Schooling the Metropolis: Educational Inequality Made and Remade
Nashville, Tennessee, 1945-1985

Ansley T. Erickson

Sponsor Elizabeth Blackmar

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2010
ABSTRACT

Schooling the Metropolis: Educational Inequality Made and Remade, Nashville, Tennessee, 1945-1985

Ansley T. Erickson

“Schooling the Metropolis” traces how metropolitan and school policy furthered educational inequality even as extensive desegregation ostensibly sought to challenge it. As Nashville, Tennessee, a consolidated city-county metropolitan government and school system, achieved relative statistical success at desegregation, the district also built deep inequalities into how it desegregated. The forces that perpetuated educational inequality during and after desegregation demonstrate the roots of metropolitan inequality beyond schooling.

Although many views of educational inequality emphasize seemingly inexorable processes of urban decline or white flight, in fact educators, administrators, federal, state, and local officials, and judges had significant leeway in how they interpreted Brown’s mandate and how they responded to demographic and economic shifts in the contexts of schooling. Their policy choices actively maintained inequality by privileging local economic elites and white suburban communities while neglecting black urban residents. These choices frequently rested on cognitive maps of the metropolis that identified some spaces as growing and valuable and dismissed others as declining and without value.

Many of the policy choices that shaped desegregation stemmed from the interaction between capitalism and the state. This dissertation traces two venues for such interaction. First, schools and land: how schools were distributed in metropolitan space could and did shape local property markets, and how local participants imagined metropolitan space
shaped the experience of schooling. Second, schools and labor: efforts to link schooling and the local labor market informed instruction in Nashville schools, the structure and location of high school education, and the experience of inequality within schools.

Such interactions constrained the ability of various local participants, especially African-American families and communities, to shape policy to serve their children. African-American community representatives also found barriers in bureaucratic habits, in legal debate and discourse, and in diminished representation through metropolitan (rather than city-specific) politics. Legal processes codified particular ideas of inequality and neglected others, while separating the contemporary understanding of inequality from the many local policy decisions about land and labor that had in fact created it.

The relationships of power, economic interest, and ideology that maintained educational inequality in Nashville are common to metropolitan areas North and South.