



Politics, Policy Alternatives, and Potential for School Desegregation: The Case of Howard County, Maryland

Kayla Bill

University of Maryland

In 2019, Maryland's Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) attempted to redistrict, or redraw school attendance boundaries, to desegregate. Whereas political resistance and legal constraints have thwarted redistricting efforts elsewhere, HCPSS's diversity and commitments to equity positioned it favorably to desegregate. Using a political framework and a mixed methods case study design, I explore how political factors shaped the potential for reduced segregation associated with different redistricting plans proposed throughout the policy process and segregation rates upon implementation of new attendance boundaries. Findings suggest that equity-oriented values, competing policy goals, and other factors undermined the redistricting policy's potential to reduce segregation, but also reveal how changes to districts' political structures, policy processes, and personnel could support desegregative redistricting efforts.



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In 2019, Maryland's Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) attempted to redistrict, or redraw school attendance boundaries, in ways that made schools more diverse. Whereas racist political resistance (Castro et al., 2022b; Lareau et al., 2018) and legal constraints (McDermott et al., 2012) have thwarted redistricting efforts in many communities, HCPSS appeared uniquely positioned to reduce racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation between schools. Both the county government and the school system espoused commitments to equity, and Columbia, a planned community that is the economic center of the county, was designed to foster racial/ethnic and socioeconomic integration. HCPSS also had a diverse student population, which meant that it could reduce racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation without crossing district lines—a practice made legally fraught by *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974). Could HCPSS capitalize on its equity-oriented values and favorable structure to desegregate schools, or would contentious politics and legal limitations yet again lead to attendance boundaries that doubled down on segregation?

Drawing on a mixed methods case study, this article explores the *politics* of HCPSS's 2019 redistricting effort, the *prospects* for reduced racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation associated with redistricting plans that were proposed and enacted by the district's superintendent and school board, and the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation *outcomes* of the new attendance boundaries. In an era where stark differences in school populations drive unequal access to educational opportunities and resources (e.g., Weathers & Sosina, 2022), it is critical to know whether and under what conditions districts have the potential to reassign students in more equitable ways. Many studies have examined efforts to desegregate through redistricting (e.g., Bartels & Donato, 2009; Castro et al., 2022b;

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Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017), but several gaps in the literature remain. First, this literature is bifurcated between qualitative studies, which explore how politics undermine desegregation efforts (e.g., Bierbaum & Sunderman, 2021; Lareau et al., 2018; McDermott et al., 2012), and quantitative studies, which describe the outcomes of redistricting efforts on racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation without attention to political factors (e.g., Carlson et al., 2020; Taylor & Frankenberg, 2021). Taken together, these strands of literature *hint* that political factors mediate the effects of these policies on segregation, but few studies identify *the extent to which* they do so (see Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017 for an example).

Second, studies that do explore the politics of redistricting tend to focus on one set of political factors, such as community resistance (e.g., Castro et al., 2022a; Lareau et al., 2018) or legal constraints (e.g., McDermott et al., 2012), rather than exploring how these factors interact with one another. Other political factors remain understudied. For example, few scholars have addressed how the structural features of districts, including the formal processes that guide redistricting processes, shape policy actors' power to influence them (see Bierbaum & Sunderman, 2021 for an example). A more comprehensive approach to studying redistricting—one that looks at multiple political dimensions of the policy process *and* that identifies how politics affect these policies' capacity to reduce segregation—could provide important insights about the conditions that support the design and implementation of equity-oriented redistricting policies.

Finally, while some studies suggest that redistricting may reduce segregation (Carlson et al., 2020; Taylor & Frankenberg, 2021), others suggest that it may exacerbate segregation (Mawene & Bal, 2020; Siegel-Hawley, 2013). Yet, studies of redistricting outcomes do not

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acknowledge the role of political factors in shaping which plans are implemented and, subsequently, which plans' outcomes are measured. Thus, outcomes-focused studies generally provide insights about the aftereffects of political processes that remain invisible, rather than the potential of less erosive political conditions. Distinguishing between the two is important if we are to understand whether, when, and where redistricting is a viable strategy to desegregate schools.

This article addresses these gaps in the literature by exploring the politics, prospects, and outcomes of HCPSS's 2019-2020 redistricting effort using a mixed methods research design and a race-conscious political framework that attends to sociopolitical context, political systems and policy structures, and policy actors. The article explores three research questions:

1. What political factors characterized HCPSS's 2019-2020 redistricting process?
2. How did political factors influence the prospects for reduced racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation associated with redistricting plans that were proposed by the HCPSS superintendent and enacted by the Howard County Board of Education?
3. How did political factors influence racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation outcomes associated with the redistricting plan that was implemented by HCPSS?

Findings suggest that factors including equity-oriented values, competing policy goals, and actors' different degrees of power to advance those goals led to the proposal, enactment, and implementation of redistricting plans that had different degrees of potential to reduce racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation across schools within HCPSS. Although political factors generally *undermined* redistricting's prospects for reducing segregation, some factors *supported* the advancement of a redistricting plan that could desegregate schools. Proposing,

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enacting, and implementing desegregative redistricting policies is no simple task, but changes to districts' political structures, policy processes, and personnel can open windows to do so.

A “Critical Case” of Redistricting to Desegregate

Howard County is an ideal setting to study the relationship between the politics and prospects of redistricting because it possesses several favorable conditions for desegregating schools. These conditions make this study a “critical case” (Yin, 2018; p. 49), which scholars may use to “test” (p. 29) the theoretical or empirical propositions associated with a phenomenon. Given that political barriers often undermine redistricting efforts (Castro et al., 2023), this study tests the proposition that, under favorable political conditions like those in Howard County, redistricting policies have the potential to reduce between-school segregation. Put differently, if redistricting cannot desegregate schools in Howard County, it is not likely to do so in other districts where these favorable conditions are not present.

Espoused Commitments to Equity and Integration

The first of Howard County's favorable conditions for desegregation is its espoused commitment to educational equity, which suggests that the district might have been inclined to redistrict in a way that would desegregate schools and that residents might have been willing to support those equity-oriented adjustments. HCPSS has a Strategic Call to Action (SCTA) that focuses on “ensur[ing] academic success and social-emotional well-being for each student in an inclusive and nurturing environment that closes opportunity gaps” (HCPSS, 2022).

Superintendent Michael Martirano—a White man and long-time educator who served HCPSS during the 2019-2020 redistricting effort—introduced the SCTA when he became interim superintendent in 2017. The SCTA, which aligns with Martirano's own commitments to equity

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(Magill, 2017), outlines several equity-oriented goals, including hiring and maintaining a diverse staff and ensuring that students of different racial/ethnic and cultural backgrounds are represented in the curriculum (HCPSS, 2022). It has guided many of the district's policies and practices (HCPSS, 2019).

Howard County is also home to Columbia, a planned community built by James Rouse in the 1960s to foster racial/ethnic and socioeconomic integration. Rouse sought to transform Howard County from a predominantly White and rural area to a community where people of all income levels and races/ethnicities could live in harmony. To that end, Rouse built villages within Columbia that had mixed-income housing and interfaith centers (Hurley, 2017). A look at Columbia's demographics decades later suggests that Rouse's attempt to build an integrated community may have worked. In 2019, 51% of Columbia residents were White, 29% were Black, 6% were Asian, and 10% were Hispanic or Latinx (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Rouse's guiding value of integration appears to be ever-present in Columbia, too. Residents continue to espouse the ideals of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Hurley, 2017), and the Columbia Association, which manages Columbia's operations and resources, has continued to prioritize offering mixed-income housing options (Columbia Association, 2019).

Racial/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Diversity

Beyond espoused commitments to equity and integration, HCPSS has a county-based structure, which affords it enough student diversity to advance desegregation within its boundaries and to sidestep the legal constraints of *Milliken* (1974) (Siegel-Hawley, 2016). In 2019, HCPSS's student population (Table 1) had the racial/ethnic diversity required to advance desegregation to a substantial degree, unlike many districts that are racially/ethnically

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homogenous (Bischoff, 2008). At the same time, HCPSS is also one of the wealthiest counties in the nation. In 2019, residents' median household income was \$121,160—almost double the national median household income (U.S. News, 2020). The same year, fewer than a quarter of HCPSS students were eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals (FRPM) (Table 1). Nevertheless, schools' FRPM rates ranged from 1% to 61% (Table 1), indicating that the district also had an opportunity to reduce socioeconomic segregation by redistributing FRPM and non-FRPM students more evenly across its schools.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this paper (Figure 1) integrates classic traditions of political systems, power, and influence (e.g., Dahl, 1984; Easton, 1965); scholars' adaptations of these traditional perspectives (e.g., Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Malen, 2006); and sociological and critical race perspectives on how racism shapes societal and institutional structures and policymaking (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Ray, 2019). While a traditional political analysis provides the analytic tools to identify how various contextual, systemic, and actor-level factors shape the policymaking process, this approach does not explicitly account for the roles race and racism play in politics, which is required for a more holistic perspective on redistricting policy (Castro et al., 2023).

Political Factors

This framework analyzes contextual, systemic, and actor-level political factors that shape the policymaking process and explains how race and racism shape each set of factors. Contextual factors, such as the social structure of a society, generate demands, or stressors on a political system that prompt it to advance a policy, and supports, such as confidence in the

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political system responsible for advancing policies (Easton, 1965). In the United States, the social structure privileges White people, allocating property, resources, and opportunities *to* them and *away from* Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and other people of color (Harris, 1993). From this racist social structure stems values and norms that reinforce and perpetuate inequality in overt and covert ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Systemic factors are features of the political system—in this case, a school district—that drive policymaking once contextual factors demand it. Features may include the governance structure of the system, the procedures it follows to create a policy, and the values and norms by which it abides. These features influence not only how policies are made, but also who has the power to participate in their making and to what degree (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Mazzoni, 1991). Like the broader social system, the political system prioritizes White policy actors and their interests at the expense of actors of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Ray, 2019). For example, Bell's (1980) principle of interest convergence explains that political systems only enact policies to redress racial inequities, for which Black and other people of color have long advocated, when those policies converge with White interests.

Within political systems are policy actors, who possess various interests and values, sources of power, and degrees of political skill and will to advance their policy goals (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Malen, 2006). Race and racist structures also influence actors. Regarding desegregation, for instance, a recent study found that Black parents value diverse schools more than White parents, who prioritized school assignments closer to home (Honey & Smrekar, 2020). These divergent interests subsequently shape parents' political will to support policies like redistricting. Furthermore, racist social and institutional structures grant White policy actors

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more power to advance their interests than actors of color (Bell, 1980; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Ray, 2019). Operating within these structures, actors engage in various strategies to influence policy processes, such as persuading other actors to change their policy goals (Dahl, 1984) or excluding other actors or issues from the policymaking process (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970).

Policy Phases, Prospects, and Outcomes

Existing political models suggest that contextual, systemic, and actor-level factors interact at different stages of policymaking (e.g., Kingdon, 2003; Malen, 2006), but those models tend to focus on one segment of the policy process rather than the process as a whole. Taking a broader view, this study suggests that policies move through three phases: 1) *initiation*, where actors identify and define policy problems, get them on policymakers' agendas, and propose potential solutions for them (Kingdon, 2003); 2) *enactment*, where policymakers choose one policy to adopt among many alternatives (Kingdon, 2003); and 3) *implementation*, where actors attempt to put an enacted policy into practice (Malen, 2006). In each phase, contextual, systemic, and actor-level political factors interact to shape a policy's *prospects*, or potential to fulfill its aims. Phases may have multiple prospects, and prospects may be different in each phase. For instance, a policy alternative may have great potential to fulfill its aims in the initiation phase but end up watered down by political factors during implementation (Malen, 2006). Upon implementation, a policy generates a variety of outcomes that relate to its aims but extend beyond them as well. Outcomes re-enter the policy context and may feed back into the political system as inputs, generating future policy changes (Easton, 1965).

Literature Review

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In alignment with my conceptual framework, this section reviews the contextual, systemic, and actor-level political factors that shape redistricting and desegregation more broadly, as well as how political factors have affected these policies' prospects and outcomes related to segregation.

Contextual Factors

For decades, most children have attended schools with children of their same race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, with differential access to resources and opportunities (Frankenberg et al., 2019; Owens, 2020). This segregated and unequal context is driven, in part, by discriminatory housing policies and practices (e.g., restrictive covenants, redlining, blockbusting) that were prominent in the early-to-mid-20th century and persist today (Erickson, 2016; Rothstein, 2017). Through the mid-20th century, the Supreme Court tried to remedy racial/ethnic school segregation through cases including *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), *Green v. School Board of New Kent County* (1968), and *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District (ISD)* (1971). Since then, however, the Court has made it more difficult for districts to desegregate by limiting the constitutionality of the inter-district desegregation plans that had advanced desegregation in many metropolitan areas (*Milliken v. Bradley*, 1974) and by limiting districts' ability to consider individual students' race/ethnicity in school assignment decisions (*Parents Involved*, 2007), which has led many to abandon desegregation policies altogether or to rely on less effective race-neutral strategies (McDermott et al., 2012). At the same time, increasing diversity in the United States has presented an opportunity for districts to promote desegregation through policies like redistricting

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(Frankenberg et al., 2019), but evidence suggests that many are hesitant to do so (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012).

Systemic Factors

Few studies explore how systemic factors shape desegregation policymaking, and those that do suggest these factors may support *or* undermine desegregation efforts. For example, several studies suggest that county-based districts like HCPSS are less constrained in their ability to desegregate because they are relatively large and demographically diverse (Siegel-Hawley, 2016). Other studies suggest that ward-based school board election procedures could deter board members from pursuing desegregation (Frankenberg & Diem, 2013) or encourage them to do so (Holme et al., 2014). One study of a redistricting effort in Richmond, Virginia, also found that financial constraints may prompt districts to redraw school attendance zones, which may but do not necessarily promote desegregation (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017).

Some literature suggests that institutional values—namely, localism and equity—also play a significant role in desegregation efforts. Although localism *can* foster educational equality, given that local communities may be more attuned to their children’s needs than more centralized actors like state and federal governments, it has also allowed predominantly White and wealthy communities to hoard opportunities and resources from predominantly Black, Latinx, and low-income communities (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2018). Localism also guides districts’ norms of community engagement around desegregation policy efforts, which may privilege resistance to desegregation (Bierbaum & Sunderman, 2021) or increase political support for it

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(Finnigan et al., 2014). Other studies have found that districts in socially progressive cities that espouse equity as a value may be more inclined to advance desegregation policies voluntarily and may also receive more political support for desegregation from community members (Chavez & Frankenberg, 2009; Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012).

Actor-Level Factors and Desegregation Prospects

Resistance to desegregation has persisted since the 20th century, when White parents engaged in mass protests, anti-desegregation coalition-building, intimidation and violence, and flight to White suburban or private schools (Clotfelter, 2004; Patterson, 2001), and White state and local leaders passed legislation aimed at undermining desegregation efforts (Patterson, 2001). Studies of policy actors' involvement in desegregation policymaking in the 21st century—particularly since *Parents Involved* (2007) changed the legal landscape—has largely focused on actors involved in redistricting efforts, including district policymakers (e.g., superintendents, school boards) and community members (e.g., parents) (Castro et al., 2023). Some evidence suggests that actors' influence efforts vary across the initiation, enactment, and implementation of policies, although few studies explicitly distinguish between these phases of the policymaking process. For example, during initiation, districts may try to improve prospects for desegregation by involving community members in the policymaking process, but these efforts have typically led districts to enact weak desegregation policies or abandon them altogether (Bierbaum & Sunderman, 2021; Lareau et al., 2018; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017). White parents' resistance during the enactment phase has also often led districts to weaken or

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abandon their proposed desegregation policies (Bartels & Donato, 2009; Castro et al., 2022b; Holme et al., 2014; Lareau et al., 2018; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017). And while few studies address the implementation of desegregation policies (Castro et al., 2023), some suggest that White parents have tried to undermine attendance boundary adjustments by suing districts (Chavez & Frankenberg, 2009; McDermott et al., 2012) or using their power to exit desegregating or desegregated districts (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2018).

Desegregation Outcomes

Studies of the outcomes of 21st century desegregation efforts address both political and segregation-related outcomes. For example, a handful of studies suggest that school reassignment policies like redistricting may lead to school board turnover and inject partisanship into subsequent school board elections (Diem et al., 2015; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Holme et al., 2014), while others suggest that the racialized political battles that often if not always accompany these policy efforts may actually generate support for desegregation (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017). Furthermore, some studies suggest that school reassignment policies may reduce segregation (Carlson et al., 2020; Taylor & Frankenberg, 2021), while others have found that these policies perpetuate or exacerbate segregation (Mawene & Bal, 2020; Siegel-Hawley, 2013; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017). Although it seems clear that political dynamics are at least one source of these disparate policy outcomes, few studies test that assumption. One example is Siegel-Hawley and colleagues' (2017) mixed methods study of redistricting in Richmond, Virginia, which found that the politics of redrawing elementary school attendance

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boundaries contributed to a dramatic increase in racial/ethnic segregation between schools.

This article builds on the work of Siegel-Hawley and colleagues to identify how various political factors influenced HCPSS's redistricting policy's potential to reduce racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation.

Research Design, Methods, and Analysis

This critical case of redistricting employs a qualitative-dominant, convergent parallel mixed methods design (Figure 2). The study occurred in two phases: 1) collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data on the political process of redistricting and the potential effects of different redistricting plans on racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation; and 2) integrating qualitative and quantitative data to draw interpretations about the influence of political factors on redistricting plans' segregation-related prospects and outcomes.

Qualitative Data

Sources and Methods

Qualitative data included documents, observations, and interviews collected between March 2021 and December 2022 (Table 2). Documents provided information about the redistricting policy timeline and political factors that shaped the policy process, and included news articles, HCPSS's formal policy on school attendance boundary adjustments, school board and county council documents, and written testimony from Howard County community members. Observations also provided information about various political factors—particularly interactions among school board members, council members, and the HCPSS superintendent. Because data collection took place after the redistricting process had concluded, I observed *recordings* of school board and county council meetings where redistricting was discussed,

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including meetings in which the board initiated the redistricting process, discussed redistricting with other entities (e.g., HCPSS's Office of School Planning), deliberated potential boundary adjustments, and enacted a final redistricting plan; joint meetings between the board and the county council; and public hearings in which parents, students, and other community members testified about redistricting.

Interviews offered insights into the political dynamics that were not always evident in public data, such as relationships among school board members. Interview participants included Howard County community members and elected officials involved in the 2019-2020 redistricting process, whom I recruited using purposive and snowball sampling strategies (Merriam, 1998). I first recruited school board and county council members who had served in 2019-2020; HCPSS parents whom I had interviewed for a pilot study on the redistricting effort conducted in 2020-2021; Parent-Teacher Associations at all HCPSS elementary, middle, and high schools; and 17 community organizations whom I identified as engaged in redistricting from a preliminary review of documents. I did not recruit district employees to participate because HCPSS declined to participate in this study. I conducted 21 interviews via Zoom, which ranged from 45 minutes to three hours long, and one interview via phone, which lasted approximately 20 minutes. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol based on my conceptual framework. I used a transcription service to generate and clean transcripts for the Zoom interviews and took notes on responses for the phone interview to ensure accuracy of the data.

Analysis

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I analyzed all documents, observation field notes, and interview transcripts in NVivo. I began coding using deductive strategy based on concepts from my framework (e.g., sociopolitical context) and developed additional subcodes inductively. For example, I developed “overcrowding” and “segregation” subcodes for sociopolitical context because those factors were mentioned frequently in documents, school board and county council meetings, and interviews. I coded documents first because they were the largest source of qualitative data for this study and subsequently coded observation field notes and interview transcripts. After coding all data, I used NVivo to generate documents that contained data associated with a particular code or combination of codes. I reviewed these documents for patterns using the constant comparative method of analysis, an iterative process of categorizing data into themes and comparing new data with existing data in those themes (Glaser, 1965). Within themes, I triangulated data to identify whether patterns were present in documentary, observational, or interview data, or a combination of the three (Merriam, 1998).

Quantitative Data

Sources

Quantitative data sources for this study included district- and school-level student enrollment data by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status for HCPSS’s 42 elementary schools, 20 middle schools, and 12 high schools. Race/ethnicity (Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White) and socioeconomic¹ (FRPM/not FRPM) categories were mutually exclusive. Table 1 presents race/ethnicity and FRPM enrollment rates in 2019-2020 for the district and ranges of race/ethnicity and FRPM enrollment rates for each school level.

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District- and school-level enrollment rates between 2010 and 2019 and associated with the implemented redistricting plan were retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (CCD), a national database of enrollment information (e.g., race/ethnicity, FRPM eligibility) for all U.S. public elementary and secondary schools and districts. Enrollment projections for the superintendent's recommended redistricting plan and the plan that the board enacted were retrieved from publicly available documents on the Howard County Board of Education's website. These data were *projections*, rather than *rates*, because the proposed and enacted redistricting plans had not yet been implemented. I took several steps to prepare projection data for analysis. First, these plans included projections for school capacity utilization (i.e., the percentage of a school's capacity that is projected to be used) rather than for school enrollment, which required me to calculate projected school enrollment by multiplying a school's projected capacity utilization by its capacity. Second, the documents detailing enrollment projections associated with these plans provided race/ethnicity and FRPM projections in percentages, rather than counts, which were required to calculate segregation projections. To calculate counts, I multiplied each school's projected race/ethnicity and FRPM percentages by its projected total enrollment. Because of data privacy laws, if a group comprised less than or equal to 5% of a school's population, the document provided a projected enrollment range ($\leq 5\%$) rather than the projected percentage. In cases where the document provided a projected enrollment range, I estimated enrollment projections at 2.5%.²

Analysis

I used enrollment data to calculate racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation rates and projections at various points in the redistricting process: *rates* in the decade prior to

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redistricting (Fall 2010 and Fall 2019); *projections* associated with HCPSS superintendent's recommended redistricting plan, proposed during the initiation phase (August 2019), and the school board's enacted plan, voted into effect at the end of the enactment phase (November 2019); and *rates* associated with the school attendance boundaries that the district implemented (Fall 2020). Segregation rates in the decade prior to redistricting provided evidence about the contextual factors that may have motivated HCPSS to redistrict and comparing segregation projections/rates associated with different versions of redistricting plans that were initiated, enacted, or implemented offered evidence about the degree to which political factors influenced the potential for redistricting to reduce segregation over the course of the policy process.

I used two segregation indices for this analysis: Theil's H (Theil, 1972) and the two-way interaction index (Massey & Denton, 1988). Because school attendance area sizes vary for elementary, middle, and high schools, I disaggregated analyses for both indices by school level. Theil's H , which measured the degree to which students in different groups were evenly distributed across schools within HCPSS, was the primary index for this analysis. H is a multigroup measure of segregation, meaning that it can capture the increasing diversity—and increasingly complex patterns of segregation—in the U.S. overall and in diverse suburban districts like HCPSS. It is also the only multigroup measure of segregation that satisfies the principle of transfers (Reardon & Firebaugh, 2002). An H value of zero indicates no segregation (i.e., every school is as diverse as the district), and a value of one indicates complete segregation (i.e., students do not attend school with any student from a different group). Reardon and Yun (2003) suggest that an H value below 0.10 indicates low segregation, between 0.10 and 0.25

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indicates moderate segregation, above 0.25 indicates high segregation, and above 0.40 indicates extreme segregation. These scholars also argue that a change in values by 0.05 or more over the course of a decade constitutes a “significant change in segregation levels” (Reardon & Yun, 2003; p. 1570). Several scholars have used these values as benchmarks when studying school segregation (e.g., Taylor & Frankenberg, 2021). Computing H involves first calculating entropy (E), or diversity in the district overall, using the following formula:

$$E = \sum_{m=1}^m \pi_m \ln\left(\frac{1}{\pi_m}\right)$$

In this equation, m refers to a racial/ethnic or FRPM group; π_m is the proportion of group m in the district. The same formula is used to calculate E_i , which is the entropy of each school (i) in the district. E and E_i are then used to compute H :

$$H = \sum_{i=1}^n \left[\frac{t_i(E-E_i)}{ET} \right]$$

Here, n is the number of schools in HCPSS, t_i is the number of students in a school, and T is the total number of students in HCPSS.

The two-way interaction index (P^*) (Massey & Denton, 1988) measured the probability that Black, Hispanic, or Asian students were exposed to White students and the probability that FRPM students were exposed to non-FRPM students. P^* ranges from zero to one; values closer to zero indicate higher segregation between two groups whereas values closer to one indicate lower segregation. P^* values may be interpreted relative to the overall population of students in a particular group. For example, a value may indicate that the average Black student in HCPSS attended a school that was 25% White students. If White students were 50% of HCPSS’s population, this finding would suggest that the schools Black students typically attend serve

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fewer White students than the district enrolls. Using both H and P^* offers a more comprehensive understanding of segregation in HCPSS, given that H indicates how evenly students in different groups are distributed across the district and P^* indicates the frequency with which students interact with peers in other groups. P^* is calculated as follows:

$$P^* = \sum_{i=1}^n \left(\frac{x_t}{X} \times \frac{y_t}{t_t} \right)$$

Here, n is the number of schools in HCPSS, x_t is the number of one group of students in school i , X is the total number of that group of students in the district, y_t is the number of another group of students in school i , and t_t is the total number of students in school i .

Data Integration and Interpretation

I used a merging strategy to integrate qualitative and quantitative data, which involves bringing the two types of data together and comparing results from them (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2017), because that strategy aligns with this study's convergent parallel design. To merge qualitative and quantitative datasets, I used a side-by-side comparison, which involved explaining how results from one set of data confirm, disconfirm, or extend results from the other set (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

The following sections integrate qualitative and quantitative data to explain how political factors shaped the redistricting policy's potential to reduce racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation, as well as its ultimate outcomes. I first address the contextual factors that motivated HCPSS's 2019-2020 redistricting effort, then turn to the initiation, enactment, and implementation phases of the redistricting process, where I discuss how political factors shaped

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prospects for reduced segregation under plans in each phase. I close by discussing how the newly implemented school attendance boundaries influenced segregation rates and how the redistricting process influenced the political context of Howard County.

Contextual Factors Driving Redistricting

Increased Segregation

Howard County schools became increasingly segregated in terms of evenness and exposure in the decade leading up to the 2019-2020 redistricting effort (Table 3). Between 2010 and 2019, students became more unevenly distributed by race/ethnicity and FRPM status at elementary, middle, and high school levels. In 2019, *H* for race/ethnicity landed in the moderate range (0.10-0.25) at elementary and middle school levels and the low range (<0.10) at the high school level, and *H* for FRPM status landed in the moderate range at all school levels. *H* was highest—by a wide margin—for FRPM status at the elementary school level. Results from the interaction index also indicated that exposure between students of color and White students and between FRPM and non-FRPM students decreased over time. However, exposure rates of students of color to White students were consistently higher than the proportion of White students in HCPSS, meaning that students of color were *overexposed* to White students, while FRPM students were *underexposed* to non-FRPM students. For example, in 2019, 78% of HCPSS students were non-FRPM, but the average FRPM student attended a school where just 63% of students were non-FRPM.

Qualitative data also pointed to growing segregation in the district and revealed some of its sources. For example, many interview participants suggested that segregation stemmed from housing patterns and zoning policies. As one Black resident who had lived in the county for

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decades explained, segregation was “really a matter of housing” and “comes down to where people can live.” Several interview participants also cited instances where developers had tried and failed (or not even tried) to include affordable housing units in new buildings, as was the case in River Hill—an area known for its expensive single-family homes and high-quality schools.

Community members and elected officials also attributed segregation to HCPSS’s policies and prior redistricting decisions. In particular, many participants indicated that the prior superintendent, Renee Foose, had implemented a policy that maintained high-poverty schools in Columbia with the intent of investing additional resources in them. Foose’s policy, called the Elementary School Model (ESM), was introduced at elementary schools with high FRPM rates during the 2014-2015 school year and provided schools with programs like full-day prekindergarten and world language instruction. But the ESM was dismantled after Foose left the district in 2017, and the segregative boundaries remained. Several interview participants believed that the ESM model, as well as prior boundary adjustments, intentionally segregated students, or at least avoided “rocking the boat too much” by trying to desegregate. This theme was particularly salient for residents of Columbia, where some schools had high FRPM rates. As one Columbia resident shared, “I think that, historically, redistricting ... was always to try to increase the segregation. ... Otherwise, it would’ve actually gotten more integrated.”

Increased Overcrowding

School overcrowding was also a pressing issue in HCPSS—and one that was interrelated with segregation. Although a few schools were under-enrolled, many elementary, middle, and high schools had more students than available seats. The most overcrowded school at the time was Howard High School (HHS), which, in fall 2019, was almost 500 students over capacity. One

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parent whose children were districted to HHS explained how overcrowding shaped students' experiences and opportunities at the school:

Nobody in high school uses lockers because there's no time to go to your lockers, and there's no time to go to your lockers because you can't get through the halls. ... Sports teams, extracurriculars, you're competing with twice as many kids, so you're losing out on opportunities to do these different things."

Qualitative data suggested that population growth, zoning policies, existing infrastructure, and prior redistricting decisions (or lack thereof) had contributed to overcrowding in the district. Between 2010 and 2019, HCPSS's total enrollment ballooned from 50,783 to 57,057. At the same time, Howard County policies led to development patterns that contributed to overcrowding in some schools and under-enrollment in others. For example, the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO) was supposed to prohibit residential development in an area if a school was over its capacity limit. However, APFO only paused development in an over-capacity region for four years, at most. Additionally, limited infrastructure in western Howard County concentrated population density in the east, which overcrowded schools there. These structural constraints also contributed to residential segregation, given that higher-density housing was generally more affordable than lower-density single-family homes. Thus, while denser parts of the county like Columbia were racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse, western Howard County was predominantly White, Asian, and wealthy. Interview participants also suggested that HCPSS had "kick[ed] the can down the road" with regard to overcrowding, largely because board members feared the political repercussions

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of moving students from wealthier, predominantly White and Asian schools to lower-income, predominantly Black and Hispanic schools.

Initiating the Redistricting Process

When HCPSS Superintendent Michael Martirano and school board members initiated the redistricting process in January 2019, they cited overcrowding as their impetus for doing so. As Maritrano explained to the board, “We can only manage this [overcrowding] so much longer. ... I see no other option except for ... to engage in the process of redistricting” (1/24/19 Board of Education meeting). Board members agreed and directed the superintendent to develop a recommended redistricting plan to present to the board that August. HCPSS’s formal policy on attendance boundary adjustments, which outlined the procedures that the superintendent and board members were to follow when reviewing school attendance boundaries and considering potential changes, would guide the redistricting process that followed. This policy required the superintendent and board members to consider three factors when developing alternative redistricting plans: school capacity, community stability, and school diversity. The policy did not assign weights to each of these criteria, allowing the superintendent and school board to prioritize whichever factor(s) they found to be most important.

Before the superintendent presented his recommended redistricting plan, the district conducted its annual Feasibility Study, from which they developed ten potential redistricting plans. In 2019, the district sought feedback on those plans from HCPSS parents through an online survey and in-person sessions. The superintendent was to consider this feedback when developing his recommendation. While a few parents supported one or more of the Feasibility Study plans because they thought those plans could combat overcrowding and segregation,

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most opposed the plans, which they believed would unnecessarily increase students' commute times to school, separate children from friends at their current schools, and "tear apart" communities by assigning students to schools outside their neighborhoods. For example, one parent wrote, "I simply believe that neighborhoods really must be kept together. Schools are the heart of social interactions in neighborhoods and breaking them up will harm the social and eventually the economic strength of our county." Countless parents shared this support for neighborhood schools, at the same time failing to acknowledge that maintaining neighborhood school boundaries was likely to maintain school segregation. A smaller set of parents—most of whom were from Columbia—opposed the Feasibility Study plans because they perceived those plans would not address or would exacerbate segregation and overcrowding. For example, one parent argued that "in any [redistricting] move, each school with FARMs [rates] over the county school average should have improvement in its FARMs rate," adding that the Feasibility Study plans "are shameful."

At the same time parents were providing feedback on the Feasibility Study plans, Superintendent Martirano was hand-selecting community members to serve on the Attendance Area Committee (AAC), which would offer input as he developed his recommendation. All three AAC members I interviewed suggested that the committee over-represented community members who valued equity, like the superintendent did. One AAC member explained:

I felt like it [the AAC] was diverse, but I also felt like ... it was people that probably were a little more open-minded than the community as a whole. ... I think the superintendent placed people on there in some respect ... to follow his line of thinking ... about the whole piece of at least considering the role of economic equity in [redistricting].

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Another AAC member who had long advocated for Black students and community members in Howard County supported this contention when he said, “My involvement in equity is one that I’m sure made the superintendent invite me to be a part of this ... committee.”

Unsurprisingly, AAC members pushed the superintendent to prioritize desegregation with his recommended redistricting plan. As one AAC member recalled, “Unlike past years ... we [AAC members] were with a real focus on equity. Not just moving the population for the sake of moving it, but let’s have some equity in here.” Less predictable, however, was the Howard County Council’s push to use redistricting as an opportunity to desegregate. Just a week before the superintendent was scheduled to present his recommendation to the school board, three council members shared a press release condemning socioeconomic segregation in HCPSS and calling on the superintendent and school board to desegregate. The timing of this press release, and an impending county council resolution that called on HCPSS to desegregate, created a firestorm of resistance to redistricting from community members that, as described in later sections, characterized the enactment phase of the policy process.

The Superintendent’s Recommended Redistricting Plan

At a school board meeting in August 2019, Superintendent Martirano presented his recommended redistricting plan, which he characterized as “a turning point” in the district’s attendance boundary adjustments because it was “in alignment with our Strategic Call to Action, leading with equity as our driver to provide all students with full access and opportunity to receive the best educational services and supports” (8/22/19 Board of Education meeting). The superintendent argued that his plan would advance equity by reducing socioeconomic

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segregation, while also addressing overcrowding—the reason the school board voted to redistrict in the first place.

Quantitative analyses of the superintendent's recommended plan suggest that it did, indeed, have the potential to reduce segregation in HCPSS (Table 3; Figure 3). Relative to rates in 2019, the superintendent's recommended plan was projected to more evenly distribute students by race/ethnicity at elementary, middle, and high school levels, and by FRPM status and elementary and middle school levels. But while Asian, Black, and Hispanic students' exposure to White students was projected to increase at all school levels, FRPM students' exposure to non-FRPM students was projected to decrease at all school levels—a change that conflicted with the superintendent's claim that his plan would have advanced socioeconomic equity. Even so, the superintendent's plan would have advanced desegregation along most dimensions.

Enacting a Redistricting Plan

HCPSS parents and students provided feedback on Superintendent Martirano's redistricting plan to the school board at several public hearings and through written testimony. The vast majority of parents and students who testified opposed the superintendent's redistricting plan, claiming that it was “inconvenient,” “misconceived,” “haphazard and ill-advised,” “too disruptive and radical,” and “absolutely reckless.” Many parents even opposed the plan in the name of equity—seemingly an attempt to legitimize their positions against desegregation. For example, one parent opposed the superintendent's plan because it “does not provide additional resources directly to students in need,” while another stated, “We are for equity, but do not think addressing FARM distribution is the way to go.”

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Many who opposed the superintendent's plan were from wealthy, predominantly White and Asian communities in western Howard County, which Superintendent Martirano had proposed redistricting to lower-income, predominantly Black and Hispanic schools in Columbia. Some Asian families argued that these attendance boundary adjustments would violate their right to pursue the "American Dream." For example, one Asian River Hill parent shared:

My parents were immigrants to this country and worked very hard to see that I received an excellent education to be "better than them" in life. ... [My sister and I] have worked very hard and made a lot of sacrifices to ... provide a better life for our children. I am not okay with the American Dream that I've worked so hard for to be taken away from me and my kids.

Beyond testifying, Asian parents also formed a coalition called Howard County Families for Education Improvement (FEI), which organized several protests throughout the enactment phase, including one attended by roughly 4,000 community members.

Relatively few community members supported the superintendent's plan, and those who did supported it because they thought HCPSS should use redistricting as an opportunity to desegregate schools. Some advocates held signs or donned shirts at public hearings that read "#DefendThePlan" and testified in support of Martirano's recommendation. For example, one student from Columbia encouraged the board "to vote in favor for Dr. Martirano's plan" because "we are segregating our students into race and class and giving schools with lower socioeconomic status less resources." Like this student, others who advocated for the superintendent's plan did so because they thought that it was, as one parent who testified argued, "a move in the right direction."

The School Board's Enacted Plan

In October 2019, the school board began work sessions to discuss whether and how they would move forward with redistricting. While the board could have enacted the superintendent's plan, or at least used it as a basis to make modifications, they did not. As one AAC member explained, board members essentially said, "Okay, forget the superintendent's plan. We've got to work on a whole new plan." Interview participants agreed that the board's decision to move away from the superintendent's plan was a direct result of pushback from the vocal, well-organized group of Asian and White parents from River Hill, who did not want their children redistricted to Wilde Lake. In one parent's view, "It was just the outrage. ... Just so many people, just hours and hours and hours of people coming in and telling [board members] how awful they are. The national news attention, the protests, people showing up at [board members'] houses. They did not want to deal with that."

Over the course of nine work sessions—one of which lasted nine hours—board members developed a plan largely based on two board members' proposed plans. Board member Jennifer Mallo, a Columbia resident, proposed a plan that she argued would keep communities intact, minimize travel times to school, and enhance school diversity, while board member Chao Wu, a River Hill resident, proposed a plan that he claimed was less disruptive than the other two alternatives because it would move the fewest students. The board voted on the final redistricting plan on November 21st, 2019, despite some community members' and board members' efforts to delay the process. HCPSS released a statement after the vote indicating that the enacted redistricting plan would move 5,402 students: 2,007 high schoolers, 568 middle schoolers, and 2,827 elementary schoolers.

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Comparing segregation projections associated with the school board's enacted plan to those associated with the superintendent's plan reveals the erosive effects that political dynamics had on this redistricting effort's prospects for reducing segregation (Table 3; Figure 3). The enacted plan would have led to similar improvements in the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic distribution of elementary school students but had substantially less potential to improve racial/ethnic and socioeconomic distributions at the middle and high school levels. In fact, the enacted plan was projected to create *less even* racial/ethnic and socioeconomic distributions of students at middle and high school levels than existed in 2019. Projected changes to Asian, Black, and Hispanic students' exposure to White students were similar between the superintendent's plan and the enacted plan, although, in most cases, the enacted plan would have improved exposure to a lesser degree. In contrast, the enacted plan would have improved FRPM students' exposure to non-FPRM students as much as or more than the superintendent's plan.

Implementing New Attendance Boundaries

Many HCPSS parents continued resisting new attendance boundaries in the weeks after the board's final vote by suing the school board or submitted written testimony arguing that moving forward with redistricting would take funds away from important programs like music, which the board was considering cutting. But in March 2020, parents had a new reason to oppose boundary changes: the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the pandemic, HCPSS, like many other districts across the country, turned to distance learning and scrambled to support teachers, students, and their families during the transition. Amidst the scramble, parents wrote to board members asking them to delay redistricting. As one wrote, "This virus has had a huge,

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heart-wrenching impact on our country, state, county, and schools. We are in unprecedented times. ... Postponing this large-scale [redistricting] plan is essential.” Some board members, including the three who voted against most boundary changes and one who voted in favor of them, were hesitant to move forward with redistricting too, but HCPSS officials and Superintendent Martirano stood their ground.

Although HCPSS moved forward with implementing the new attendance boundaries, parents’ displeasure with redistricting and the district’s response to the pandemic contributed to a decrease in HCPSS enrollment by approximately 3%, after it had climbed steadily for 10 years (Table 4). Enrollment for Asian, Black, and Hispanic HCPSS students continued to increase but at lower rates than in prior years, while enrollment for White students dropped more precipitously than in prior years. Enrollment of FRPM students also decreased, although this enrollment drop may reflect changes to the FRPM program, rather than a decline in the number of low-income students in HCPSS schools.³

A portion of these enrollment changes appeared to be driven by flight to private schools and increases in homeschooling. Between 2019 and 2020, enrollment in Howard County’s private schools grew by approximately 10% and the rate of homeschooling grew by almost 57% (Table 4). Interview data corroborated these trends and offered some explanation for flight from HCPSS. While some participants said that parents left HCPSS because they wanted their children to attend school in person, others suggested that parents left because they did not want their children to attend the predominantly Black, Hispanic, and low-income schools to which they were redistricted. For example, one Asian parent whose neighborhood was redistricted to Long Reach High School, which had higher percentages of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students

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than her child's previous school, said that many of her neighbors transitioned to private schools. She explained that these parents were not those who had expressed racist opposition to the superintendent's redistricting plan, but were those who had claimed to support "equity:"

There were people who sent their kids to private school who didn't go to Long Reach whom I had higher expectations of. ... I actually call them the pearl-clutching Democrats now, because after all, they have the "Black Lives Matter" sign in their yard, but when the rubber hits the road in terms of equity, it's just like, "I can't send my child there."

Thus, in this parent's view, redistricting exposed stark gaps between some Howard County residents' *espoused values* and their *actions*.

Outcomes of the Redistricting Process

Given that the enacted plan served as the basis of the new attendance boundaries, one might expect that segregation under the implemented plan would reflect projections for the enacted plan. If anything, given efforts to *resist* the new boundaries, one might expect segregation under the implemented plan to be *higher* than projections for the enacted plan. Yet, for the most part, the implemented redistricting plan was associated with similar racial/ethnic segregation rates and lower socioeconomic segregation rates than rates in 2019 and projections for both the superintendent's plan and the enacted plan (Table 3; Figure 3).

At first glance, these results suggest that redistricting fulfilled its goal of reducing segregation in HCPSS. Yet, the sociopolitical context during the policy implementation phase—namely, the pandemic and its influence on HCPSS enrollment changes—complicate this story. Because calculations for *H* are dependent on student populations in the district, decreased enrollment of White students may have made it *appear* that Asian, Black, Hispanic,

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and White students became more evenly distributed under the new boundaries when those changes actually resulted (at least in part) from population changes. In other words, “desegregation” under the implemented plans could have resulted from decreased White enrollment, rather than improvements in the distribution of students by race/ethnicity across schools. Results from the interaction index—which indicate that Asian, Black, and Hispanic students were exposed to White students at lower rates under the new boundaries—support this explanation. The same is true for socioeconomic segregation under new boundaries: while it is possible that students became more evenly distributed by FRPM status, it is also likely that apparent decreases in the FRPM student population made outcomes appear more encouraging than they actually were.

Beyond segregation outcomes, qualitative evidence suggests that redistricting affected the political context of Howard County. For example, the two women of color on the school board who supported redistricting to desegregate did not run for re-election in 2020, which several interview participants attributed to the “nastiness” and “harassment” they experienced during the redistricting process. Furthermore, FEI, the predominantly Asian coalition that formed in opposition to the superintendent’s recommended redistricting plan, remained active and endorsed three candidates for school board who opposed redistricting to address issues beyond overcrowding. FEI also used the momentum they gained during redistricting to advocate for seats on various school board committees, including the school board’s Operating Budget Review Committee, which provides input on district expenditures.

Discussion and Policy Implications

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HCPSS, a district that espouses equity-oriented values and has a county-based structure that is favorable for desegregating schools, embarked on a promising effort to desegregate by redistricting in 2019. In an era where school desegregation is all but dead, this redistricting effort offered an opportunity to understand whether, under favorable political conditions, districts have some opportunity to reduce segregation across their schools, if only on the margins. Using a mixed methods design that allowed me to connect the political dynamics of the redistricting process with different redistricting plans' prospects for reducing racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation, I found that, overall, political factors such as protests, coalition-building, and other strategies used by White and Asian community members to influence school board members inhibited the redistricting policy's potential to fulfill its aims. This finding aligns with prior work that shows how racist political resistance, which often masquerades as race-neutral resistance to issues like traveling longer distances for school, undermines attempts to desegregate schools (Bartels & Donato, 2009; Castro et al., 2022b).

Yet, identifying projected and real changes in segregation between 2019 and the superintendent's plan, the school board's enacted plan, and the implemented attendance boundaries, as well as changes between the plans themselves, offered a more holistic and, at times, more encouraging picture of the redistricting effort's potential to desegregate schools. For the most part, the HCPSS superintendent's proposed redistricting plan was projected to more evenly distribute students by race/ethnicity and FRPM status. His plan was also projected to increase the rate at which Asian, Black, and Hispanic students were exposed to White students. Yet, the redistricting plan that the school board enacted was, in many cases, projected to maintain the status quo of segregation, or to make it worse—particularly in the case of

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socioeconomic segregation. In terms of evenness, segregation under the implemented plan appeared consistently and, in some instances, substantially lower than projections associated with the board's enacted plan and rates in 2019. But Asian, Black, and Hispanic students' exposure to White students decreased, suggesting that improvements in evenness by race/ethnicity resulted from lower White enrollment, rather than a more even distribution of students. Improvements in socioeconomic evenness appeared more encouraging, given that FRPM students' exposure to non-FRPM students also increased. However, these changes were likely bolstered, if not driven, by a decrease in the percentage of FRPM students in HCPSS.

Beyond illustrating general trends in how political dynamics affect redistricting plans' potential to reduce segregation, this study extends existing work by demonstrating the *degree to which* these dynamics affect prospects for desegregation. Reardon and Yun (2003) suggest that a change in evenness by 0.050 or more over the course of a decade marks a significant change in segregation; this translates to an average change of 0.005 per year. In most cases, both for racial/ethnic and socioeconomic evenness, projected and real changes between 2019 and the redistricting plans and between the plans themselves were greater than 0.005. For example, the superintendent's plan would have improved racial/ethnic and socioeconomic evenness by as much as 0.20—almost half of what Reardon and Yun (2003) constitute as significant change in a decade. Yet, political factors led the board to enact a plan that would have diminished potential to reduce segregation with redistricting and, in some cases, would have exacerbated it. The most drastic example is socioeconomic evenness at the middle school level, where the enacted plan would have increased segregation by 0.011 relative to 2019 and by 0.028 relative to the superintendent's plan. Ultimately, while these changes may appear

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small, each of them would have amounted to a change in evenness by more than 0.050—in some cases, more than 0.100—over the course of a decade.

Projected and real changes to exposure rates under these various redistricting plans also appeared small, but many were substantial when interpreted relative to trends in the decade leading up to redistricting. For example, in 2010, the average Hispanic elementary school student attended a school that was 70% White; in 2019, Hispanic-White exposure dropped to 55%. The superintendent's plan would have increased Hispanic-White exposure at the elementary school level by almost 7%, meaning that implementing the superintendent's proposed attendance boundaries could have remedied the increase in segregation between 2010 and 2019 by almost half. Yet, political factors led to the implementation of new attendance boundaries that left Hispanic-White exposure at the elementary school level at 55%—the same rate as in 2019. The superintendent's plan would have had a similar positive effect on Black-White exposure at the middle school level, increasing it by almost 4%, or a third of the decrease in Black-White exposure that occurred in the decade prior to redistricting. However, the implemented boundaries decreased Black-White exposure at the middle school level by roughly 1%.

The qualitative portion of this mixed methods study helped to explain the changes in projected or real segregation throughout the redistricting process. Using a conceptual framework that attended to contextual, systemic, and actor-level political dynamics, I identified how factors such as countywide values, policy structures, and individual interests interacted to shape prospects for desegregation, largely through actors' power to influence the policymaking process. This framework also helped me identify how dynamics varied—or remained the

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same—throughout phases of the policy process. When integrated with quantitative findings, phase-by-phase political dynamics provided specific insights about what political factors influenced redistricting plans’ potential for reducing segregation, as well as how districts may mitigate *or* capitalize on those factors to improve their chances of desegregating schools. For example, commitments to equity from the superintendent and members of the Attendance Area Committee during the initiation phase *bolstered* the potential that redistricting could reduce segregation by leading the superintendent to propose a redistricting plan that prioritized would have improved the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic distribution of students in HCPSS and increased Asian, Black, and Hispanic students’ exposure to White students.

These findings suggest that political resistance to redistricting, and desegregation more broadly, is not inevitable. They also suggest that having district leaders who value equity and are willing to prioritize it in policymaking, as well as including community members in the planning phase of redistricting efforts, could increase districts’ chances of redrawing attendance boundaries in desegregative ways. Yet, given the well-documented resistance to desegregation in many communities (e.g., Bierbaum & Sunderman, 2021; Castro et al., 2022a)—corroborated by findings from this study—involving community members in these efforts could also *undermine* districts’ chances of implementing an equity-oriented redistricting plan. For instance, the enactment phase of redistricting in HCPSS was dominated by staunch, racist resistance from wealthy White and Asian parents, to which most school board members ceded by enacting a plan that would have done little to reduce racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation.

This tension between equity and democracy is not a new one, but it reiterates the importance of having policy structures that *prioritize* equity when values that are often, though

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not always, in competition with equity are present. The Howard County Board of Education's policy on attendance boundary adjustments required board members to consider diversity, capacity, and community when deciding whether and how to redistrict. Furthermore, HCPSS could only initiate redistricting because of capacity issues—that is, if schools were overcrowded or under-enrolled. Thus, rather than prioritizing equity, the policy structure privileged capacity and ultimately allowed board members to prioritize the goal that mattered most to them. Embedding equity as the leading priority in policies that guide redistricting efforts would offer some assurance that attendance boundary adjustments reduce segregation, or at the very least, do not exacerbate it.

So, did HCPSS capitalize on its equity-oriented values and favorable structure to desegregate schools? Given the political dynamics that characterized the enactment phase, one might assume that HCPSS's new attendance boundaries exacerbated or at least failed to reduce segregation. Yet, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 made this question a difficult one to answer. Whether and what families left HCPSS because they were unhappy with redistricting or because of the pandemic is unclear, although countless studies have documented White flight as a way to circumvent school desegregation (e.g., Clotfelter, 2004). Even so, this finding illustrates the importance of understanding the context in which a policy is implemented when assessing whether that policy fulfilled its aims. Acknowledging the role that contextual and other political factors play in policy processes—particularly such politicized processes as desegregation efforts—is critical to understanding whether the *policy* failed, or whether the *conditions* in which the policy was advanced undermined it. Scholarship on redistricting and desegregation more broadly would benefit from additional mixed methods

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studies that attend to these political factors and their influence on policies' potential to reduce segregation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, findings from this critical case of redistricting suggest that reducing segregation remains a challenging policy goal for districts to achieve, even under favorable political conditions. Yet, desegregation, albeit on the margins, is not an *impossible* goal. This study revealed that political factors are not inherently or inevitably counterproductive and may in fact support the advancement of desegregative redistricting plans. However, districts must have the capacity and will to hire personnel that *value* equity and modify their policy structures to *prioritize* equity if they are to capitalize on the limited remaining opportunities to desegregate schools.

Endnotes

¹ Several scholars have identified limitations of FRPM as an indicator of socioeconomic status (e.g., Domina et al., 2018; Taylor & Frankenberg, 2021). I use this measure because FRPM data were available for all points in the redistricting process included in this analysis (e.g., baseline, initiation, enactment, implementation), allowing for comparison.

² I estimated projections at 2.5% because estimating at 5% led to stark overestimates of school enrollment, which I discovered by comparing the total of racial/ethnic group projections and the total of FRPM group projections with the total projected enrollment provided in the report. Using the average of the potential projected enrollment (which ranged from 0-5%) led to a closer estimate of total projected enrollment and reduced the risk of under-counting students in groups whose data were redacted.

³ In 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture expanded students' access to free meals (Toossi et al., 2021), which may have affected the rate at which low-income families signed up for, and were reported as receiving, FRPM.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Howard County Public School System Racial/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Demographics in Fall 2019

Enrollment Level	Demographic Group														
	Asian			Black			Hispanic			White			FRPM		
	N	%	Range (%)	N	%	Range (%)	N	%	Range (%)	N	%	Range (%)	N	%	Range (%)
District	13,352	22.73	-	14,096	24.04	-	7,033	12.00	-	20,256	34.55	-	11,672	19.91	-
Elementary	6,387	23.82	3.35-51.87	6,294	23.47	1.13-55.34	3,403	12.69	3.15-45.37	8,826	32.92	6.51-79.68	5,815	21.69	1.83-60.82
Middle	3,127	22.67	3.82-49.82	3,444	24.97	5.16-51.95	1,602	11.61	3.10-26.30	4,726	34.26	12.01-72.23	2,821	20.45	1.29-45.58
High	3,811	21.15	6.90-40.76	4,358	24.18	3.84-46.63	2,028	11.25	3.13-22.88	6,704	37.20	20.30-73.43	3,036	16.85	3.59-37.96

Source: NCES, 2022

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Table 2. Sample and Description of Qualitative Data Sources

Data Source	<i>n</i>	Description
Documents		
News articles	116	Articles from local and national news outlets about redistricting
District documents	21	Press releases pertaining to redistricting, Attendance Area Committee notes, community responses to survey on potential redistricting plans, formal policy on attendance boundary adjustments
School board documents	335	Meeting agendas and minutes, presentations and spreadsheets shared by board members, written testimony from community members
County Council documents	50	Meeting agendas and minutes, redistricting-related bills, written testimony from community members
State documents	17	Redistricting-related bills, written testimony from community members
Total	539	
Observations		
School board meetings	32	Recordings of meetings between January 2019 and August 2020 that addressed redistricting or related topics (e.g., school overcrowding, inequities)
County Council meetings	14	
Total	46	
Interviews		
Parents	15	
Attendance Area Committee members	3	Addressed actors' policy goals, power, and efforts to influence the redistricting process
Elected officials	2	
HCPSS graduates	2	Participants were Asian (1), Black (4), Black and White (1), White (8), and unspecified (8)
Total	22	

Note: Interview participant races were collected through an optional demographic survey. All participants who responded identified as non-Hispanic. "Unspecified" refers to participants who did not respond to the survey.

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Table 3. Racial/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Segregation Rates and Projections

Year	Evenness						Exposure (%)											
	Race/Ethnicity			FRPM Status			Asian/White			Black/White			Hispanic/White			FRPM/non-FRPM		
	Elem.	Mid.	High	Elem.	Mid.	High	Elem.	Mid.	High	Elem.	Mid.	High	Elem.	Mid.	High	Elem.	Mid.	High
2010	0.123	0.099	0.078	0.166	0.136	0.096	66.71	72.57	75.06	51.38	56.43	62.59	69.84	78.25	83.44	69.16	76.00	79.91
2019	0.135	0.116	0.095	0.192	0.144	0.111	51.55	55.69	60.62	44.04	43.99	49.05	55.04	60.77	65.85	62.75	68.92	74.76
Redistricting Plans																		
Superintendent's Plan	0.127	0.101	0.086	0.172	0.127	0.115	52.49	57.77	62.45	46.48	47.72	50.54	61.79	64.60	69.91	62.03	65.97	69.00
Enacted Plan	0.123	0.120	0.096	0.174	0.155	0.127	52.89	58.25	61.94	47.04	44.90	49.57	60.81	61.80	68.84	63.67	65.67	71.07
Implemented Plan	0.125	0.112	0.095	0.153	0.131	0.101	49.96	53.89	58.98	43.32	42.50	47.95	55.12	58.96	64.56	67.25	70.31	76.32

Source: NCES, 2022 (2010, 2019, implemented plan); author's calculations (superintendent's plan, enacted plan)

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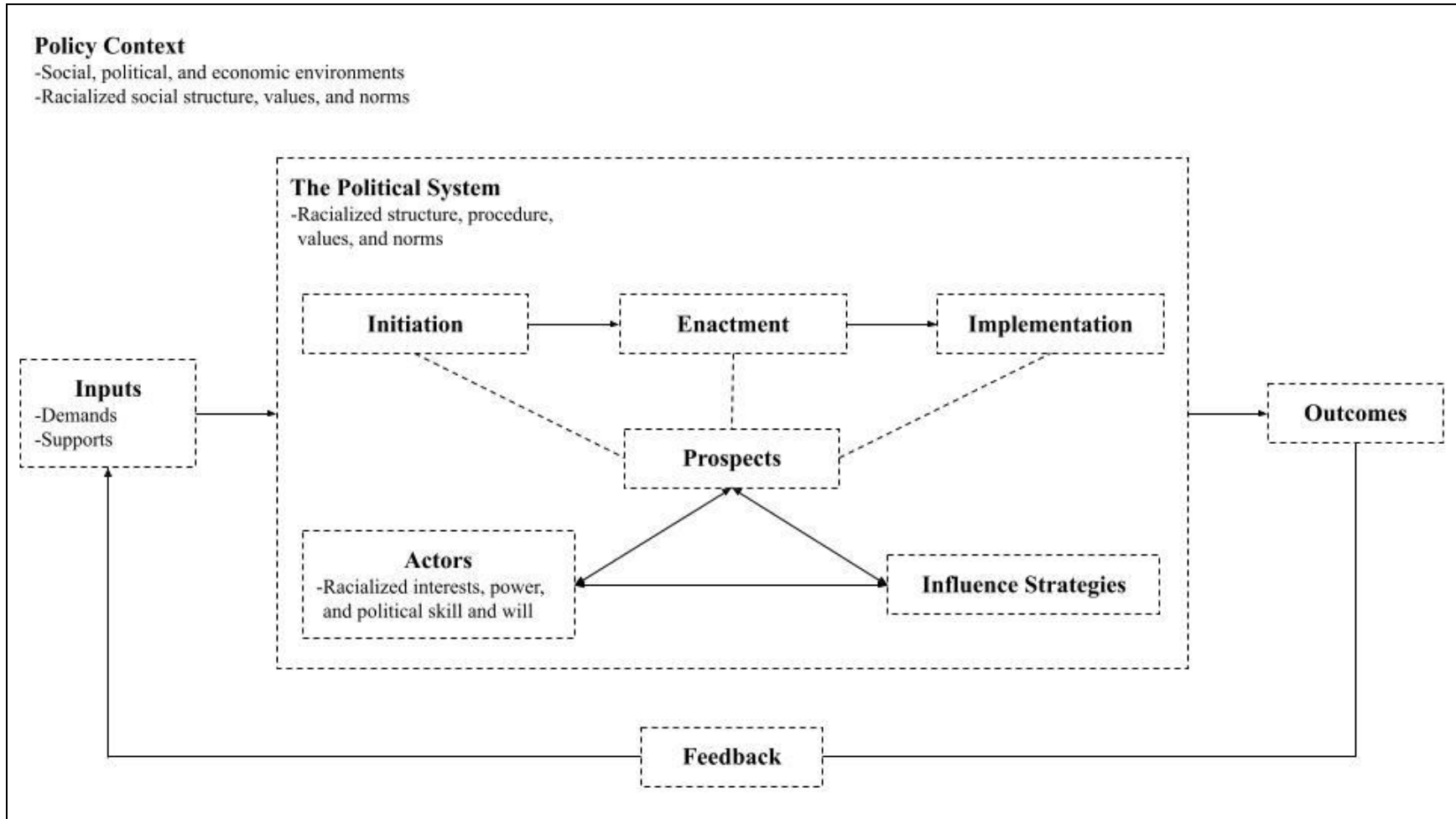
Table 4. Howard County Public School System, Howard County Private School, and Howard County Homeschool Enrollments from 2010-2019

Year	HCPSS										Private Schools		Homeschooling			
	Total		Asian		Black		Hispanic		White		FRPM		N	Δ%	N	Δ%
2010	50,783	-	8,117	-	10,345	-	4,178	-	24,785	-	8,118	-	5549	-	1188	-
2011	51,316	1.05%	8,857	9.12%	10,661	3.05%	4,358	4.31%	24,370	-1.67%	8,985	10.68%	4601	-17.08%	1180	-0.67%
2012	51,829	1.00%	9,140	3.20%	10,885	2.10%	4,506	3.40%	23,928	-1.81%	9,388	4.49%	4862	5.67%	1004	-14.92%
2013	52,566	1.42%	9,697	6.09%	11,280	3.63%	4,755	5.53%	23,368	-2.34%	10,039	6.93%	4376	-10.00%	1027	2.29%
2014	53,408	1.60%	10,347	6.70%	11,643	3.22%	5,052	6.25%	22,826	-2.32%	10,576	5.35%	4194	-4.16%	995	-3.12%
2015	54,619	2.27%	11,134	7.61%	12,212	4.89%	5,406	7.01%	22,296	-2.32%	11,377	7.57%	4852	15.69%	962	-3.32%
2016	55,385	1.40%	11,762	5.64%	12,593	3.12%	5,744	6.25%	21,654	-2.88%	11,061	-2.78%	4912	1.24%	1279	32.95%
2017	56,569	2.14%	12,406	5.48%	13,319	5.77%	6,067	5.62%	21,088	-2.61%	10,888	-1.56%	4369	-11.05%	1323	3.44%
2018	57,671	1.95%	12,923	4.17%	13,789	3.53%	6,488	6.94%	20,664	-2.01%	10,941	0.49%	3557	-18.59%	1247	-5.74%
2019	58,629	1.66%	13,325	3.11%	14,096	2.23%	7,033	8.40%	20,256	-1.97%	11,672	6.68%	4046	13.75%	1318	5.69%
2020	57,057	-2.68%	13,352	0.20%	14,064	-0.23%	7,106	1.04%	18,725	-7.56%	10,914	-6.49%	4441	9.76%	2066	56.75%

Source: NCES, 2022 (HCPSS); MSDE, 2019, 2020 (private schools); MSDE, 2023 (homeschooling)

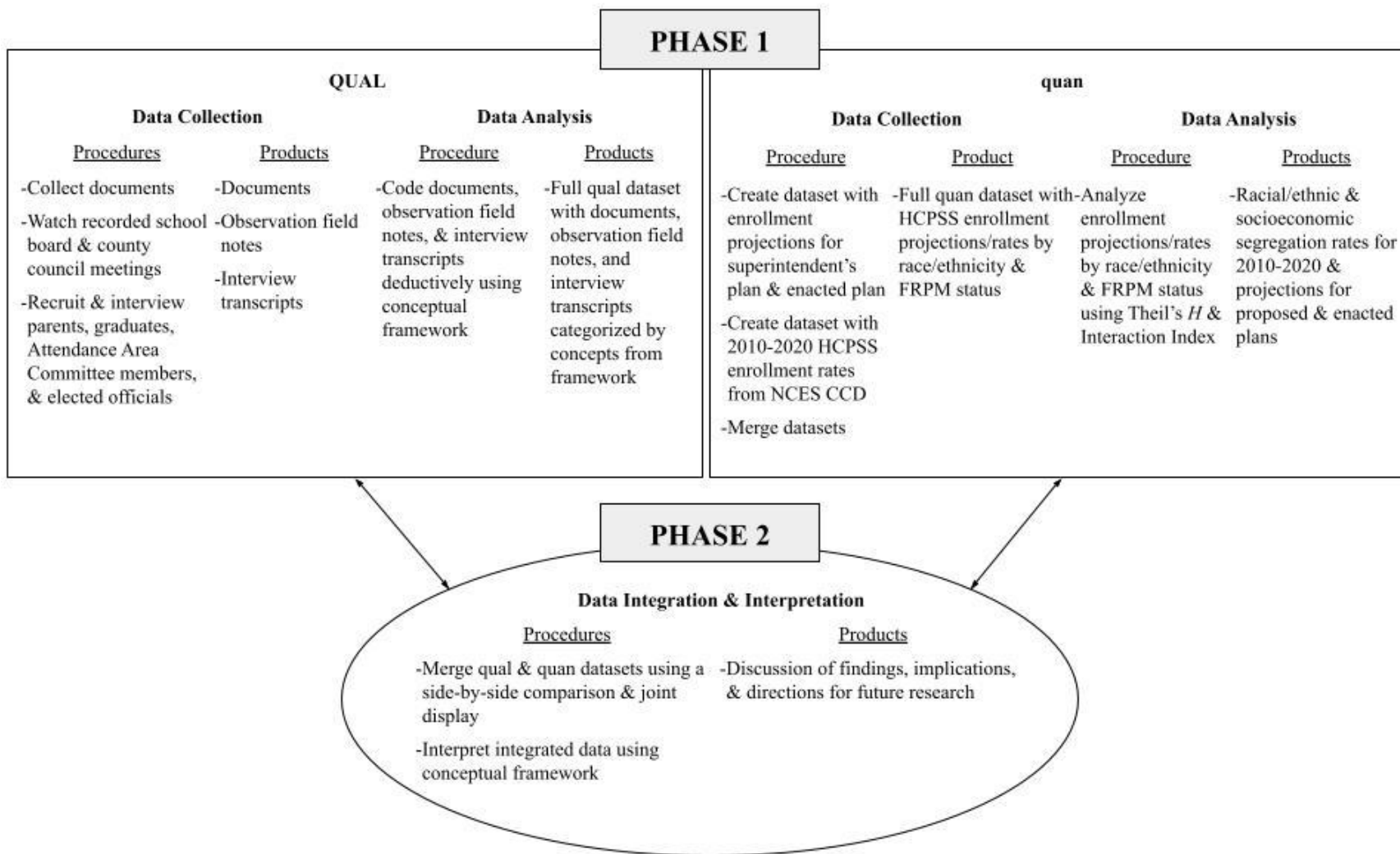
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Figure 1. Conceptual Model



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Figure 2. Research Design



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Figure 3. Evenness by Race/Ethnicity and FRPM Status for HCPSS Elementary, Middle, and High Schools under Proposed, Enacted, and Implemented Redistricting Plans

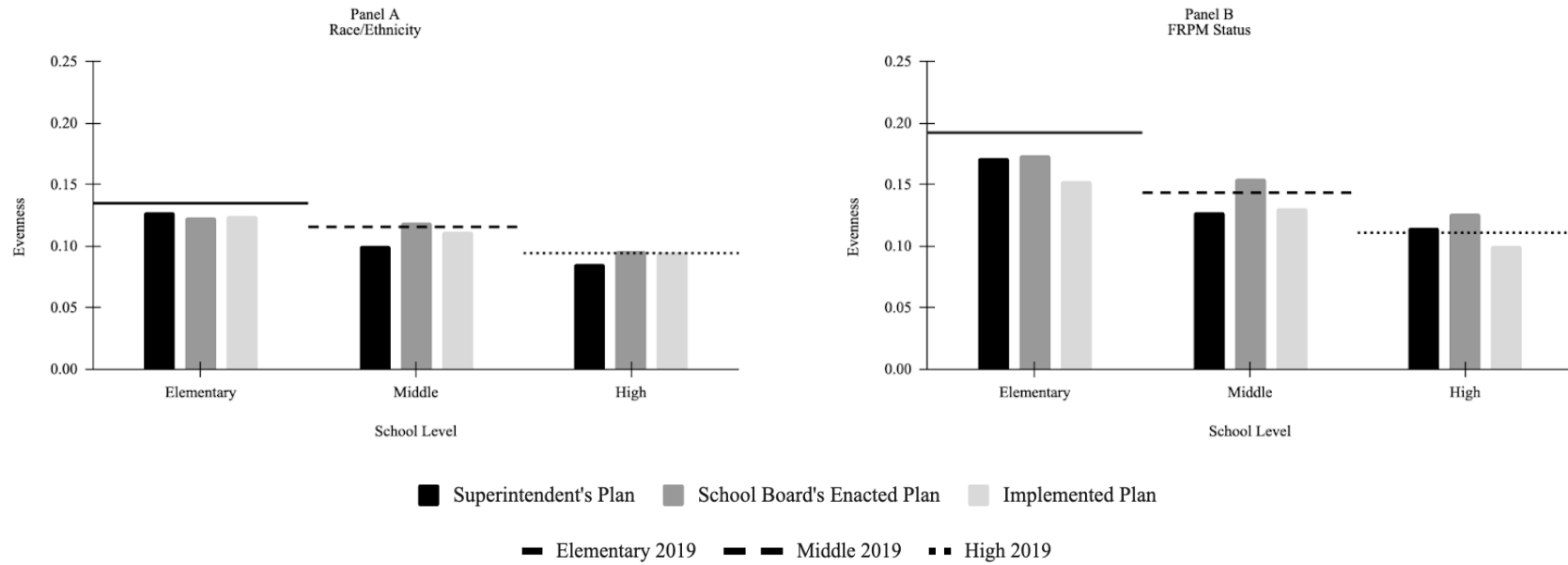


Figure Notes

Figure 1 note: Adapted from Easton (1965), Malen (2006), and Malen (Anderson) (1983).

Figure 2 note: Adapted from DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz (2017).

Figure 3 note: NCES, 2022 (2019, implemented plan); author's calculations (superintendent's plan, school board's enacted plan)

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