

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Uprooting the Grounds in Ohio's State Takeover School Districts

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the spatial and contextual dimensions of structural oppression and opportunity within Ohio's state takeover districts by integrating Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping, fiscal and performance metrics, content and policy analysis, and stakeholder testimonies. Focusing on Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland, the analysis centers on public school districts affected by state takeover legislation from 2015 to 2025. These districts, two of which are predominantly Black and all three experience high rates of child poverty, are examined through the lenses of Critical Race Spatial Analysis (CRSA), Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), and Critical Race Theory (CRT). The analysis is guided by two research questions: (1) How do spatial and structural factors in Ohio's state takeover districts generate both barriers and pathways to opportunity? (2) In what ways do narratives of cultural identity, memory, and resistance illuminate and challenge these dynamics? Findings trace the influence of historical and contemporary forces—from Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) redlining to ongoing disparities in property values and district revenues—on access to power, political representation, and opportunity across these educational geographies. The study foregrounds community narratives that expose and contest the spatial and structural arrangements in Ohio's state takeover districts. By amplifying the lived experiences of those most directly affected, this research reveals the implications and limitations of state interventions that quantitative indicators and policy documents alone cannot fully capture.

KEYWORDS: state takeover, educational reform, spatial analysis, high-stakes accountability

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In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois predicted that the color line would remain a defining problem well into the future (Du Bois, 1903). More than a century later, institutional racism persists in the United States and is actively reproduced through public policy—particularly in education, where state-level performance measures are systematically used to rank and sort school districts (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Such statutory performance metrics trigger state takeovers that establish centralized control, disproportionately targeting communities marked by racial segregation and concentrated poverty (Morel, 2018). Crucially, these administrative interventions are deeply geographic processes. As Kobayashi and Peake (2000) argue, “no geography is complete, no understanding of place or landscape comprehensive, without recognizing that American geography... as the spatial expression of American life, is racialized” (p. 392). This research draws on Critical Race Spatial Analysis (CRSA) to

interrogate how race and racism shape the spatial dimensions of policy and opportunity (Vélez, 2017). Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), CRSA exposes how inequality is embedded in physical and institutional landscapes, treating urban maps, boundaries, and accountability zones as racialized rather than neutral constructions. It also foregrounds how community members discuss, interpret, and contest these boundaries.

Through storytelling, metaphors, and acts of resistance, participants show how spatial arrangements operate as mechanisms of exclusion, control, and surveillance, while also serving as spaces for expressing identity, constructing knowledge, and asserting agency. Within this framework, state-controlled districts are understood as sites of both ongoing oppression and resistance (Morel, 2018). Employing Critical Policy Analysis (CPA; Horsford et al., 2019), this study further challenges conventional understandings of power and governance. CPA treats policy as discourse and spectacle, asks who benefits and who is burdened, and centers the lived experiences of those positioned at the margins. It reveals how policies like state takeovers label districts as “failing,” diminish local voices, and reorganize resources and decision-making in ways that reinforce racialized and spatial patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Additionally, the study incorporates CRT concepts such as counterstorytelling and community cultural wealth (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

Lived narratives of identity, memory, and resistance—shared by local educators, families, community leaders, and alumni—function as vital forms of knowledge that make visible and contest spatial and structural dynamics. These counter-stories demonstrate how communities interpret physical and discursive lines, respond to takeover policies, and envision alternative futures. Combining CRSA, CPA, and CRT’s focus on storytelling enables this research to examine how historical and contemporary forces—such as economic inequality, racial segregation, and disinvestment—shape access to power, political representation, and opportunity. The marginalization of local voices in school governance often generates activism, coalition-building, and resistance—actions that embody the “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behaviors that challenge inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). These responses are crucial for understanding how narratives of identity, memory, and resistance expose and contest the spatial and structural arrangements within Ohio’s state takeover districts.

Landscapes of Inequality. The historical production of educational inequality in the United States is deeply rooted in structural, economic, and institutional barriers (Horsford et al., 2019). As Massey and Denton (1993) argue in *American Apartheid*, racial segregation in neighborhoods has been intentionally engineered through federal policies rather than occurring by chance. This spatial segregation, in turn, shapes access to educational resources and perpetuates inequalities across generations. Chetty et al. (2020) demonstrate that intergenerational mobility remains stagnant, with Black and Native children experiencing especially low rates of upward mobility and disproportionately high rates of downward mobility. These patterns are exacerbated by broader social determinants—including economic instability, childhood poverty, unstable neighborhoods, increasing mortality rates, and disparities in health and connectivity (Ginwright, 2016)—that converge to undermine educational opportunity. At the local level, school districts have frequently operated within—and reinforced—these inequitable structures, layering surveillance, policing, and exclusionary discipline onto schools serving Black children in ways that reproduce educational stratification rather than relieve it (Love, 2023). Economic inequality further compounds these divides: persistent gaps in school funding formulas and reliance on local property taxes fuel disparities in resources and opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Horsford, 2016). In Ohio, statewide analyses of school report card data show a consistent, nonlinear

relationship between district poverty concentration and test performance. Districts in which more than 80% of students live in poverty receive the lowest report card scores, whereas those with less than 10% poverty perform at the top (Faust, 2016).

In Youngstown, where over 40% of residents are Black, the median income was \$34,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). According to the 2018–2019 state report card, the district received an “F” grade (Ohio Department of Education, 2019b). Conversely, nearby Canfield, a predominantly White city, had a median income of \$81,637 and earned a “B” grade during the same period (Ohio Department of Education, 2019b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The result is a tangible and perceived cycle of oppression. In East Cleveland, official data confirm that the district has the single lowest average income per federal tax return in Ohio, with 100 percent of students qualifying as economically disadvantaged (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a). To compensate for hollowed-out property wealth, residents exert a disproportionate local tax effort—taxing themselves at 54.71 mills compared to a peer average of 43.3 mills (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a). Yet, despite taxing themselves at higher rates relative to their limited resources, this localized extraction cannot overcome the structural deficits created by systemic municipal disinvestment (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a). Ladson-Billings (2006) reframes the “achievement gap,” or underperformance on state metrics, as an “education debt,” capturing the cumulative impact of chronic underfunding, segregation, and discriminatory policies and practices. This debt accumulates across generations, as each inherits not only the original debt but also the compounded effects of ongoing neglect and policy failure, making educational equity increasingly difficult to attain.

These compounding structural forces are especially pronounced in districts subject to state takeover, where decades of disinvestment—evidenced by industrial decline, structural demolition, and elevated mortality rates—intersect directly with Ohio’s unconstitutional state funding formulas (*DeRolph v. State of Ohio*, 1997). These conditions manifest as food and pharmacy deserts, unstable housing, limited employment opportunities, and high rates of incarceration and school exclusion (Cuyahoga County Planning Commission, 2025; Ohio Board of Pharmacy, 2025). Understanding these spatial and structural configurations is crucial for analyzing where state takeover policies are implemented, how they interact with existing landscapes of inequality, and how affected communities experience and respond to them.

Literature Review

National Context of State Takeovers. Accountability legislation has led to a marked increase in state takeovers of school districts deemed underperforming by state-defined metrics (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). Nationally, the average annual rate of state takeovers climbed from 3.9 per year between 1988 and 2010 to 5.8 per year between 2011 and 2016, signaling a broader shift toward centralized governance in public education. To date, 34 states have codified statutory avenues allowing for centralized school governance (Jochim, 2016), and 22 states—plus the District of Columbia—have actively dissolved or weakened elected school boards in at least one local district (Morel, 2018). The Newark Public School District underwent the nation’s longest state takeover, spanning 28 consecutive years (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). At the federal level, policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) expanded federal oversight by mandating the disaggregation of test scores for specific student “subgroups”—including those categorized by race, ethnicity, income, disability, and English learner status—to monitor disparities in math and reading performance. By anchoring public education to a neoliberal framework of market-style accountability, NCLB established standardized testing as the primary metric for evaluating school effectiveness. While policymakers defended this shift as a necessity for global

competitiveness, empirical data indicate that these reforms failed to close racial achievement gaps (Hursh, 2007). Subsequent initiatives, such as the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) program (2009), further entrenched this accountability regime. By offering competitive grants, RTTT prompted states to expand market-based school choice and adopt test-based teacher evaluations (McGuinn, 2012). The consequences of these accountability mandates disproportionately destabilize Black and Brown communities through school closures, state takeovers, and privatization (Steggert & Galletta, 2018).

In Cleveland, for example, the 2010–2012 school restructuring inflicted a profound sense of uprooting on displaced youth while placing intense systemic and disciplinary strain on receiving schools, ultimately exacerbating pre-existing structural vulnerabilities rather than improving educational equity (Steggert & Galletta, 2018). State takeovers systematically target large, urban school systems serving predominantly racially minoritized, low-income student bodies (Morel, 2018). Schueler and Bleiberg (2022) observe that these interventions are starkly concentrated in urban centers, which account for 25% of all takeovers despite comprising only 6% of school districts nationwide. Taken-over districts typically enroll vastly higher proportions of students, serve larger student bodies averaging 3,972 students compared to 1,539 in non-takeover systems, and maintain a significantly higher density of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Schueler and Bleiberg, 2022). Furthermore, these interventions significantly undermine Black political power (Morel, 2018).

Specifically, Morel notes that 33% of state takeovers in majority-Black districts result in the total abolition of elected school boards without democratic replacement, compared to a mere 4% in majority-White districts and none in majority-Latino/a districts. Consequently, school districts with majority-Black populations are eleven times more likely to have their local boards dissolved (Morel, 2018). In municipalities with majority-Black city councils, these interventions correlate with sharp declines in Black descriptive representation on school boards, even when Latino/a board representation shifts concurrently (Morel, 2018). Financially, state takeovers motivated by academic and non-fiscal reasons increase annual school spending by roughly \$2,000 per pupil after five years through an infusion of state revenues to cover legacy costs (Lyon et al., 2025). However, Lyon and colleagues also found that these fiscal improvements are experienced unequally: predominantly Black districts are significantly less likely to receive takeover-induced increases in expenditure. Scholars such as Sonya Douglass Horsford and colleagues (2019) critique the ways in which neoliberal reforms, market logics, and centralized accountability strip local communities of decision-making power.

School governance has long been a contested terrain: elected boards have functioned both as instruments of political patronage and as sites of resistance to desegregation (Henig, 2013; Wong, 2007). State funding formulas and municipal exclusionary zoning policies, together with uneven enforcement of federal desegregation mandates, have structurally locked intense racial and socioeconomic segregation into district boundary lines (Baker & Corcoran, 2012; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Nevertheless, school boards have historically served as vital democratic anchors in marginalized urban landscapes, frequently acting as "the only entities that provide continuous institutional leadership through times of constant change and administrative churn" (Usdan, 2010, p. 9). Proponents of local governance argue that school boards provide a vital venue for marginalized communities to articulate visions of educational justice tailored to local contexts. Yet, as Henig (2013) observes, this localized democratic capacity is severely compromised when institutional authority is consolidated upward into the hands of mayors, governors, and state legislative bodies. This loss of control is not experienced uniformly; takeovers are statistically far more likely to occur in majority-Black school districts, even when

controlling for performance (Morel, 2018). Beth Schueler and colleagues (2022) have produced comprehensive nationwide datasets tracking school takeovers. Their research confirms that takeovers spark massive public resistance, particularly from marginalized communities that lose political and economic control. They show that takeovers generate severe “administrative churn” and high teacher turnover while failing to deliver statistically significant improvements in student reading or math scores.

Stagnation Through Standardization. Standardization in education has long served as a tool for imposing dominant cultural values and practices on marginalized communities. Mechanisms such as high-stakes standardized testing and external evaluations operate as the primary vehicles for this enforcement. Through these tools, state power is deployed to circumscribe curricular content, undermine educational sovereignty, and actively restrict critical engagement with history and identity (Aronson, 2012; Cammarota, 2012). These maneuvers reflect a broader ideological project that privileges White, middle-class norms and dominant American English, erasing cultural and linguistic diversity under the guise of school “improvement” (Paris & Alim, 2017). While these standardizing reforms are frequently justified by paternalistic claims of academic improvement, the empirical record on their effectiveness remains mixed, highly context-dependent, and epistemologically contested. For example, Schueler, Goodman, and Deming (2017) report positive short-term achievement effects in the Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) in Massachusetts, a district serving Latino/a and bilingual students, with a predominantly low-income student population.

Following state intervention, students in LPS posted roughly 0.3 standard-deviation increases in mathematics and 0.1 standard-deviation increases in English language arts. Similarly, Harris and Larsen (2023) utilize a matched difference-in-differences approach to show substantial improvements in standardized reading and math outcomes in New Orleans after most district schools were converted to charter schools. Abdulkadiroğlu et al. (2016) also report sizable academic gains in math and reading within state turnaround sectors, including Boston and New Orleans, that are marked by high teacher turnover. Conversely, Zimmer et al. (2017) find mixed and uneven effects associated with Tennessee’s state-run Achievement School District (ASD), a turnaround model that aggregates geographically disparate, low-performing schools into a single state-controlled district.

Contextualizing State Intervention in Ohio. Ohio presents a compelling context for examining state takeover policies, as its public school districts have been shaped by multiple critical policy junctures involving state intervention in local school governance. Before the passage of House Bill 70 (HB 70), the Youngstown City School District (YCSD) and Lorain City School District (LCSD) operated under Academic Distress Commissions (ADCs), representing an earlier stage of state involvement that HB 70 would later intensify (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024b; 2024c). In 2010, YCSD was placed under an ADC by the Ohio Department of Education after being designated an “academic emergency” for failing to meet adequate yearly progress for four consecutive years. Similarly, in 2013, LCSD came under commission oversight due to persistent underperformance on state accountability measures. The establishment of these early commissions and subsequent chief executive officer (CEO) appointments trace a clear progression from advisory oversight of academic operations to more intrusive, state-directed control. Ohio’s House Bill 70 and the Expansion of State Control, Enacted in 2015, authorized accountability legislation that authorized the state to intervene in any district that received an “F” on the state report card for three consecutive years (Ohio Revised Code § 3302.10, 2015). House Bill 70 (HB 70) authorized academic distress commissions (ADCs) to appoint a chief executive officer (CEO) with increasing authority over academic, managerial, and operational decision-making, including staff appointments, curriculum design, and budget management.

Under ORC § 3302.10(H)–(M), the appointed CEO’s authority increases over the first five years: Year 1: Restructure schools and renegotiate collective bargaining agreement terms; Year 2: Continue Year 1 action, plus power to suspend or amend collective bargaining agreement provisions (excluding base salary and insurance benefits); Year 3: Actions from Years 1 and 2 remain effective; Year 4: Actions from Years 1, 2, and 3 persist, along with the mayor appointing a new Board of Education. CEO control remains unchanged. In Year 5 and beyond, actions from Years 1 through 4 continue, and, if funded by the General Assembly, non-district schools that enroll district students may receive additional payments (Ohio Department of Education, 2019a, p. 17).

Under this statutory framework, state-appointed CEOs assumed unilateral control over key district functions. The Youngstown City School District was taken over in 2016, Lorain in 2017, and East Cleveland in 2018. All three districts experience high rates of child poverty, and two serve predominantly Black student populations. State officials have acknowledged the tensions produced by this model; the Ohio Superintendent of Public Instruction’s report on Academic Distress Commissions: Review and Recommendations cites ‘too substantial a separation between traditional governance structures and the new governance structures’ (Ohio Department of Education, 2019a, p. 1). The report critiques Ohio’s one-size-fits-all approach and emphasizes the need to build consensus between state and local officials. Although subsequent legislative changes have modified aspects of HB 70, much of its underlying logic—linking continued ADC status and the restoration of local control to performance on state assessments—remains intact.

Policy Tensions and Ongoing Reforms in Ohio. In 2021, changes in state law required districts under the oversight of an academic distress commission to submit a three-year academic improvement plan to the state superintendent of public instruction (Ohio Revised Code, 2023). Revised improvement plans were approved by the interim state superintendent for all three districts (State Board of Education of Ohio, 2021). Under HB 33, signed into law in 2023, the Academic Distress Commission for Lorain City Schools was dissolved (H.B. 33, 2023). Following the subsequent release of East Cleveland in December 2025, the Youngstown City School District remained the sole district under academic distress status (Ideastream Public Media, 2026; O'Donnell, 2026). Senate Bill 332 was introduced in 2026 to permanently dissolve the remaining academic distress commissions and return governing power to elected local boards. This study positions Ohio—and specifically, the districts of Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland—as critical case studies within a broader national trend of state takeovers. More broadly, the context reveals a deeply racialized relationship between state legislators and stakeholders in districts undergoing takeovers. This study seeks to illuminate the spatial and structural dynamics in state takeover districts, while exploring community narratives of identity, memory, and resistance. By prioritizing these lived experiences, the project highlights critical limitations that cannot be captured by performance indicators or policy documents alone.

Summary. Accountability legislation has led to a marked increase in state takeovers of schools identified as underperforming by state-defined metrics (Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). Driven largely by standardized test scores, these interventions disproportionately target Black school districts even when researchers control for baseline academic performance (Morel, 2018). Ladson-Billings (2021) frames the state takeover narrative as locking districts into a deficit paradigm—tied to this is a pretentious effort at rescuing that tightens control and maintains power. Empirical evidence regarding the academic effectiveness of these interventions remains mixed and highly context-contingent (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2016; Harris & Larsen, 2023; Schueler et al., 2017; Zimmer et al., 2017). Beyond test scores, state interventions are deeply racialized and disrupt the broader ecology of community wellbeing (Morel,

2018). For instance, while takeovers increase overall per-pupil spending, these fiscal benefits are experienced unequally along racial lines (Lyon et al., 2025). Furthermore, they diminish Black school board representation in cities with majority-Black councils, while fundamentally altering the descriptive representation of Latino/a board members (Morel, 2018). Standardization in education imposes dominant cultural norms. Cammarota (2012) observes that local resistance to such practices is frequently weaponized and framed as a threat to state authority, thereby limiting the educational sovereignty of students, families, and neighborhoods. Despite this national research, gaps remain in understanding how stakeholders within Ohio's specific state takeover districts navigate these conditions amidst broader structural oppression. By centering community voices, the study illuminates how historical structural forces shape modern opportunities, and how localized 'resistant capital' (Yosso, 2005) is deployed to contest centralized state authority.

Methodology

This study examines spatial and structural configurations of opportunity and oppression within Ohio's state takeover districts—specifically Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland City School—during the period defined by academic distress legislation. Employing a critical qualitative methodology integrated with spatial analysis, the research leverages Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping, fiscal and institutional performance data, comprehensive policy and document reviews, and individual semi-structured interviews with a deeply impacted, diverse stakeholder group (including community leaders, classroom educators, parents or caregivers, and a district alumnus). This study seeks to illuminate how larger contextual factors and micro-level geographical contexts systematically condition the lived experiences of state educational takeovers. The following research questions guide this work: (1) In what ways do spatial and structural factors in Ohio's state takeover districts generate both barriers and pathways to opportunity? (2) How do narratives of cultural identity, memory, and resistance illuminate and challenge the spatial and structural dynamics within these districts? This work is guided by Critical Race Spatial Analysis (CRSA), Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), and Critical Race Theory (CRT). These frameworks offer tools for examining how race, space, and institutional power operate within state-controlled educational settings. This approach examines how dominant state-takeover narratives reveal localized access to power, shape collective and individual identities, affect political representation, and construct official knowledge. Ultimately, this framework exposes the convergence of race and class interests as rooted in historical arrangements and contemporary structural policies.

Data Sources

Primary qualitative data collection consisted of 12 semi-structured interviews, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. Employing a flexible conversation guided by open-ended questions, this protocol allowed participants to articulate their lived experiences in rich narrative detail while enabling the researcher to probe emergent themes. The interview protocol was intentionally designed to stimulate dialogue around academic distress policies, centralization of governance, and the specific spatial and contextual realities of each municipality. Participants were recruited through purposive criterion and snowball sampling strategies to ensure a diverse range of perspectives from individuals directly affected by state-led interventions. Rather than seeking broad generalizations across districts, the analysis centers on illuminating the nuanced, lived experiences of those navigating state-controlled educational environments. Recruitment channels spanned academic networks, localized social media platforms, grassroots community organizations,

school-aligned advocacy groups, and local professional networks within Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland, Ohio. The final sample included five classroom teachers, three community leaders, three parents or caregivers, and one district alumnus. Inclusion criteria required at least five years of continuous residency or professional involvement in the target district during the active intervention window. Participants' demographics closely aligned with community profiles verified in the 2020 Census Data.

All interviews were conducted via secure, encrypted video conferencing, audio-recorded with explicit participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and strictly anonymized. Given the heightened vulnerability of participants due to the existence of only three identifiable state takeover districts, strict ethical safeguards were implemented to reduce the risk of disclosure. To protect professional and personal safety, all specific identifiers, school names, and granular biographical data were omitted from research outputs. Identities were substituted with broad professional designations and community roles.

Documentary and Policy Archives. Community narratives provide firsthand experiences that counter and contextualize the official policy records. The analysis also includes 172 public and media documents. Policy, budget, and longitudinal student and staffing data were obtained directly from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), which was renamed the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODEW) in 2023, during the active intervention window. Additional sources include school board minutes, local administrative records, and extensive local media coverage. Community-level economic indicators and demographic metrics were extracted from the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau to establish baseline ecological controls.

GIS Mapping Procedures. Spatial analysis using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) was used to delineate school district boundaries and analyze the distinct socio-demographic and environmental profiles of each area. This approach enabled a granular assessment of localized variables, including population density, racial and economic demographics, median income levels, municipal tax effort, violent crime rates, and structural infrastructure conditions. Concurrently, the study assessed indicators of housing stability—specifically, mapping instances of housing blight and distinguishing between renter- and owner-occupied tracts—and evaluated the geographic dispersion of vital community resources. Publicly available spatial datasets from municipal, state, and federal repositories were layered and analyzed using the following source configurations: Violent Crime Patterns and Longitudinal Tracking, extracted from the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services (2016) Crime in Ohio Counties dashboard. Fiscal Dynamics and Tax Effort: Regional financial indicators and local tax base metrics compiled by Policy Matters Ohio (Srivastava, 2026). Spatial Resource Dispersion: Access matrices for nutritional assets, pharmaceutical providers, and clinical medical facilities provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (USDA ERS, 2023); Baseline Demographics: Spatialized decennial data from the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau.

These indicators were overlaid against the geographic boundaries of the East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown City School Districts. This spatial overlay facilitated an analysis of how socio-economic risks and resource deficits cluster within and around these specific state takeover districts. These layers were mapped directly against the legal geographic boundaries of the East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown City School Districts to examine how structural socio-economic risks and resource deficits cluster spatially within and around state-controlled entities. To isolate food insecurity at a highly localized scale, the analysis integrated the USDA's Food Access Research Atlas low-income, low-access (LI/LA) census tract metrics (USDA ERS, 2023). These metrics flag tracts where a high percentage of residents are low-income and live beyond a specified baseline distance from a full-service supermarket or large grocery store. Furthermore, a vehicle-access variant was incorporated to map

tracts characterized by a high concentration of households lacking reliable automobile access, thereby isolating where transportation deficits compound geographical barriers to essential resources.

Analysis Plan

Critical Race Spatial Analysis (CRSA), Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), and Critical Race Theory (CRT) are foundational to the research questions and the coding processes. CRSA is used to examine how educational policy is experienced through structural arrangements. CPA analyzes how state-level accountability measures—such as performance grades or district report cards—are deployed to label, sort, and lock districts deemed underperforming into a deficit paradigm, justifying tightened administrative control. CRT identifies axes of oppression and resistance. The analytical plan was executed utilizing Dedoose software. The first coding cycle involved applying the theoretical framework to the uploaded data sources (e.g., “How is state power exercised here?” “How is space being racialized?”), while deliberately privileging participants’ own language and emic perspectives.

This initial stage generated approximately 100 distinct codes capturing localized experiences of isolation, surveillance, state intervention, and grassroots community responses. During the second coding cycle, these initial codes were iteratively revised, merged, and clustered into approximately 20 higher-order, conceptual pattern codes (such as “structural opportunity,” “structural oppression,” and “community cultural wealth”). Finally, these pattern codes were synthesized into three overarching thematic categories, elucidating how intersecting historical and contemporary forces—such as racial segregation, institutional funding inequities, and centralized policy interventions—shape educational opportunity and how local communities actively construct counter-narratives and alternative future possibilities.

Trustworthiness and Methodological Rigor. The study implements a variety of validation strategies. Following Emerson et al. (2011), analytical memos were continuously compiled within Dedoose throughout the coding process. These memos documented evolving code definitions, recorded operational coding decisions, traced emerging theoretical insights or conceptual tensions, and actively interrogated assumptions regarding state governance, race, and spatial inequity. Concurrently, a separate reflexive journal was used to critically engage positionality in relation to the studied communities and policy contexts. Journal entries examined identity, professional background, and political commitments that shaped interpretations of Ohio’s state takeover districts and the specific meanings ascribed to participants’ accounts. Methodological rigor was further enhanced through systematic data triangulation across multiple distinct sources. The analysis juxtaposed public archival recordings and structural documentary data—including 2024 Ohio Auditor of State performance audits and Ohio Department of Education report cards—that were actively contested and contextualized alongside stakeholder interview accounts of state takeovers in these districts. Interview transcripts and preliminary interpretive frameworks were shared back with participants for formal member checking to confirm narrative accuracy, alignment, and resonance.

Findings

The findings of this study are organized thematically to reflect the spatial and structural dynamics shaping Ohio’s state takeover districts. Spatially, the data reveal a stark concentration of state intervention in areas characterized by perpetual economic disparity, entrenched racial segregation, and chronic disinvestment. These conditions are symptoms of broader social determinants that undermine educational opportunities and compromise the overall health and well-being of communities.

Structurally, these geographic realities are compounded by a centralized governance model that strips power from local school boards. Some stakeholders initially perceived state takeovers as a promising opportunity for transformative change—especially in districts long plagued by chronic underfunding, high stress levels, and dissatisfaction with local governance. This initial hope, however, was often tempered by continued marginalization, a lack of transparency, and the systematic sidelining of local expertise. Promised resources arrived late or were inequitably distributed, while new leaders, unfamiliar with local contexts, made high-stakes decisions that were not always aligned with the community’s needs. By drawing on interview transcripts, public documentation, policy texts, and GIS mapping, this study illuminates barriers and contextualizes forms of contestation within Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland, Ohio. Each theme is grounded in direct quotations that capture the lived realities, perspectives, and forms of resistance articulated by local stakeholders.

Removing Barriers to Student Learning. Data across all three Ohio state takeover districts reveal a concentration of student profiles subject to intensive surveillance. As summarized in Table 1, these three districts serve overwhelmingly minoritized student populations: East Cleveland is 98.2% Black or African American; Lorain is 25.0% Black or African American and 45.3% Hispanic or Latino/a; and Youngstown is 52.2% Black or African American and 24.8% Hispanic or Latino/a (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). Within these racially segregated district boundaries, state monitoring captures a convergence of structural oppression, noting that economic disadvantage reaches 100 percent in East Cleveland and Lorain, and 99.96 percent in Youngstown, compared to a 44.9 percent statewide baseline (Ohio Department of Education, 2019b; Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). Across all three districts, chronic absenteeism and the proportion of students with disabilities profoundly exceed state averages (Ohio Department of Education, 2019b).

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics in State Takeover Districts in Ohio, 2022*

Indicator	State avg.	ECCSD	LCSD	YCSD
Pre-K through 12th grade enrollment	2,400	1,496	5,925	4,400
Number of schools	—	4	14	14
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch (%)	44.9	100	100	99.96
African American or Black (%)	17.49	98.2	25	52.2
Hispanic or Latino/a (%)	5.6	NC	45.3	24.8
English learners (%)	3.8	NC	7.8	NC
Students with Disabilities (%)	15.45	25.2	20	18.1
Performance Index (PI)	83.3	40.3	49.7	32.4
Chronic Absenteeism (%)	14.4	62.32	59	63
Graduation Rates (4 yrs, %)	87	80	76.3	87.3

Note. State avg. = state average; ECCSD = East Cleveland City School District; LCSD = Lorain City School District; YCSD = Youngstown City School District; NC = not calculated (enrollment below 10). Adapted from Performance Audits of State Takeover Districts, by Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c. Where enrollment falls below

10, results are marked NC; as the editors of *Beyond the Asterisk* note (as cited in Ewing, 2025), this practice can render small groups invisible.

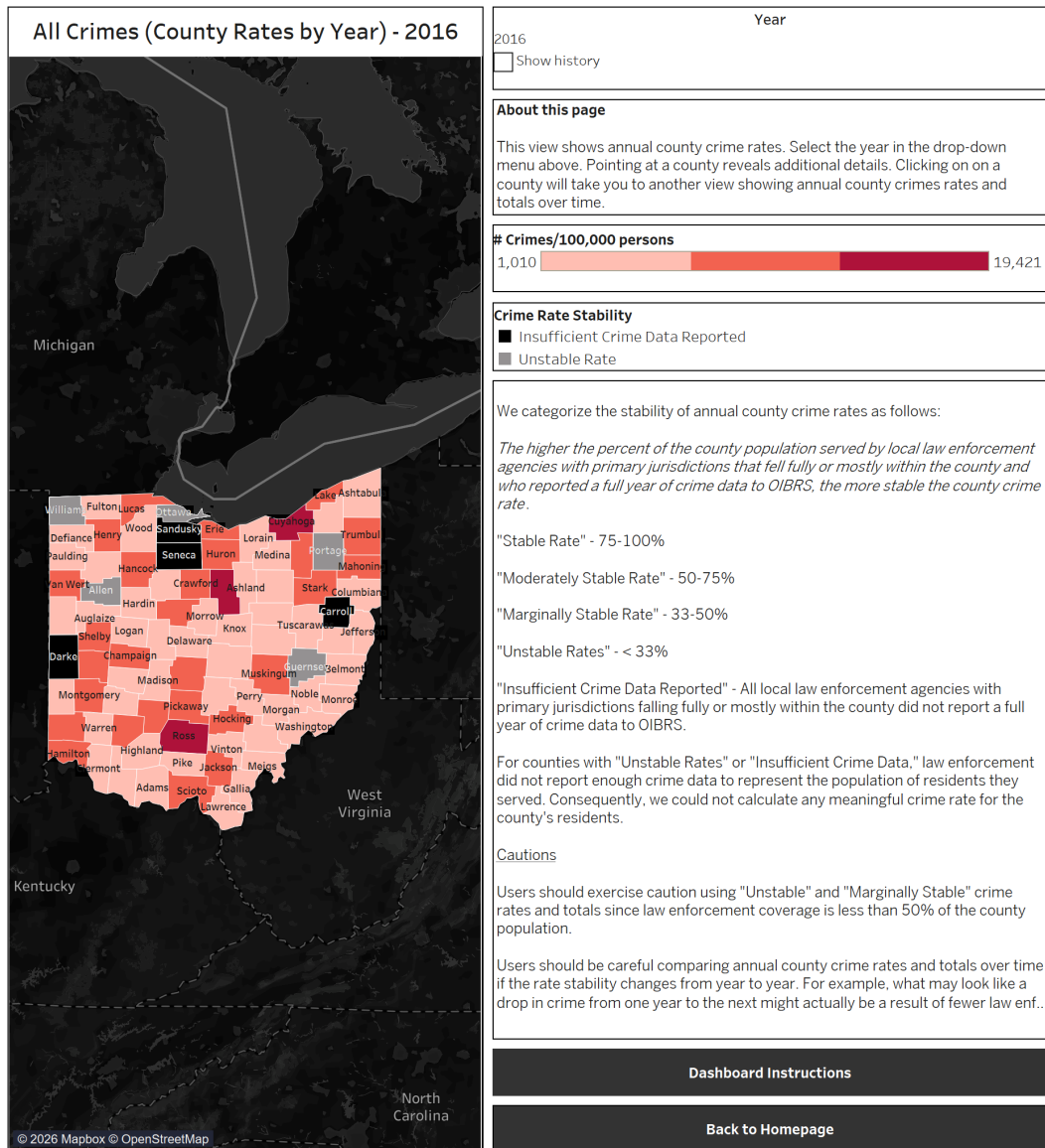
The Performance Index (PI) reports students' standardized test results against established thresholds. Declines in performance must also be understood in the context of disruptions incurred during the transition back to in-person schooling after the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior research documents that a child's socioeconomic status is "one of the most significant predictors—if not the most significant predictor—of educational success" (Garcia & Weiss, 2017, p. 1), with low-income students entering school statistically behind their wealthier peers due to systemic resource gaps (Mulligan et al., 2012). It costs more to educate communities enduring concentrated poverty than those in affluent areas (Baker et al., 2018; Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). East Cleveland administrators emphasize that their students come from highly disadvantaged areas and "require more attention, more support, and more services than other districts have to provide" (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a, p. 97). In response, East Cleveland reports placing a social worker in every school building and purchasing household Wi-Fi to support students' remote learning (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a).

Similarly, during fiscal year 2023, Lorain describes operating a Health & Family Services Engagement Center, staffing each building with counselors and wellness coaches, and converting school buses into mobile clinics (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024b). In the same year, Youngstown documents staffing counselors in each school and the purchase of medical vans to provide critical dental and ophthalmology services directly to students (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024c). These accounts illustrate that the wraparound services provided in these districts are necessary responses to address the barriers that impede student learning. The state's performance audits reveal important structural divergences in how these "barriers to learning" are configured locally (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). The East Cleveland audit emphasizes the combined effects of concentrated poverty, severe food insecurity, high rates of violent crime, housing blight, and limited municipal infrastructure—including the absence of city playgrounds, hazardous road conditions, and inadequate snow removal and street lighting (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a). The Lorain audit documents similar levels of economic disadvantage but highlights a distinct linguistic landscape, noting a large Hispanic or Latino student population, a higher share of English learners than the state average, and district investments in mobile clinics and community food pantries to meet basic health needs (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024b).

The Youngstown audit reveals high levels of economic disadvantage and elevated violent crime, and describes how safety concerns constrain the basic use of physical school spaces, such as limiting students' ability to play outside at certain elementary schools (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024c). Interview participants describe the dangerous conditions in which students live. For example, community leaders report that students face chronic infrastructural issues like elevated lead rates, heightened risks of witnessing or experiencing violence, and toxic neighborhood stress from gangs and drugs. These traumatizing experiences are detrimental to student well-being (Ginwright, 2016). Analyses by county and state agencies indicate that limited access to grocery stores, pharmacies, and healthcare services clusters around these districts' attendance zones (Cuyahoga County Planning Commission, 2025; Ohio Board of Pharmacy, 2025). These neighborhoods are also characterized as food and pharmacy deserts and healthcare "dead zones," further compounding cycles of exclusion and deprivation. These conditions generate both a tangible and a perceived cycle of oppression that structures everyday schooling in Ohio's takeover districts. As shown in Figure 1, county-level violent crime rates in 2016 are high in Cuyahoga

County, where offenses in and immediately adjacent to East Cleveland surpass state averages.

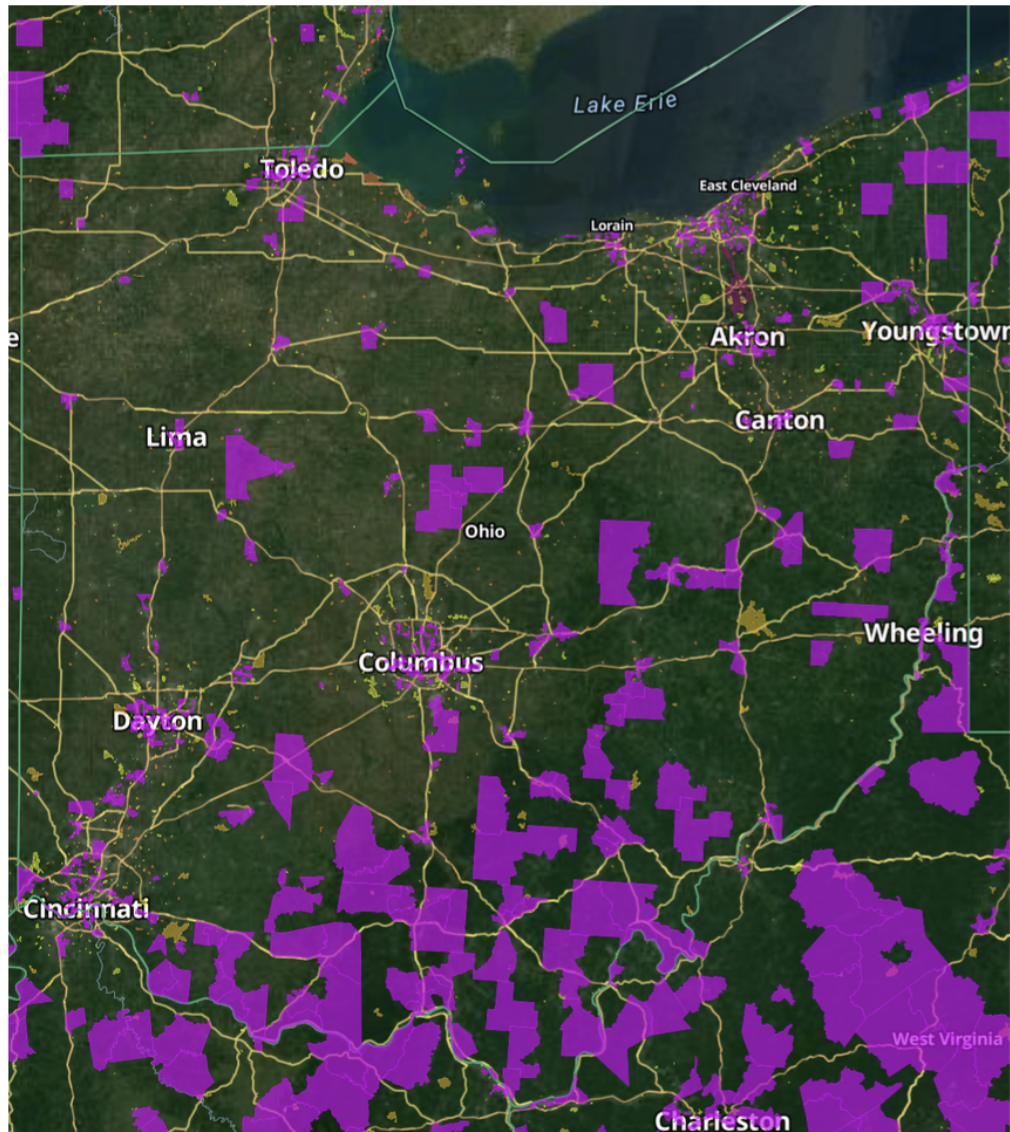
Figure 1: County-Level Violent Crime Rates in Northeast Ohio, 2016



Note. Author-supplied GIS map; source data as cited in text. County-Level Violent Crime Rates in Ohio in 2016. Reproduced from Crime in Ohio Counties Dashboard, by Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services, 2016.

These spatial boundaries are further demarcated by federal metrics of long-term financial abandonment. To map these landscapes of structural disinvestment across Northeast Ohio, Figure 2 illustrates the concentration of federally designated economic development tracts (US GIS, 2024).

Figure 2: Federally Designated Economic Development (Opportunity) Zones in Northeast Ohio



Opportunity Zones 2.0 - US

Note. Author-supplied GIS map. Opportunity Zone data from US GIS (2026). Opportunity Zones in Ohio in 2024. Screenshot from the Opportunity Zones 2.0 Web Map, by US GIS, 2024. Hosted on ACRES.com.

These federal designations serve as a reliable proxy for tracking economically distressed areas. These zones identify census tracts with high poverty and low income that are targeted for preferential tax treatment. While they do not directly measure housing foreclosure, they delineate areas of concentrated economic disadvantage that overlap substantially with the neighborhoods served by East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown. An analysis of maps tracking low-income, low-access (LI/LA) tracts in Cuyahoga, Lorain, and Mahoning Counties further confirms this overlapping deprivation. In these tracts, a high share of residents are low-income and live more than a walkable distance from a supermarket or large grocery store; in the vehicle-access variant, many households also lack reliable access to a car. When overlaid with the boundaries of East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown City School Districts, these data show that substantial portions of each district fall within LI/LA tracts, indicating

that many students reside in neighborhoods that are both economically disadvantaged and food-insecure. This spatial overlap of poverty and low food access reinforces the “barriers to learning” described by district leaders and community members in interviews and public testimonies (USDA ERS, 2023). Interviewees often described school-based food programs and community pantries as essential pathways to opportunity in these LI/LA contexts, temporarily offsetting the spatial and economic barriers to accessing healthy food.

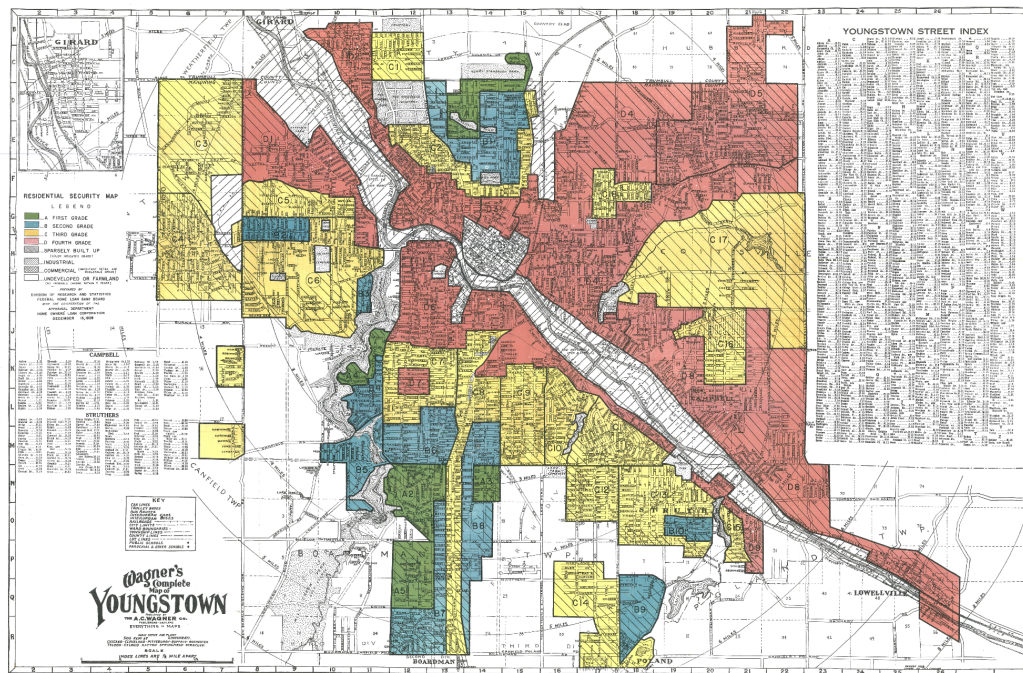
These maps and interview transcripts show that state takeover districts are not only high-poverty and racially segregated but also embedded in spatial areas of deprivation. State takeovers are disproportionately concentrated in predominantly Black districts and in communities experiencing intense levels of concentrated poverty (Morel, 2018; Schueler & Bleiberg, 2022). While state officials often justify takeovers as necessary interventions to “fix” failing schools, community testimonies and local data instead situate low academic performance within broader, cumulative histories of municipal disinvestment and structural racism. In Ohio, these interventions have been met with sustained local resistance. For example, the End State Takeover Campaign collected oral and written testimonies in 2020 from residents and educators across East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown. These narratives reported decades of disinvestment—shuttered factories, high rates of opioid-related overdoses, and shrinking public resources—as impediments to student well-being (see also *DeRolph v. State*, 78 Ohio St. 3d 193, 1997).

One Lorain leader explains: Lorain, Youngstown, and East Cleveland have seen years of disinvestment and the opioid epidemic. Fewer wraparound services can be a barrier to student success. In response to these challenges, the state took away local control over our schools and our rights to vote on the district's direction (Ohio Education Association, 2020, 0:30). Within this context of state control, these structural vulnerabilities were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition to remote, online instruction exposed deep digital divides, a crisis intensified by fragmented, misaligned institutional directions across federal, state, and municipal levels of government. The campaign video situates these local experiences within a longer pattern where the rolling back of voting rights, gentrification, and housing removal actively destabilize communities of color. School takeovers are poised to reemerge as states confront post-pandemic fiscal pressures and debates over how to address deficits following the end of COVID-related relief.

Histories in the Spatial Block. Drawing on participant interviews, state performance audits, historical and planning documents, media accounts, and original GIS analyses, this study traces how deindustrialization, redlining, and Ohio's school funding formulas have shaped the spatial and structural conditions confronting East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown. By triangulating these diverse data sources, the findings reveal both the historical depth and contemporary manifestations of systemic disinvestment in these communities. Decades of economic decline and industrial plant closures have severely eroded the local tax base and financial stability of Ohio's former industrial cities, as demonstrated through both archival records and interview data. As the grip of deindustrialization tightened around the region, the sudden loss of manufacturing centers cut off the economic support that sustained the community; for instance, local historians describe the collapse of Youngstown's steel industry in the Mahoning Valley as a “symbolic end” to the region's steel era. The Mahoning Valley Historical Society (2022) notes that following “Black Monday” in 1977 and a rapid succession of plant closures between 1979 and 1981, it estimates “40,000 manufacturing jobs, 400 satellite businesses, \$414 million in personal income, and 33–75% of school revenue were lost.” Archival photographs of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company's Ohio Works capture the transformation from thriving industrial hub to post-industrial landscape (Ohio History Connection, 2011).

The loss of heavy industry disrupted the structural underpinnings of school funding. Community leaders, interviewed as part of this study, reflect on the resulting fiscal precarity across all three districts. As one Lorain community leader observes, “The base isn’t there anymore... we’re all state assistance now. The factories and the hospital are gone, and that means less money for our schools.” Similar accounts in East Cleveland underscore how industry decline has left districts increasingly reliant on state and federal aid and private foundations, highlighting the persistent resource strain documented across data sources. The research further demonstrates that these patterns of disinvestment are historically racialized, rooted in legacy practices such as redlining, restrictive housing covenants, and exclusionary municipal zoning. Analysis of historical redlining maps for East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown reveals how neighborhoods predominantly inhabited by People of Color were systematically denied access to mortgage loans, investment, and essential financial services.

Archival documents and GIS analyses indicate that federal interventions, including those by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) in the late 1930s, limited credit access, depressed property values, and initiated cycles of urban disinvestment. The HOLC’s nationwide color-coded maps, analyzed in this study, designated neighborhoods with Black residents and those in close proximity to factories as high-risk “red” zones. Although the HOLC continued to issue some loans in these areas, its grading system institutionalized the federal government’s practice of labeling Black communities as financial risks, irrespective of actual financial conditions (Rothstein, 2017). Integrating HOLC maps from the Mapping Inequality Project (Nelson et al., 2023) with contemporary census and tax assessment data, this study finds a marked overlap between historically redlined neighborhoods and current indices of concentrated poverty, large-scale demolition, and neighborhood blight. GIS analyses visually underscore how these redlined regions—deemed “inferior” largely due to the presence of Black residents—remain sites of pronounced disinvestment, as illustrated in Figure 3 for the Youngstown area.

Figure 3: Overlapping Deprivation in the Youngstown Area

Note. Reproduced from Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America, by R. K. Nelson, W. Lynch, J. Ayers, and J. Madron (nd.), Digital Scholarship Lab (<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/>).

In the public domain. In Youngstown, residents in neighborhoods labeled as Grade C or D faced systemic barriers that restricted their access to mortgage loans, hindered wealth accumulation through homeownership, and contributed to segregation along with ongoing health disparities (Nelson et al., 2023). Consequently, this intentional deprivation of capital led to a population decline of over 50% by the year 2000 (Nelson et al., 2023). Figure 4 illustrates historical redlining maps in Lorain, Ohio. The blue zones along the Lake Erie shoreline denote the most "desirable" neighborhoods, typically characterized at the time by newer developments and higher property values (Nelson et al., 2023). Yellow zones indicate neighborhoods deemed "definitely declining" with mixed socio-economic conditions. In contrast, the red areas represent predominantly African American or Black communities—particularly around Fulton—that were labeled "hazardous" and are still characterized today by concentrated poverty, housing blight, and severe health disparities.

Map of the CITY OF LORAIN OHIO

RESIDENTIAL SECURITY MAP
LEGEND

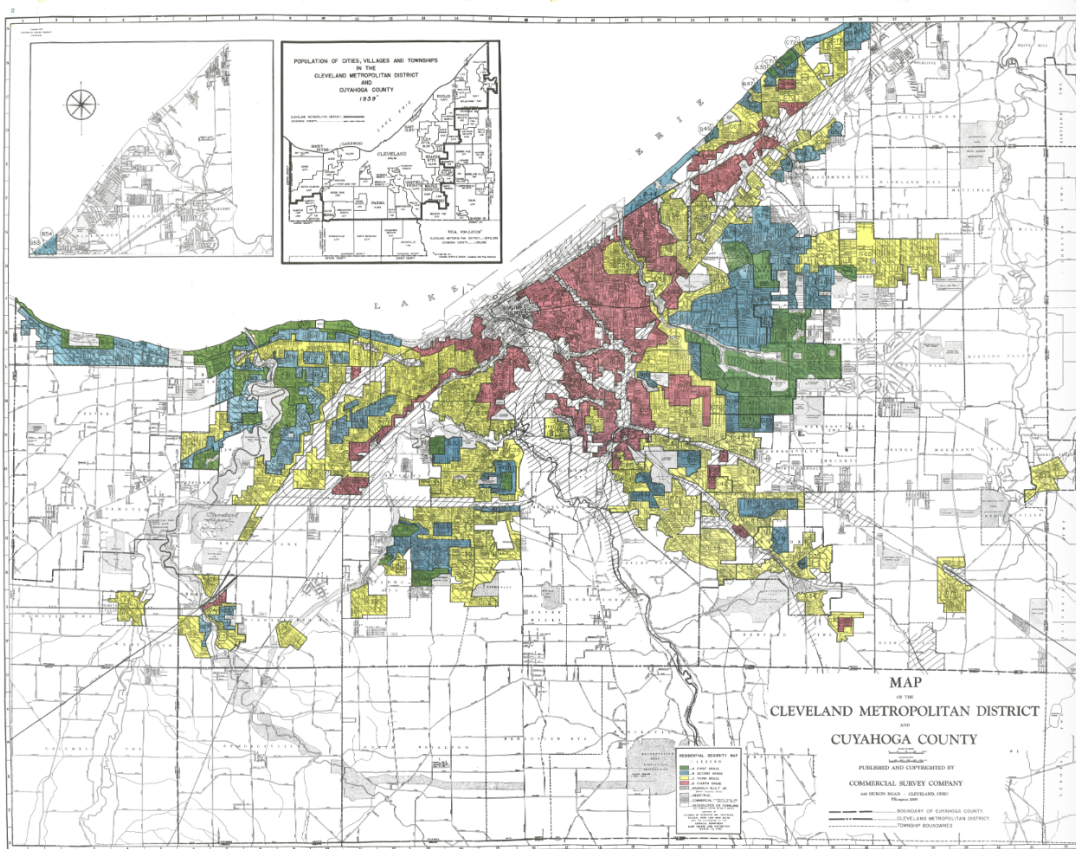
- A FIRST GRADE
- B SECOND GRADE
- C THIRD GRADE
- D FOURTH GRADE
- E SPARSELY BUILT UP (Other Security Area)
- INDUSTRIAL
- COMMERCIAL "SPARSELY BUILT UP"
- UNDEVELOPED OR FARMLAND (See Section 10 Code, Article 9, Part I)

Division of Housing & Community Development
City of Lorain, Ohio
Home Building Line Corporation
October 1, 1967

Compl'd & Published by Wm. Seghy
P.O. Box 39
Lorain, Ohio

Figure 5 shows a map of northeast Ohio, focusing on East Cleveland—a historically working-class, industrial city impacted by economic and demographic decline (Nelson et al., 2023). The map highlights hazardous environmental zones in red and marks industrial areas, including the nearby Nela Park complex, which was a major employer for local residents.

Figure 5: Home Owners' Loan Corporation Residential Security Map, Cleveland Metropolitan District and Cuyahoga County



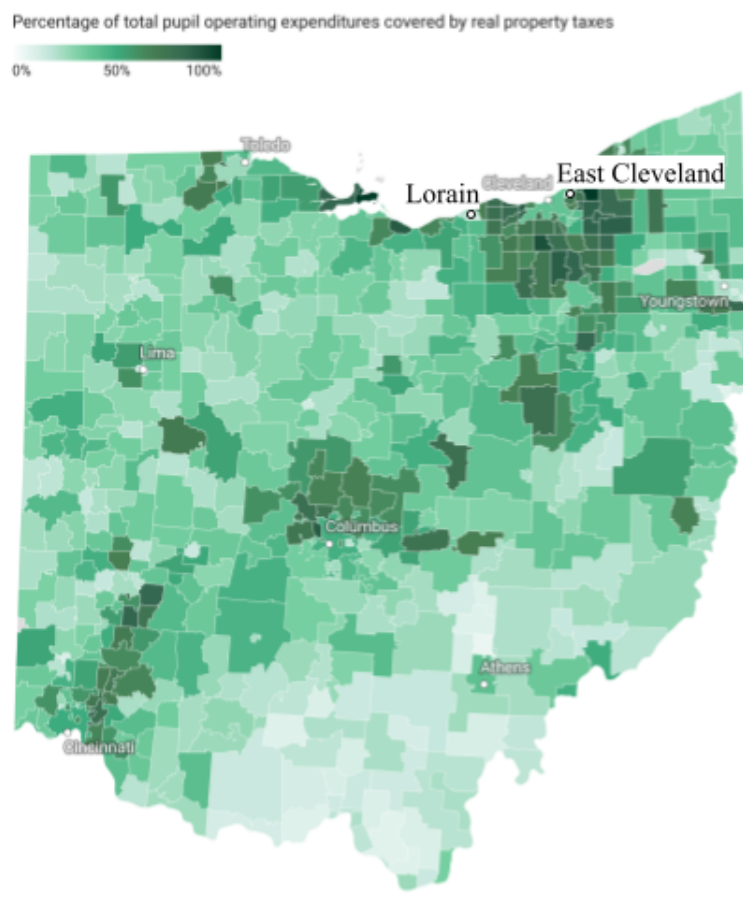
Note. Home Owners' Loan Corporation residential security map of the Cleveland metropolitan district, with neighborhoods graded A ("Best," green) through D ("Hazardous," red). East Cleveland lies in the northeastern portion of the mapped area. From *Map of the Cleveland Metropolitan District and Cuyahoga County*, by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, 1939, City Survey Files, 1935–1940, Record Group 195, National Archives and Records Administration; digitized in *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*, by R. K. Nelson, L. Winling, R. Marciano, N. Connolly, et al., Digital Scholarship Lab, University of Richmond (<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/>). In the public domain.

Redlining and related policies in the 1960s and 1970s led to segregation and declining property values in East Cleveland, Ohio, straining the city's infrastructure and reducing available resources. According to data analyzed from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2023 American Community Survey, East Cleveland, Ohio, has the lowest median family income in the United States among places with a population of 5,000 people or more. Ohio's educational finance system, which relies heavily on local property taxes, continues to exacerbate resource disparities among districts. The erosion of the property tax bases in East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown has created financial instability for district revenue. As one Lorain educator explained, "the base isn't there, and so we're dependent on... money [that] comes from other sources than property tax... I'm sure it's the same in East Cleveland and Youngstown. It's all state assistance." Property devaluation—shaped by redlining and exclusionary housing practices—continues to stifle each district's fiscal capacity, even as student needs increase. Nearly thirty years ago, the Ohio Supreme Court declared the state's reliance on local property taxes to fund public education unconstitutional, citing the resulting disparities in educational opportunity. In its 1997 *DeRolph v. State of Ohio*

ruling, the Court determined that this funding mechanism created unacceptable resource gaps between property-poor and property-wealthy districts.

Despite subsequent legal challenges and protracted advocacy from plaintiffs, formal judicial oversight concluded in 2003 without securing a comprehensive legislative overhaul. Subsequent state biennial budgets have faced criticism for failing to permanently decouple district funding from local wealth, prompting some stakeholders to argue that policymakers have merely “kicked the unconstitutional school funding can down the road” (WOSU Public Media, 2019). The incremental Cupp-Patterson Fair School Funding Plan aims to address these imbalances. However, property devaluation still challenges resource equity across Ohio’s educational landscape. Participant interviews reveal the impact of chronic fiscal instability: students attending underfunded schools face unsafe walking routes, poor lighting and ventilation, rodent infestations, broken heating and cooling, lead pipes, asbestos, and unclean facilities. State finance data (Srivastava, 2026) and Figure 6 visualize these imbalances, showing that districts like Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland generate only 15–20% of their revenue locally and depend almost entirely on state or federal foundation formulas.

Figure 6: *Reliance on Local Property Tax Revenue in Ohio Public School Districts, 2025*



Note. Adapted from Property tax repeal would harm students in every school district, by Z. Srivastava, 2026, Policy Matters Ohio (<https://policymattersohio.org/research/property-tax-repeal-will-harm-students-in-every-school-district/>).

In these communities, local tax effort is high, but property values are low. For example, East Cleveland's assessed property value per pupil is \$104,641 (far below the peer average of \$240,025), yet its tax effort index is 1.78—meaning households devote a much higher share of income to school taxes than the state average (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a). Lorain and Youngstown show similar patterns: above-average tax effort, low property wealth, and deep reliance on state aid (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024b; Ohio Auditor of State, 2024c). Despite residents “doing their part,” local revenues remain sharply limited.

As one Lorain teacher noted, these are “mostly rentals... not a lot of ownership,” with residents contributing “more of what little they have,” yet districts remain dependent on “state assistance.” Another interviewee emphasized, “all three of these districts that have been taken over are... impoverished districts with a racial balance unlike some of the places that look better on state report cards.” These systemic pressures are visible in public testimony and collective action, such as the 2021 Shaw High School student and alumni protests in East Cleveland, Ohio (News 5 Cleveland, 2021). Residents describe daily hardships, geographic segregation, and outdated infrastructure. A 2020 episode of CNN's *United Shades of America* vividly illustrates these resource disparities by juxtaposing East Cleveland City Schools with nearby Shaker Heights City Schools (CNN, 2020). According to CNN (2020), East Cleveland spends approximately \$21,541 per student; an overwhelming 30–40% of its budget is immediately absorbed by non-academic services such as security, food services, and special education.

By contrast, wealthier districts with fewer concentrated poverty metrics can devote the vast majority of their revenue directly to advanced learning experiences—exemplified by Shaker Heights, which maintains a school planetarium, a symbol of its relative financial security. An East Cleveland teacher noted that the city once had its own observatory, the Warner & Swasey Observatory, which operated from 1920 to 1980. Its closure was attributed to increased vandalism and growing concerns about community safety. Overlooked but Present Participant interviews consistently described state takeovers as having effectively “neutered” elected school boards, replacing local governance with “an autocratic, unaccountable, appointed CEO [in] control over every facet of the system.” Under state control, major decisions—such as school closures, staff reorganizations, and budget reallocations—were often carried out with little or no public input. Interviewees reported feeling “betrayed,” “ousted,” and “silenced.”

One Youngstown community leader employed a vivid spatial metaphor, likening state intervention to “someone coming inside my house and telling me what I need to do inside my home,” capturing the sense of intrusion, division, and instability experienced by the community. In East Cleveland, these tensions have been further compounded by ongoing debates about annexation to Cleveland and the visible neglect of historic community spaces, such as abandoned theaters. One Youngstown participant recounted the loss of the district's performing arts high school during the 2017–2018 school year, lamenting the disappearance of music and arts opportunities, even as federal emergency relief funds (ESSER I–III) became available: It pulled the most valuable programs we [the Youngstown City School District] had, a performing arts school. They turned that back into a regular high school [Fiscal Year 2017]... We don't have any music programs. We hardly have anything for our kids, nothing. ... Everybody else got books and desks and laptops and things for their kids, created and brought in new programs and things. We got nothing. Across all three sites, participants described subsequent Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER I–III) allocations as failing to reach core arts, enrichment, or neighborhood wraparound service providers. In their accounts, this widened an existing disconnect between centralized fiscal decision-making and immediate community priorities.

Analysis of 2024 state performance audits further corroborates these accounts. In the years surrounding state takeover, there was little evidence of growth in student-facing supports—and in some instances, staffing levels lagged behind state averages. For example, in 2022, East Cleveland maintained roughly 1.8 counselors and 1.3 nurses per 1,000 students (state averages: 2.3 and 1.1, respectively), with no ELL teachers and only average or below-average staffing in the arts (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a). In 2022, Lorain had just 1.4 counselors per 1,000 students (below state norms), no social workers, and sharply reduced arts capacity (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024b).

In 2022, Youngstown, while exceeding state averages in counselor and nurse ratios, continued to struggle with academic distress and insufficient support for high-need populations, demonstrating that formal staffing levels alone did not ensure adequate resources (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024c). As one East Cleveland educator observed, “We had more administrators go to the district office and fewer teachers in the classroom... it ballooned during the state takeover... less money was spent in the classroom.” A Youngstown leader highlighted that \$30 million less was spent in classrooms amid rising central office expenditures. As one educator explained: I do not feel that two counselors are enough for a high school. ...there should be counselors, social workers, and nurses in the elementary schools... a counselor and a nurse or social worker shouldn’t have to serve two or three schools. This shift in funds toward administrative positions and external consultants raised stakeholder questions about resource diversion. Interviewees frequently cited these fiscal reallocations as a source of frustration.

Disregarding the Expertise of Service Recipients. Educators consistently positioned their professional and experiential knowledge in opposition to externally imposed mandates. They described a narrowing of the curriculum, the imposition of scripted pacing guides, data-driven professional development, and heightened surveillance associated with state takeovers. As one teacher explained, “We [teachers] know our students. We know what they need. But all these new rules and constant monitoring make it impossible to teach the way we know is best.” Some teachers responded by preserving as much instructional autonomy as possible: “We [teachers] would comply with what we had to, but we found ways to maintain our autonomy in the classroom. We’d submit the required lesson plans, but teach in ways we knew worked for our students.” Others explicitly refused carceral expectations: “I stopped sending kids to the office for things I knew they could work out themselves. The system wanted us to be enforcers, but I’m an educator, not a cop.” Across these accounts, teachers argued that externally imposed mandates—especially those selected by state-appointed CEOs without educator or community input—were detrimental to student survival. Despite these constraints, they continued to draw on familiar practices and language, framing their pedagogy as care, affirmation, and resistance. Stakeholders further criticized the state’s reliance on standardized metrics, which they viewed as incapable of capturing the full assets and strengths of their students and communities.

Yet, paradoxically, these same metrics were sometimes deployed to demonstrate to policymakers the failure of state interventions to improve outcomes. These dynamics underscore deep tensions over what constitutes legitimate knowledge and educational success. Teachers questioned policies that disregarded professional expertise and lived experience, revealing epistemological divides over whose knowledge is valued and how institutional decisions are justified. This disregard for local expertise was further evident in exclusionary practices: in Lorain, a teacher who raised concerns about the mathematics curriculum was excluded from departmental meetings (Payerchin, 2019); in East Cleveland, teachers and community members reported being silenced or blocked during CEO “listening tours,” with comments removed from virtual meetings and access to platforms restricted.

Community Cultural Wealth, Agency, and Power From the Margins.

Participant interviews reveal a persistent, collective struggle to self-determine the social, educational, economic, and political representations and realities of their communities. In the face of state-imposed control, community members consistently mobilized what Yosso (2005) terms community cultural wealth. Respondents described transforming shared history, strong family ties, and deep geographic roots into powerful political and educational resources. For instance, a Lorain participant traced their activism to a lineage of Black educational leadership, highlighting how contemporary resistance is grounded in historic civil rights struggles: “My dad was a principal... a superintendent... He taught... He’s told me stories about getting run off the road by trucks... because he had his [Carl] Stokes for Mayor sticker.” Such narratives situate current pushback within a broader continuum of racialized exclusion. An East Cleveland educator deliberately returned home to serve their community: They want to be, you know, those change agents. They want to be the people who have lived there, I’ve seen it, I’ve been through it, and I want to fix the problem... that’s why we have a large group of African American teachers... They went through it. They lived it. They are invested.

Similarly, a Black male social worker leveraged his deep spatial ties to the region, returning to Lorain after earning his master’s degree, specifically motivated “to work with the kids that were like him growing up.” These examples show the importance of personal, geographic, and racial identity. Community members deployed a range of grassroots strategies to reclaim local agency. “I am Lorain” T-shirts and protest slogans became visible symbols of solidarity. As one interviewee put it: “You can’t wait for permission—you have to build what it is that we need in our community.” Many educators described pushing back against state takeover policies, sometimes at personal and professional risk—such as being excluded from meetings or silenced during virtual town halls. As an East Cleveland advocate emphasized: “It takes a village... [for] a community of youth as a whole... or building a city... there’s no success... individually without that investment in community.” As traditional governance structures—including school boards—were progressively hollowed out by state mandates, this collective responsibility transmuted into grassroots cross-district organizing and mutual aid. One Youngstown advocate described the relentless, disruptive nature of this multi-district mobilization: I testified with the State School Board, the State Senate, and the House of Representatives. I traveled... everywhere talking. I was busting [into] the meetings that I was not invited to. I was crashing the meetings. I need some time... to talk about the state takeover in Youngstown. This activism set off a domino effect across districts:

Youngstown held a meeting and said, ‘We need to pull everybody together.’ After that, East Cleveland got included. Lorain testified at the state capitol... We had a lot of people who went to Columbus to speak out against the state takeovers. Even amid surveillance and silencing, participants insisted on hope and the possibility of community-driven educational renewal. An East Cleveland alumnus illustrated the gap between state promises and lived experience: “I thought they were here to help us... to lead us to a better land. But they didn’t (News 5 Cleveland, 2021, 1:50).” Among protesters, this metaphor of a “better land” was reinterpreted as a vision for the future. By locating daily signs of student vitality and pedagogical care amid institutional adversity, educators treated these “signs of life” as proof of enduring cultural wealth and collective strength.

Summary of Findings. Across East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown, similar student profiles and a combination of state report card scores and performance indicators rendered each district a potential candidate for state takeover (Ohio Department of Education, 2019b; Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). GIS mapping, state performance audits, and local datasets show how concentrated poverty, food insecurity, weakened municipal infrastructure, and elevated violent

crime cluster around these districts' attendance zones. These same areas are characterized as food and pharmacy deserts and healthcare "dead zones," with violent crime most heavily concentrated in neighborhoods overlapping district boundaries between 2015 and 2025 (Cuyahoga County Planning Commission, 2025; Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services, 2016; Ohio Board of Pharmacy, 2025; Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). By 2023, each district had developed some form of wraparound services—social workers in every East Cleveland school, Lorain's Health & Family Services Engagement Center and mobile clinics, and Youngstown's counselors and medical vans (Ohio Auditor of State, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

While these efforts signaled a clear intent to address barriers to learning, they proved insufficient to disrupt the overwhelming cycle of oppression that historically and contemporarily structures everyday life in Ohio's takeover districts. Historically, these conditions are rooted in deindustrialization and racialized disinvestment. Plant closures in the Mahoning Valley alone eliminated an estimated 40,000 manufacturing jobs, hundreds of satellite businesses, and up to three-quarters of school revenue, while HOLC redlining maps reveal that neighborhoods graded "hazardous" in the 1930s—disproportionately Black and in close proximity to industrial plants—continue to align with contemporary patterns of concentrated poverty, demolition, and neighborhood blight (Mahoning Valley Historical Society, 2022; Nelson et al., 2023; Ohio History Connection, 2011).

Ohio's school funding system still relies heavily on local property wealth despite being declared unconstitutional in *DeRolph v. State*; devalued tax bases structurally constrain East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown's capacity to raise operating revenue, linking legacy redlining and industrial decline directly to present-day fiscal precarity (*DeRolph v. State*, 78 Ohio St. 3d 193, 1997; WOSU Public Media, 2019). Community members and educators stress that residents are already "doing their part," contributing "more of what little they have" in largely renter-dominated neighborhoods, yet they remain structurally dependent on state assistance and private philanthropy. The loss of voice within traditional governance structures—such as boards of education, unions, and district administrations—spurred the emergence of community advocacy groups, intensified individual outrage, and fueled cross-district organizing. Stakeholders unified across district boundaries, transforming their collective struggle against state takeovers into a force for community action. Employing both historical strategies and innovative contemporary tools—including creative use of social media and digital platforms—residents exposed district conditions and amplified local voices. This momentum not only galvanized greater involvement from neighboring communities but also prompted the formation of cross-district coalitions, united by a shared recognition of the historical and systemic inequities driving these challenges.

Discussion

The study maps the spatial racialized inequality across East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown, Ohio. Plotting GIS maps against local structural data demonstrates that food and pharmacy desert tracts explicitly overlap with school district attendance zones. The spatial longitudinal analysis reveals that concentrated violent crime between 2015 and 2025 remained tightly bound to these exact geographic coordinates. These spatial patterns document a legacy of racialized dispossession. The data directly challenges the "race-neutral representations of space." Capital, historical tax policy, and the systematic devaluation of redlined areas are actively inscribed into the physical geography of these three districts, indicating that racism and capitalism alter local opportunities. The interview data and policy texts analyzed in this research expose a disconnect between state-level rhetoric and community realities. State policymakers and officials consistently frame takeovers as

objective, public-interest solutions to localized school "failure." However, the empirical analysis reveals this framing to be what Horsford et al. (2019) term a "manufactured crisis."

This discourse of failure serves an ideological purpose: it legitimizes aggressive, market-oriented state interventions while systematically ignoring the predatory property regimes that produced local fiscal precarity in the first place. The application of Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) illuminates how educational inequality in Ohio is produced through deliberate state action rather than neutral market forces. Srivastava's (2026) mapping of local property-tax dependence illustrates that East Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown are legally trapped in zones of chronically low assessed property value. The findings show that despite high local tax efforts by residents, institutional mechanisms—including local wealth dependence, millage caps, and statutory tax-reduction factors—yield virtually no additional revenue.

This contemporary fiscal strangulation aligns with 1930s HOLC redlining maps and current patterns of state-sanctioned blight and demolition. The state continues to sanction historical fiscal architectures that shield wealthy suburban enclaves—mirroring Milliken-era exclusions—while structurally denying these three industrial districts the capacity to fund their schools, long after the state's funding mechanism was declared unconstitutional in *DeRolph v. State* (Rothstein, 2017; Horsford, 2016). A critical contribution of this research lies in its methodological synthesis of GIS mapping and interview transcripts. While the GIS data establishes the structural boundaries of spatial deprivation, the qualitative participant interviews ensure that mapping serves as a starting point for anti-racist praxis. By documenting the lived and perceived realities of these spaces, a socio-spatial narrative is built that firmly centers Communities of Color as legitimate knowledge producers.

The interview participants explicitly identified structural spatial conditions—such as deindustrialization and medical deserts—as impediments to student learning. The state actively penalizes local schools for low test scores but is never held legally or fiscally responsible for the percentage of children it permits to live in poverty, survive without health insurance, or navigate severe food insecurity. The state simply reframes systemic state neglect as localized school-level failures to be corrected through surveillance, punitive accountability metrics, and state takeover. However, the empirical documentation of local resistance highlights a powerful counter-hegemony. When community members organize, draft prepared statements, and speak at board meetings, they actively check empirical GIS maps against their everyday experiences. These grassroots actions directly contest the common-sense notion that intensified state surveillance, top-down takeovers, and zero-tolerance policies are natural or necessary responses to academic underperformance. Instead, through the deployment of community-led wraparound services—including localized social workers, mobile health clinics, and grassroots food pantries—these communities rearticulate students' "needs" not as deficit traits, but as direct consequences of structural trauma. In doing so, they manifest what CPA theorizes as everyday, material struggles over the definition of equity, survival, and authentic accountability from the ground up.

Limitations

The research is limited to case studies of Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland during their periods of state control from 2015 to 2023. While this design enables a detailed, context-specific examination of how spatial and structural elements influence opportunities during state takeovers, these three districts are historically, demographically, and politically distinctive. Each is profoundly marked by legacy deindustrialization, racial segregation, and concentrated poverty characteristic of the Ohio Rust Belt. The findings offer theoretical transferability rather than broad

generalizability, proving most applicable to urban public school systems experiencing similar structural marginalization and emergency management policy regimes.

Although the study includes a range of stakeholders—educators, parents or caregivers, community leaders, and an alumnus—not all groups are equally visible or accessible. Some individuals and organizations may intentionally obscure certain forms of agency, resistance, or fiscal maneuvering to protect community interests or avoid political retaliation. As a result, the analysis likely underrepresents everyday, informal, or covert practices through which residents navigate, subvert, or reconfigure takeover policies. GIS maps rely on existing administrative boundaries (e.g., census tracts, district lines, zoning categories) that do not always align with residents' lived geographies of neighborhood, mobility, and belonging. Descriptive statistics and fiscal indicators are limited by how the state aggregates and reports data, which can obscure intra-district variation (for example, between schools or neighborhoods) and mask the experiences of minoritized subgroups. As such, spatial visualizations and tables should be read as indicative, not exhaustive, representations of inequality and opportunity. Finally, the study captures a particular moment in ongoing struggles over governance, funding, and educational futures. The period under examination includes the implementation and modification of HB 70, the COVID-19 pandemic, and ESSER funding. Policy landscapes continue to shift, as do local organizing strategies and demographic patterns. Subsequent legal changes, budget decisions, or community initiatives may alter the spatial and structural dynamics documented here.

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