EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary of Master’s Thesis titled:
EDUCATION QUALITY AND THE COMMUNITY: A GEOGRAPHIC AND POLICY ANALYSIS OF A RUST BELT CITY’S SCHOOLS,
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INTRODUCTION:

This research explored an urban school district that was once a proud manufacturing city, but is now a Rust Belt city. The school district and even the name of the city itself has been hidden to protect the identities and interests of all parties involved. The city, now referred to as Dionysia* faced severe economic changes with the declining manufacturing belt, and with it, a decline in population and economic stability.

PART I: SCHOOL POLICY:

Current school issues and policies that are prevalent in the school system are policies that reflect teacher accountability, school choice or a business portfolio model of schools, school funding and disparities, student based budgeting, cultural openness and multilingual education, and the rights of states to dictate student education to name a few. Some of these policies have historical precedence within the United States.

The History of School Policy:

- After the Civil War education in the United States was seen as a social step ladder to increase social mobility and is still viewed in this light to this day (Pulliam & Van Patten 2013).

- There is a long standing history of federal laws or reports supporting accountability measures and business model approaches which encourage student based budgeting practices and partnering with community businesses throughout the late 1950s and well into the 1990s before No Child Left Behind was signed into law (Pulliam & Van Patten 2013).

- Other policies created in an attempt to reduce the achievement gap and increase accountability have been the creation of school of choice initiatives and student based budgeting systems, that again, support business model approaches.

- School of choice seems to be a response to solving school segregation and desegregation reform complications by directly putting the choice within individuals’ hands instead of finding institutional methods to fix inequities therefore school districts and the community no longer bear responsibility (Scott 2013).
PART II: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DATA:

Access to a decent education has been proven to determine the future well-being and success of every American citizen. Ultimately this study seeks to understand the relationship between community engagement, school district policy, neighborhood disorder and decay, and how these elements can create good or poor performing school districts (please see the figure taken from master’s thesis below).

*Figure 1. Conceptual Diagram*

Research Questions Include:

1. What policies is the school district pursuing to improve education quality, equality and access to high performing schools for minorities and the poor, and is the community sharing equal power in engagement or having an open relationship with the district in implementing these policies? Do these policies seem to be working from the community’s point of view?

2. Is there a relationship between poor performing schools with high levels of blight and crime?

3. Do the poor performing schools that are surrounded by blight and crime have high levels of minority students and are they assigned to neighborhoods that are predominately surrounded by African American or minority populations within the city?

Data:

Data was comprised of nine personal interviews with school district members and staff and affiliates, which included one community consultant. Four public meetings were also attended and recorded to include the community perspective. Three key policy documents were analyzed from the school district and transformation alliance that are available upon
request. Other data sources include: blight data from the exclusive access Neighborhood Stabilization Team Web Application (2016) downloaded on April 18th 2016, neighborhood data from the NEO CANDO database (2016), the School District School Quality Guide created by the city’s Transformation Alliance (2015), crime data from the Office of Criminal Justice Services affiliated with the Ohio Department of Public Safety by request November 17th, 2015, and school report card data collected through the Ohio Department of Education website and databases (n.d.) for the years 2012 through 2014.

PART III: METHODS EMPLOYED

This study utilized the following methods and theories:

- Grounded Theory in creating a codebook, finding themes discussed and then compared for analysis.
- Pearson Correlation Coefficient Analysis in NVivo which statistically compares the wording similarity within policy documents between codes.
- An in-depth analysis of all interviews and public meetings.
- ArcGIS Spatial Clustering Analysis of blight and crime using Kernel Density Estimation and Getis Ord Gi* Statistic (All crime known to cause PTSD in children was later excluded due to its lack of spatial clustering within the study area).
- Poor performing schools were compared with higher performing schools using a median of Ohio School Report Card grades from 2012-2014 and the school locations in relation to blight within a half mile radius or 804.67 meters.
- All schools were compared to their neighborhood racial composition, in particular failing schools, and other information regarding school populations was collected and analyzed.

PART IV: CONCLUSIONS/SUMMARY

There are several policies that the school district attempts to put into action to help reduce the achievement gap and help improve outcomes of students, but none of the policies address minorities and the poor explicitly. After analyzing the policy documents and interviews it is clear that the district does have plans to alleviate problems for students and pushing students toward receiving a decent education, but it follows a business model that has several problems. When considering community input, the student based budgeting system and the autonomy given to schools who are already performing well, this seems to create an unfair advantage amongst the students in the schools with some school buildings struggling to acquire resources while other schools have better resources. There is also still a lack of transparency and consistency within the City Plan and other school district initiatives that is not made easily understandable to the community. This leads to the conclusion that improvement to the educational outcomes will benefit the students that already are receiving a benefit and may continue to leave other students behind.
Through in-depth analysis of interviews, it was determined that there is not enough community input in the implementation of those policies and there are two forms of “community” being created. While the city alliance team is including the businesses, city leadership, and foundation members as a “community” in policy decisions, the district may or may not be including the residents and locals that live in Dionysia that do not have political affiliations. There is no evidence that they are including local residents without political affiliations in their policy decisions. The additional analysis of Pearson’s Coefficient on the policy documents themselves shows that the district initiatives do focus on community development, but community is linked with the businesses and foundation members, leaving the meaning as to what type of community they will be including rather vague. Also there was no evidence in the documents that community members could be involved in school district policy making except in the re-build process of new schools and by serving on the Transformation Alliance. In addition to this, there is no evidence in the documents that shows how community members will be reached or how many community members must serve on the Transformation Alliance that do not also belong to a business, foundation, or another political entity. Again, this concludes that the type of “community” that is being referred to in communities of practice approaches refers to all members of a society or local group and the school district, as seen through interviews, meetings, and policy documents, is leaving a significant portion of the community left out of the decision-making and policy building process.

In proving that there is a positive relationship between blight and crime areas with poor performing schools within a half a mile radius, the results only show four F schools within blighted areas, and also crime that causes PTSD was too spatially dispersed and not clustered around schools. There was also a C graded school within a blighted hot spot. There is more blight in African American and minority neighborhoods and that there are more poor performing schools nearby African American and minority neighborhoods. Whether or not poor performing schools have predominately African American and minority neighborhoods is inconclusive because there is also a significant portion of good performing schools that have predominately Black or minority students within the school’s population. Perceptions by the community say that the west side schools are better than east side schools and that there are disparities—not every school is equal. This data shows that there is validity to their claims since most of the F schools are on the East side and only two F schools are on the West. It was also determined that all the F schools were predominately minority children and were from minority neighborhoods and most were nearby blight. However, one can see that the absence rates are higher in low performing schools as well as higher percentages of students with disabilities and students lacking in English proficiency. Therefore, there may be other factors that contribute to a school’s poor performance or good performance unrelated to their neighborhood surroundings.

Policy Implications/Future Study:

- Initiatives that are passed follow Federal and State guidelines like No Child Left Behind that seem to hinder minority students, disabled students, and students with a poor foundation in the English language from being successful.

- Poor urban school districts have very little community support as well as State and Federal support under the current testing policies and with regards to student based
budgeting systems that leave many failing schools behind. This school district does however, implement an investment plan strategy that seems to be working well and any future policy created should be structured to do a massive investment plan strategy for the entire school district, with more funds going to the poorest schools and disadvantaged populations that are near gentrified neighborhoods and areas on the East side of the city.

✔ More parental involvement and community involvement must be included and a mandatory number of parents, teachers, and community members must be included within the Transformation Alliance, giving more autonomy and information to parents and members of the community. There also needs to be some form of assurance that these members will have no conflicts of interest associated with other political entities.

✔ Resources distributed throughout the district must be open to the public and connect all the district policies and initiatives together in a simplified context, allowing members of the community who do not have a background in education or educational policy to quickly and easily understand how development projects in the city are related to and affect their school district and its budget.

✔ One of the biggest problems facing this district has been and always will be public support and money. Oversight measures must be taken to ensure money is being spent on initiatives that are working and also there needs to be a greater focus on acquiring community support to ensure that the public will support a future levy.

✔ Also, federal and state laws and initiatives in support of state testing need to ensure that the tests allow for equally comparisons among schools, especially schools with high populations of disabled children and children with language barriers.

✔ More research needs to be conducted on a national scale that examines the root causes of absenteeism in schools and what policies or strategies can be created to ensure more children go to school on a regular basis.

How this Research can be Applicable and Replicated in Other Studies:

Although this study primarily focuses on education, the findings and methods can be applied to other future research projects that seek to understand and/or resolve conflict between policy makers and the community or sub-groups within. These methods can be used in any future study that focuses on community development initiatives that have struggled to instigate equality amongst minorities as well as how to develop healthy and empowering communication between policy makers and the community. Interviews from the school district and its affiliates were necessary and important to the findings, but attending public meetings were just as important. It is imperative for any researcher seeking to implement these methods to have close contact with policy makers and their affiliates as well as seeking the community’s opinion, obtain an in-depth look at the policy documents themselves found on public internet sources, and incorporate spatial analysis between where these populations live and their neighborhood conditions to discover the community’s perspective. All spatial data was from public resources and were useful for this type of analysis.
References


Please see master’s thesis for full listing of data sources citation found below.