of Long Island’s most poorly resourced communities. In my exploration of metro Phoenix, Arizona, history, I have also encountered similar dynamics, where those of means and predominately White have more choice of quality housing and schools, and those of lesser means and usually BIPOC do not.

What Steffes proposes in this history echoes the proposals of Deborah Stone (2012), who as early as 1988 enumerated the goals of policy through the lenses of equity, efficiency, welfare, liberty, and security. It seems that policymakers in Chicagoland and other metropolises across the nation failed to consider these lenses or underestimated the importance of what they might show. Also underestimated or totally ignored was White supremacy’s role. Steffes offers us a glimpse into the consequences of structural inequality over time in Chicagoland, actionable advice about how we might proceed to make corrections there or elsewhere, and a sense of urgency to follow through, even when the political climate is not hospitable. What may have been forgotten by some has for generations been very much on the minds of those hurt by these policies (Barber, 2016; Joseph, 2022). Several promising young scholars, (e.g., Cabrera, 2024; D. Evans, 2025; S. Evans, 2025; Johnson, Harper, and Milner IV, 2024; Ndubuizu, 2025; Taylor, 2019) are also speaking up.

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About the Book Author

Tracy L. Steffes is professor of education and history, chair of education at Brown University, and author of *School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890-1940*. She received her B.A. in history and political science from Western Michigan University and her M.A. and Ph.D. in history from University of Chicago. Her primary research interests are 20th-century United States history, the history of American education, educational inequality, and political and policy history. Her latest project explores the history of businesses selling products and services that shape teaching and learning in public schools and what that history tells us about the definition and development of public education over time.



Tracy L. Steffes

About the Reviewer

Elsie Szecsy is an emerita research professional at Arizona State University, where her research interests focused on the intersections of teaching, learning, and leadership, with institutional, organizational, and instructional arrangements in linguistically and culturally diverse education settings. She was involved in several documentation research projects in metro New York and metro Phoenix, Arizona, that aimed to improve Latino representation among high school and college graduates, and among faculty and administrators in K-12 and higher education. Her research interests have since expanded to include humanities-based approaches to discover racial and other injustices in schools and other educational settings. Elsie holds an Ed.D. in Educational Administration from Teachers College, Columbia University.



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