

BIRMINGHAM METRO AREA

State: Alabama

Census Designation: Birmingham-Hoover, AL



The history of segregation in the Birmingham metro area is, perhaps, the ugliest among our case studies, and it started long before the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. The city of Birmingham was founded shortly after the Civil War, but its iron and coal deposits fueled rapid growth. By the turn of the century, Black residents accounted for almost half the city's population (U.S. Census Bureau 1913). Segregation was a fact of life, enforced by violence and incarceration.

Within the city, the south's longest-standing racial zoning law (1926-51) required segregation by law, flouting the 1917 Buchanan decision. When the areas zoned for Black families were no longer sufficient for the city's growing Black population, the laws were defied. This prompted white backlash by various legal and extralegal strategies even after the ordinances were struck down in 1951. This included, tragically, dozens of bombings and murders throughout the 1940s and up until the mid-1960s, culminating in the most well-known bombing, which killed four young Black girls (Connerly 2005).

Residential spaces throughout the Birmingham metropolitan area were also subjected to many of the same discriminatory and segregative forces as were our other metro areas, including but not limited to extensive redlining (The Jefferson County PLACE MATTERS Team 2013). In addition, Retzlaff and others describe how, during and after the heyday of redlining, interstate highway development throughout the Birmingham metropolitan area served to exacerbate and reinforce segregation (e.g., by physically dividing Black and white neighborhoods along previously zoned borders), while urban renewal funds were used to build new neighborhoods and schools to reinforce segregation (Connerly 2005; Retzlaff 2020).

Yet the Birmingham metro area—and Alabama in general—is somewhat unique in the extent of its

historical and especially contemporary reliance on the segregating tool, described above, of district secessions. That is, the “carving out” of (often mostly white) new districts from their (often mostly Black) parent districts.

The only other (Census-defined) southern metro area upon which we focus in this report is Baltimore, where one of the major elements of the framework that facilitated decades of segregation and discrimination was the separation of Baltimore City from the otherwise county-based structure of governance for public school systems. Alabama also operates a public schooling system in which the county is the default unit of governance. Yet Alabama, unlike Maryland, also contains a large share of “city” school districts carved separately from county districts.

Specifically, about 70 districts among the 140 regular local school districts statewide—roughly half of all school districts—were at some point separated from their parent counties. And many of these separated districts (or “city districts”), while geographically small compared with the counties, are quite large in terms of enrollment: statewide, they serve about 278,000 students, whereas total enrollment in county districts is about 462,000 students.⁹ This practice is of course not unique to Alabama, but the state does make it particularly easy (or at least less difficult) to accomplish (Reeves and Joo 2018); any city with more than 5,000 residents can secede. Moreover, these “carved out” district boundaries are not static; they often change over time, with districts annexing additional neighborhoods.

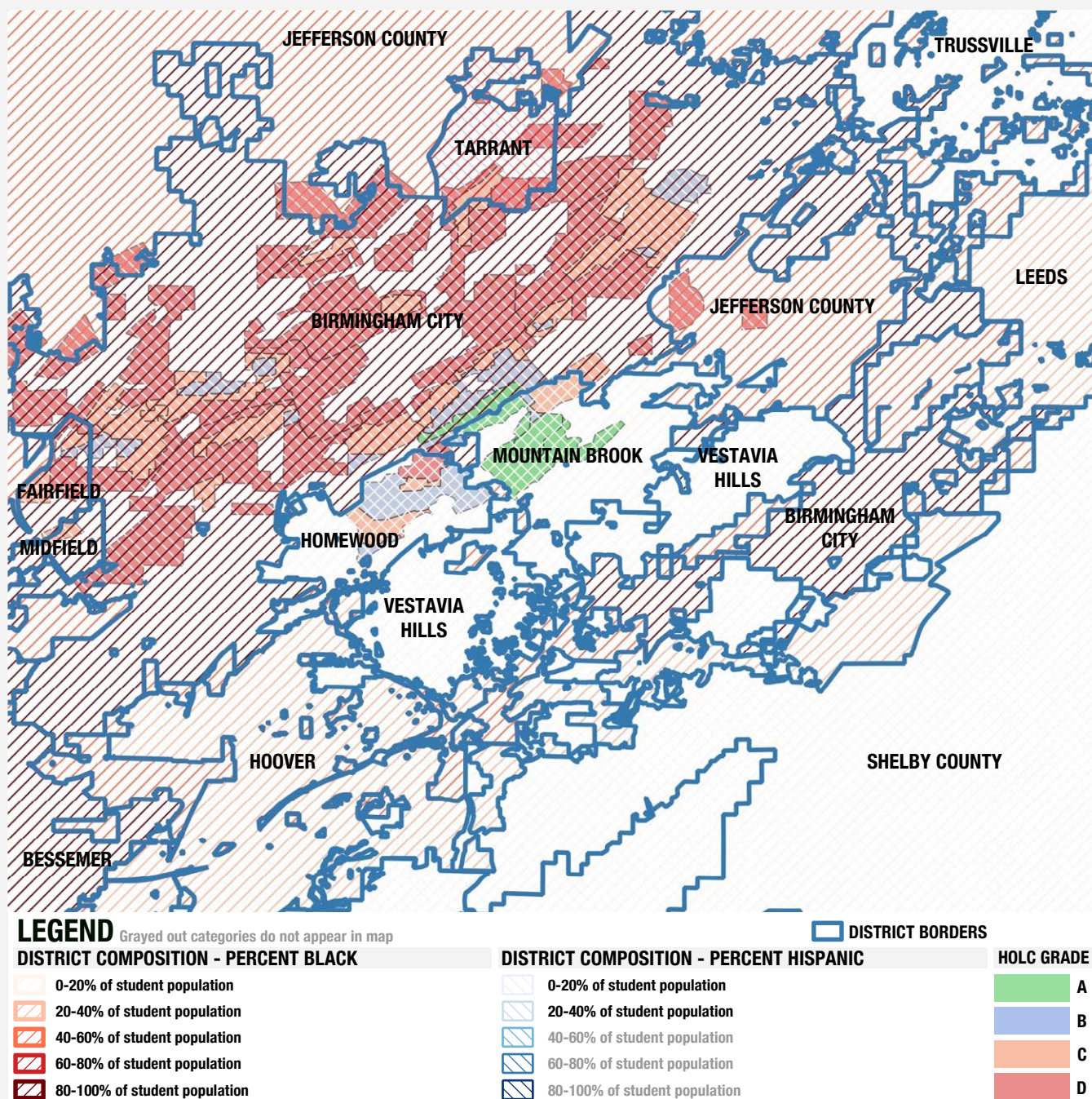
This constant process of carving out and gerrymandering has had a substantial impact on segregation in the Birmingham area, much of it starting in the latter half of the 20th century (Frankenberg and Taylor 2017). Although a few (mostly white) districts left their parent Jefferson

County district (the city and school district of Birmingham is located in Jefferson County) at the beginning of the 20th century, since 1950 an additional seven districts have “seceded” from the county, four in the wake of the *Brown* decision, and another three after court desegregation orders in the early 1970s. These seven districts, predictably, were

disproportionately white and more affluent than the county as a whole, leaving Jefferson County both poorer (less able to raise K-12 revenue) and less diverse than it was prior to the separations (EdBuild 2019; Frankenberg and Taylor 2017). The district boundary changes affected total segregation in the area, but key for our purposes is that they especially

Figure 11

SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENT RACIAL/ETHNIC COMPOSITION MAP, BIRMINGHAM METRO AREA, 2018



To improve visibility of HOLC zones, map does not include entire metro area. See Box 1 for information on measures.

increased between-district segregation (Frankenberg 2009), which, as discussed above, is the type of segregation that has the strongest implications for school finance.

(Note that the Birmingham City School District was established before—and was never a part of—the Jefferson County School District, and the former therefore does not represent an example of secession as in these other cases.)

The legacy of these secessions, as well as that of the covenants and redlining that preceded most of them, is clear in the composition map in Figure 11. The rather severe and somewhat chaotic appearance of this map's boundaries is due in part to the district secessions, and a few districts in the map appear in seemingly non-contiguous sections (to help keep track of this, three districts, Birmingham City, Jefferson County, and Vestavia Hills, are labeled twice in the map).

The overwhelming majority of C- and D-graded HOLC-graded zones are found entirely within the boundaries of the Birmingham City School District. The city district has long been home to a large Black population, but its students were about half white in 1968; that share has since declined to less than 1-2 percent. Birmingham City serves 14 percent of the area's students but almost one-third of its Black and Hispanic students.

Similarly, the handful of districts, most notably Tarrant (north of Birmingham) and Fairfield (west of Birmingham), that contain a substantial number of low-rated HOLC zones but seceded prior to the *Brown* decision (Tarrant and Fairfield in the late 1800s and early 1900s) serve heavily Black student populations today. In Tarrant's case, however, the nonwhite student share has grown dramatically over the past 20 years; the district's students were over 80 percent white in the late 1980s (Frankenberg and Taylor 2017).

On its southern side, the Birmingham City district wraps around the eastern edge of a non-contiguous portion of Jefferson County Schools. Further to the west of that county section but still flanked by Birmingham City to the south are the "seceder"

districts of Mountain Brook, Vestavia Hills, and Homewood. Every one of the area's A-graded HOLC zones are at least partially located in Mountain Brook, which seceded from Jefferson County in 1959, in the wake of the *Brown* decision. This district has served an overwhelmingly white student population from the outset (its students are 97 percent white today).

Most all of the area's B-graded zones, with the exception of a few scattered throughout Birmingham City, are in Homewood (seceded in 1970), though the latter also contains a roughly equal land area consisting of zones that received C and D grades. Homewood was around 90 percent white when it seceded. This started to change during the 1980s, but the district still remains approximately 60 percent white today (Frankenberg and Taylor 2017).

Mountain Brook and Homewood were generally white areas when the HOLC grades were assigned in the late 1930s, and, perhaps aided by discriminatory federal loan insurance programs (and violence and the threat of violence), managed to remain mostly racially isolated, despite their proximity to the city. After the *Brown* decision, rather than face desegregation with the rest of Jefferson County's schools, these jurisdictions (along with others, such as Vestavia Hills to their south, which serves an 80 percent white student body) simply left the countywide district. Even more recently, during the 1980s through the 2000s, three majority-white districts at least partially visible in the map—Hoover, Leeds, and Trussville—followed suit, seceding from Jefferson County Public Schools. In no small part as a result, the Birmingham metro area's students, particularly its white and Black students, are hypersegregated between districts.

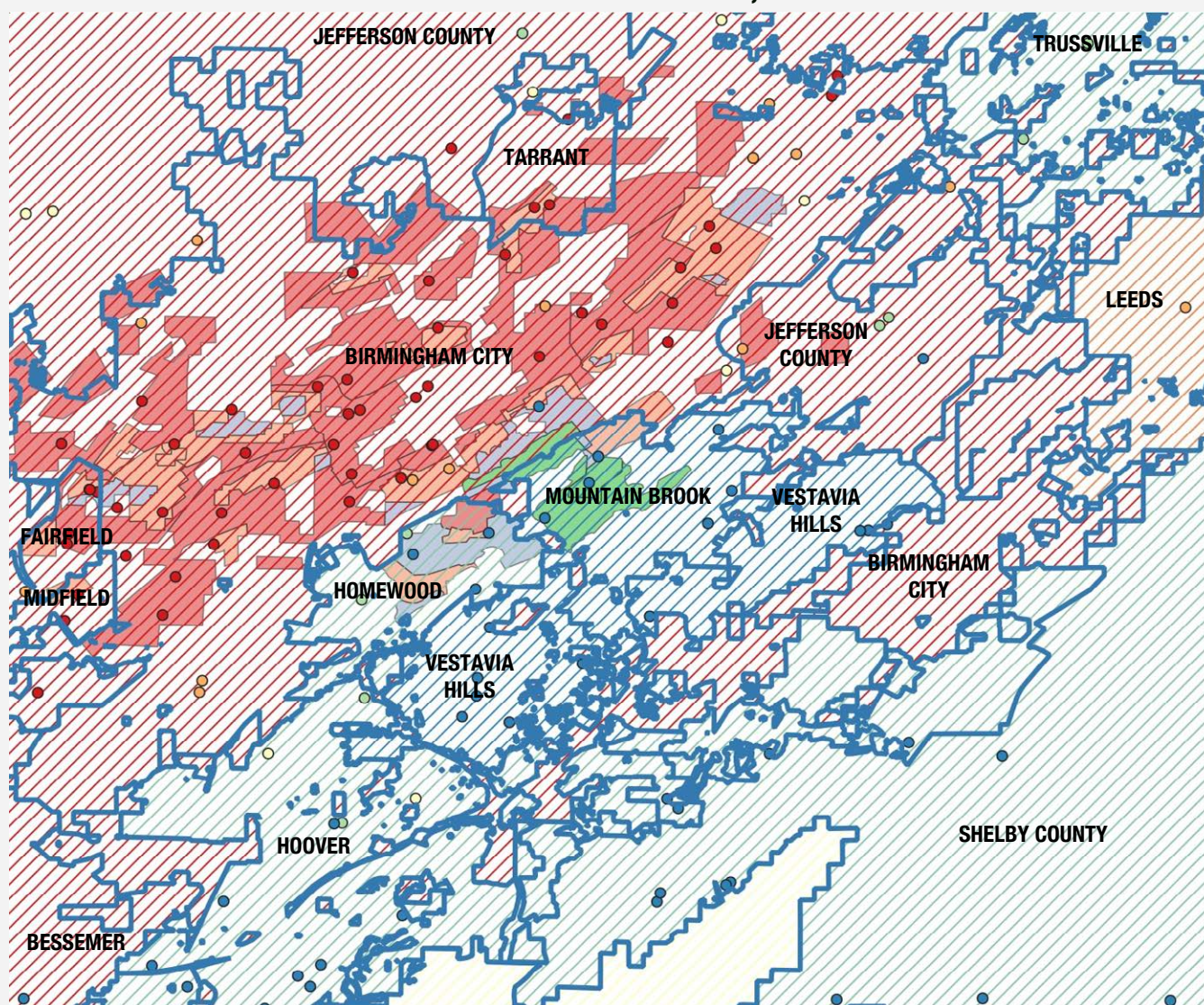
No less striking is the funding map of the Birmingham area presented in Figure 12. First, schools with lower-poverty surrounding areas (blue and green dots) are, predictably, concentrated in Mountain Brook, Homewood, and Vestavia Hills, whereas Birmingham City's schools are mostly lower income (red and orange dots). And the contrasts here are stark: Not only do the school poverty ratios correspond quite well with the HOLC zone ratings (and district secessions), but most schools' neighborhoods are either "rich" or "poor" (red or blue dots, respectively), with relatively few in the middle categories. Severely

unequal educational opportunity is driven by very high economic inequality and segregation, with discrimination and racial/ethnic segregation at their roots.

The geographical distribution of adequate funding gaps in Figure 12 is likewise conspicuous. Alabama is a generally low-spending state, as well as one that is relatively high in child poverty. Thus, the costs

Figure 12

SCHOOL DISTRICT FUNDING ADEQUACY MAP, BIRMINGHAM METRO AREA, 2018



LEGEND

SCHOOL NEIGHBORHOOD POVERTY

- Highest poverty (0-185% inc-to-pov ratio)
- High poverty (185-242% ratio)
- Medium poverty (242-303% ratio)
- Low poverty (303-406% ratio)
- Lowest poverty (ratio of 406% or higher)

DISTRICT FUNDING ADEQUACY

- ▨ More than \$5,000 PP below adequate
- ▨ \$1,000-5,000 PP below adequate
- ▨ Between -\$1,000 and +\$1,000 PP
- ▨ \$1,000-5,000 PP above adequate
- ▨ More than \$5,000 PP above adequate

▭ DISTRICT BORDERS

HOLC GRADE

- A
- B
- C
- D

To improve visibility of HOLC zones, map does not include entire metro area. See Box 1 for information on measures.

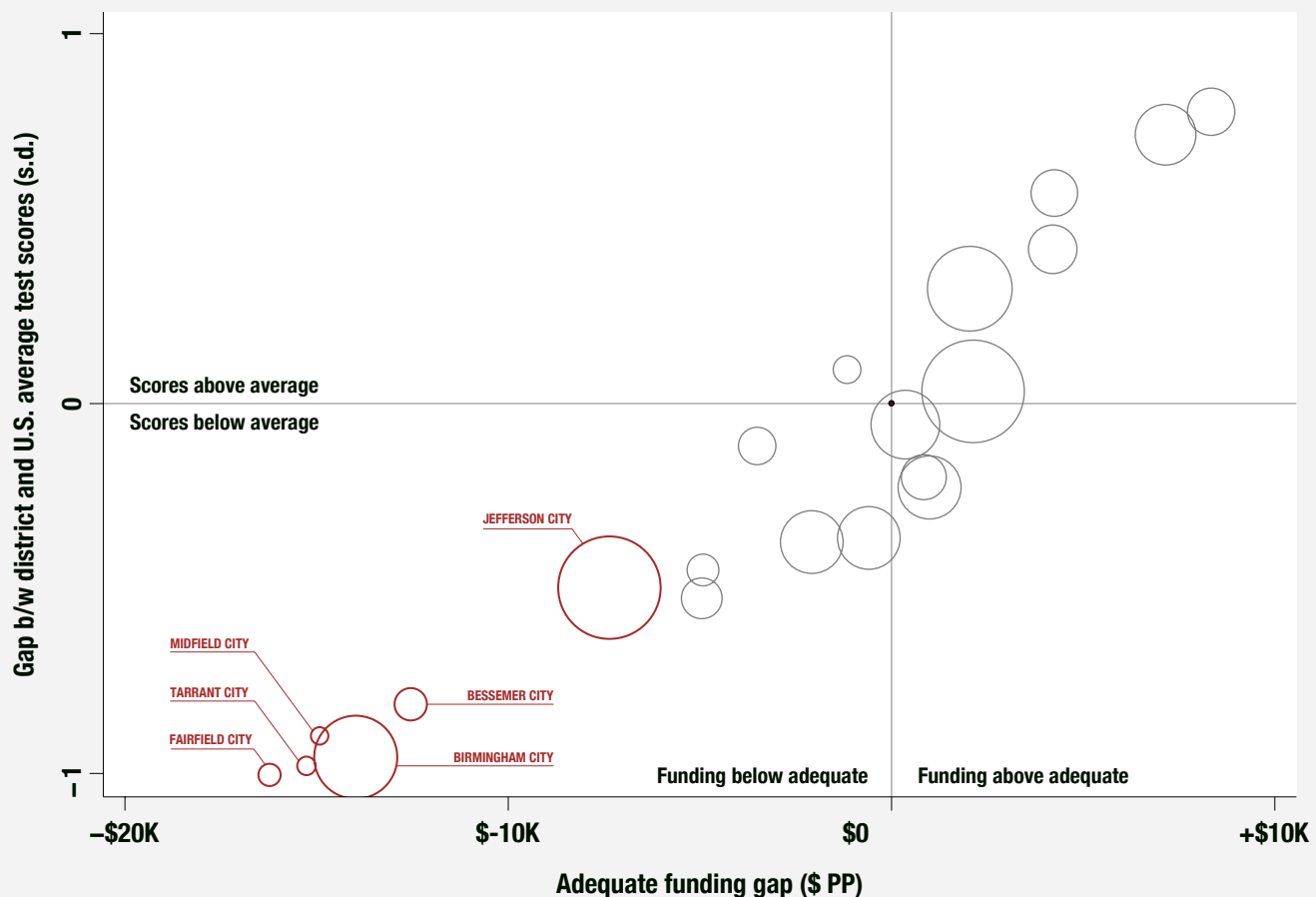
of achieving national average outcomes in many Alabama districts are quite high, and spending is far from meeting those costs (Baker, Di Carlo, Reist et al. 2021). This is particularly true, for example, of Birmingham City, which in 2018 spent about \$11,000 per pupil, but was estimated to need to spend closer to \$25,000 per pupil to achieve national average outcomes, given the student population it serves. By contrast, Mountain Brook, for example, spent over

\$13,000 per pupil despite cost estimates well below that level.

Overall, in the Birmingham metro area, the districts with C-/D-graded areas and/or heavily Black districts (Birmingham City, as well as the “early seceders” such as Tarrant and Fairfield) spend well below cost estimates. In contrast, almost all the post-*Brown* “carved out” districts with higher HOLC ratings

Figure 13

STUDENT OUTCOME GAPS BY ADEQUATE FUNDING GAPS, BIRMINGHAM METRO AREA DISTRICTS, 2018



Red markers with labels are majority-Black/Hispanic districts



Data source: School Finance Indicators Database; Stanford Education Data Archive

Note: Markers weighted by student enrollment. Outcome gaps (y-axis) are the difference in average math and reading scores (in standard deviations) between each district and the U.S. average. Funding gaps (x-axis) are the difference between actual spending per pupil and estimated spending required to achieve national average test scores.

and/or majority white populations, most notably Homewood, Mountain Brook, Trussville, and Vestavia Hills, not only spend more adequately than the area overall, but actually spend above adequate levels by large margins. They are, in fact, the four most adequately funded districts in the entire state.

We can only speculate about what the situation today would look like had these six post-*Brown* secessions not occurred, as the separations spurred movement of families across borders and other unobserved counterfactual outcomes. But it's certainly defensible to argue that the secessions increased between-district segregation of both students and resources. As an extremely simplistic illustration, if we folded these districts into Jefferson County today (including the inadequately funded Leeds and Midfield districts), it would cut the Jefferson County School District's inadequate funding gap in half.

In Figure 13, we present the relationship between funding adequacy and outcomes, with district racial/ethnic composition (i.e., majority-Black/Hispanic schools) highlighted. Every single district in the Birmingham area that is majority Black/Hispanic, which in the plot are denoted with red circles and district name labels, is located in the lower left quadrant (spending is below estimated adequate levels and average outcomes are below the U.S. mean).

That is, no majority-Black/Hispanic district has sufficient funding to achieve national average outcomes, and none meets or exceeds that modest outcome goal. None, in fact, is even close on either score.

Conversely, there are 15 districts in the Birmingham area that are not majority-Black/Hispanic (i.e., the gray circles), all of which are majority-white districts. Nine of these 15 districts exhibit adequate funding (they are to the right of the vertical line in the plot). These nine are actually among the only 21 in the entire state of Alabama (130 districts in total) that spend above estimated adequate levels. Almost half of the 15 score about the U.S. average on math and reading tests (they are above the horizontal line in the plot). Yet every single one of these 15 majority-white districts exhibits more adequate (or less inadequate) funding and lower U.S. mean-relative outcomes than does every single majority-Black/Hispanic district.

It bears mentioning, finally, that four of the six districts in the upper right quadrant are city districts that seceded in 1970 or later. Conversely, among the five majority-Black/Hispanic districts located in the bottom left corner (funding severely below adequate and scores far below average), four are city districts established before the 1954 *Brown* decision (most decades before).

This section is from the report, "**Segregation and School Funding: How Housing Discrimination Reproduces Unequal Inequality**," available at:
<http://shankerinstitute.org/segfunding>