

Bridging the Access Gap in K-12 Education

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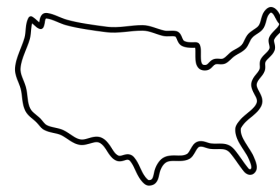
Introduction

The United States education system is burdened by structural inequities in decision-making and access, especially when it comes to who has a voice in shaping public education. Local school boards determine key policies on curriculum, student support services, discipline, and funding priorities. Yet in many communities, particularly those serving students of color and low-income populations, public engagement with school boards remains limited due to lack of transparency, poorly timed elections, and barriers to participation. When community voices are excluded from education governance, the policies enacted often fail to address students' real needs, contributing to persistent inequities in academic outcomes and support. The United States is home to over 42,500,000 neurodivergent people, and over 7 million neurodivergent current students ("8 facts about Americans with disabilities"). However, neurodivergent people often lack access to sufficient education, resources, and teachers. To combat these access gaps, it is imperative that we engage relevant stakeholders and spark the conversation amongst parents/guardians, students, and community members. This White Paper will assess the state of the U.S. education system by exploring (1) barriers to community participation in school governance and (2) gaps in the special education system.

Context: Federal Level

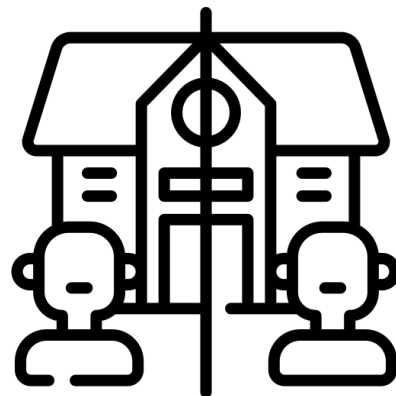
Access

Brown v. Board of Education, decided in 1954, legally ended the “separate but equal” precedent, and segregated schools were thus unconstitutional (Clark). Despite this, segregation persisted. Since the ruling in Brown, this resistance is prevalent. The US military has often been tasked to enforce this ruling, and ensure schools were fully desegregated.



Pushback such as the “white flight” movement, issues with busing, and red lining, exacerbated educational inequities, and prevented true integration. In 1979, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) was formally established by President Jimmy Carter. ED was designed to allocate federal financial aid, collect data on American schools, and prohibit discrimination in education. With limited power, ED sets national goals, enforces school laws, and aids states with money and support. ED was the first major federal effort to govern the U.S. education system.

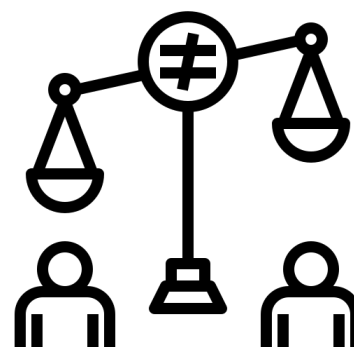
Persisting segregation has widened access gaps in educational opportunities, academic resources, and student support across the country. To combat this, major legislation has passed, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) pushed for real accountability of districts through standardized testing (“H.R.1 - 107th Congress (2001-2002): No Child Left Behind Act of 2001”). However, rigid testing standards *inadvertently deepened* these **disparities**, punishing low performing schools and connecting funding to student performance, harming schools who needed support most. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB, granting states greater flexibility to address local



challenges and emphasizing career readiness through career & technical education pathways. Even with ESSA, career & technical planning still remains out of reach for the economically disadvantaged. Without a strong federal role in education, the ongoing access gap for underserved and underfunded communities will continue to grow, leaving millions of students without the support, protections and resources they need to succeed.

Special Education

Prior to the 1970s, neurodivergent youth were often denied an education by public schools. Neurodivergent students who got to attend public schools were very often isolated. However, the United States codified the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1975, to ensure that students with disabilities received a free and appropriate public education (“Individuals with Disabilities



Education Act (IDEA) | U.S”). These individuals had been historically segregated, ignored, and neglected by American schools. IDEA, along with other legislation such as Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, outlined how states and public agencies must serve neurodivergent students, as well as indicating standards to deem individuals eligible for this support. ED soon became responsible for providing oversight and ensuring States’ compliance.

Despite this, the battle for equity for neurodivergent & disabled students has been uphill. In fact, Pew Research Center reported that during the 2020-21 school year, 40% of public schools had a special education teacher vacancy that they had been unable to fill. In this way, funding shortages, low special educator recruitment & retention, have both undermined efforts to achieve true educational equity.

Context: *State Level*

Access

Ohio public schools are funded by federal, state, and local governments. Federally, ED funds programs in Ohio schools to serve children with disabilities, children dealing with poverty, and post-pandemic recovery. State funding for school districts is allocated every two years within the state budget, set by the Governor. Local funding sources, however, differ by school district. Many Ohio school districts use local tax revenue to support additional opportunities, renovations, and programs that are not funded at the federal and state level. While a funding increase at each level would be ideal, most access gaps are prevalent at State and local levels.



Tax levies are a quick and effective source of revenue for school districts. However, tax levies (or changes to current levy rates) must be accepted by voters, and rarely pass. According to statistics gathered by the Ohio Association of School Boards, only 17% of all Ohio school districts' requests for new tax levies were approved by voters in the spring 2024 election cycle. As a result, school districts face difficulty with increasing their funding as needed. Since levies gather money through local property taxes, and low income areas have lower amounts of property tax funding available, schools in these areas have far less funding.

Furthermore, Ohio is considered one of the most segregated states in the nation. This is exacerbated by legislation, like Senate Bill 295, which emphasizes standardized test scores and student performance as the benchmark for funding. SB 295 aims to revise existing school closure requirements for poor performing community schools. If passed, SB 295 will disproportionately harm schools in predominantly black neighborhoods. This is counterproductive to the needs of

these schools. It is often the schools with lower test scores that need more funding and attention from the state and federal powers at be, in order to improve student outcomes. Rather than supporting these schools and students, SB 295 seeks to both reduce access and punish educators.

Special Education

States are required to comply with Federal standards and regulations, and therefore manage funding, provide training, and monitor districts. Every year, each state and territory within the domain of the United States receives a rating on how well it implements IDEA. According to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), Ohio is ranked 43rd out of the 61 states and territories. At the same time, according to a study conducted by the University of Cincinnati, between 2.4 and 3.2 million Ohioans deal with a disability.

Subsequently, Ohio has launched a few initiatives to improve this rating and outcomes for students with disabilities. Statewide, students are required to select a graduation path, regardless of ability. Although this may sound restricting, these graduation requirements provide greater flexibility and acknowledge that students can demonstrate competency and readiness through a variety of mechanisms” (“Ohio’s Special Education Determination”).

While these advances have been made, students still in elementary, middle, and early high school still struggle to gain access to proper teaching staff, both within and outside of school grounds. In this regard, bridging the access gap between neurodivergent and neurotypical students is an effort waiting to be fully realized.

Context: Local Level

In Cleveland, the effort to bridge the access gap in K-12 Education has been largely stagnated by inequities, including economic and racial segregation. Schools in predominantly low-income neighborhoods often struggle with inadequate funding, outdated facilities, and shortages of qualified educators. Schools in predominantly high-income neighborhoods, however, enjoy state-of-the-art facilities and numerous enrichment opportunities. Students in school districts that even neighbor each other often receive very different educations. For example, neighboring districts such as Orange and Warrensville Heights have completely different offerings and accessibilities for their student bodies.

Orange High School offers nineteen **AP courses**, whereas Warrensville Heights High School offers four. Similarly, the **proficiency rates** for reading and mathematics in Orange High School (OHS) are 84% and 78% for reading and math, respectively, while Warrensville Heights High School (WHHS) reports 36% and 27%. These disparities are not related to student body size or teacher performance, as OHS actually serves about *200 more students* than WHHS. These disparities impact student preparedness, long term academic outcomes, and college or career readiness, thus creating access gaps and systemic cycles of inequality. Local initiatives and organizations such as “Say YES to Education Cleveland, the Urban League of Greater Cleveland, and DigitalC, aim to address these disparities by providing students with opportunities to reduce the gaps. These disparities continue for neurodivergent students, through teacher shortages and divestment in public education.

The United States’ education system changed drastically when Brown V.S. Board was taken to the supreme court and ruled in Brown’s favor. This ruling that desegregated schools in America was a step in the right direction for equal access and equity in education for all students.

However, laws such as the *No Child Left Behind* Act infringe on students' rights to an equal education. Special needs students are also not given equitable education even with the passing of the IDEA. On a local level, the disparities between school districts are astounding and impact students' academic outcomes, career and college readiness, and overall preparedness.

Implementation Plan

Overview

To bridge existing access gaps within the education system, we have developed a dual-faced approach; (1) combat access gaps in advocacy and insufficient local election turnout for leadership in both public schools and local cities, and (2) remedy similar gaps for neurodivergent and neurotypical students. Through regular attendance and contribution in local, regional, and state school board meetings, working with local politicians and leaders, advocating for fair school funding, enhancing special education, promoting careers in special education, and outreach efforts, we hope to reach all communities in OH-11.

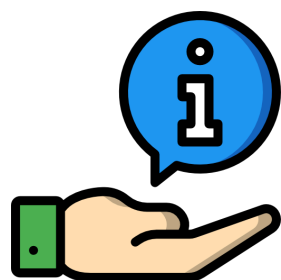
Section I — Citizen Empowerment Through Reform

To effectively close access gaps in education, communities must have a direct voice in decisions shaping their local schools. To empower citizens—especially parents, students, and underrepresented voters—on how to advocate for equitable education, this section outlines a legislative proposal to reform how school boards operate and how Ohioans engage with them. This legislation will bridge the access gaps by facilitating transparent and accessible school board governance.



Across OH-11 and the nation, critical decisions about curriculum, resource allocation, student services, and school closures are made by local school boards. Yet many families remain unaware of how these boards function—or how to engage with them. Low awareness, limited public information, and poorly timed elections all contribute to a system where a small, unrepresentative fraction of the population determines policy that *impacts every student*. By strengthening transparency and aligning school board elections with high-turnout cycles, we can ensure every community's voice is heard in shaping public education.

To strengthen community engagement and restore public trust in education governance, we propose the *School Board Transparency & Voter Empowerment Act*, a bipartisan initiative to ensure that Ohioans can easily access school board information and meaningfully participate in local elections.



Ohio's Open Meetings Act (Ohio Revised Code Section 121.22) currently requires public bodies, including school boards, to hold open meetings with advance notice. However, no centralized platform exists for communities to easily find this information across districts. Coupled with low-turnout, off-cycle elections too often, the full voice of the electorate

is rarely heard. *The School Board Transparency & Voter Empowerment Act* addresses both issues

through a two-pronged, integrated approach:

Part 1: Creating a Centralized School Board Information Portal

The School Board Transparency & Voter Empowerment Act would mandate the establishment of a statewide, public, easily navigable online portal, overseen by the ODE. For every local, regional, and statewide board of education, the portal would compile:

- The names and roles of every member of each board of education
- Dates, times, and locations of all upcoming board meetings, posted at least 30 days in advance
- The full agendas for each meeting, posted at least 7 days in advance
- Livestream links or recorded videos of meetings when available

The portal must be searchable by district or region, easily downloaded, and compliant with accessibility standards. While the database may initially depend on public submissions, districts would quickly be required to directly submit information on a regular basis. Funding for this portal would come from a modest state budget allocation, with potential support from federal education modernization grants.

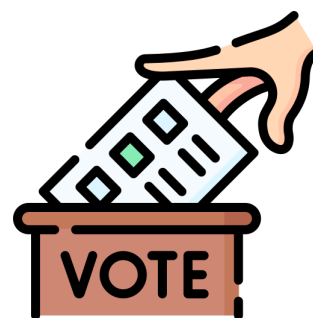
Part 2: Aligning School Board Elections with High-Turnout Cycles

To complement greater access to information with greater democratic participation, the *School Board Transparency & Voter Empowerment Act* would require school board elections be moved to on-cycle November general elections—the same dates as major statewide and federal elections.

Currently, school board elections occur in off-year cycles, when voter turnout can sometimes be as low as $\frac{1}{3}$ of general election turnout. This means only a fraction of the community, often around 25%, determines local educational policy.

The *School Board Transparency & Voter Empowerment Act* would:

- Maximize voter turnout and ensure broader community input in school governance,
- Prevent low-turnout, easily manipulated special elections, and,
- Include reasonable transition provisions for districts currently holding off-cycle elections to smoothly adjust to the new schedule;



By aligning election timing with periods of highest public engagement, decisions about public schools reflect the will of the full community, not a small, unrepresentative fraction of voters.

Components of this legislation have been supported by think tanks on both sides of the aisle. If adopted, this would serve as a bipartisan effort to modernize access to school governance and strengthen local democracy. This bill ensures easily accessible information, and maximum potential of voter participation in local elections. If adopted, Ohio would set a national example for education accountability, civic trust, and government transparency.

In addition to the portal, we further propose expert panel discussions across OH-11, both in-person and livestreamed, to educate attendees on effective school board engagement. These could be held in partnership with organizations such as *Honesty for Ohio Education*, which champions inclusive and honest education; the *Ohio Council for the Social Studies*, which promotes civic engagement and understanding of government; and the *League of Women Voters of Ohio*, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to fostering informed and active participation in government. This collaboration ensures that once information is accessible, communities are empowered not only to attend school board meetings, but to understand their significance, and advocate effectively for educational equity.

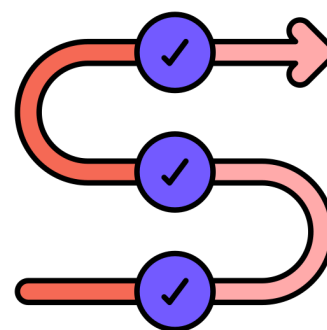


Section 2 — Special Path

To remedy the daunting shortage of educators, aids, and daycare personnel that are licensed to serve neurodivergent students, we propose the establishment of the *Special Path* program. This statewide program is designed to develop a special educator pipeline. This program would serve high school juniors and seniors with additional opportunities to engage on the collegiate level.

Special Path would be an extension to pre-existing programs that garner interest in educational fields, such as the TEACH ExcelTECC program out of Mayfield Heights High School. *Special Path* will help to provide experience and education within the realm of special education. Through working with experts in the field of special education, students will have the opportunity to gain understanding for the various nuances of special education, as well as experience working with neurodivergent students.

Special Path will match students with opportunities, scholarships, and institutions of higher learning to continue training. Through enrichment such as student teaching, essay contests, and scholarship opportunities, people apart of Special Path will develop teaching and guidance methods. In this way, potential educators will be supported throughout *their* special path.



For non-degree holding individuals, *Special Path* will provide them **their own** special path. Through the pipeline, individuals will have the opportunity to become certified daycare personnel. Not only will they be certified to work for daycares, but they will, through Special Path, be especially certified under the PECIC to serve the needs of neurodivergent children as well. This will provide sufficient daycare to all students and bridge the access gap between neurodivergent and neurotypical kids. Thus, important steps will be made to bridge the access gap between neurodivergent and neurotypical children both inside and outside of school.

Communications & Outreach

To effectively reach **the media**, we will utilize traditional and modern communication strategies. Media outlets, including The Plain Dealer, Cleveland.com, and education-focused platforms, will

be engaged through article contributions and media interviews highlighting the urgency of



bridging the access gap. We will also partner with advocacy groups such as the Ohio Federation for Health Equity and Social Justice to amplify our message through their networks, as well as local radio stations (e.g., WKSU, WZAK) and TV



networks (e.g., WEWS News 5) to broadcast PSAs.

We will compel **policymakers** to enact meaningful change in education disparities through data-driven briefs contextualizing prevalent and consequential OH-11-specific disparities. Legislators will receive data-driven policy recommendations, and town halls will be hosted in partnership with CMSD and the Urban League of Greater Cleveland, and have translated infographics distributed via SMS alerts, school newsletters, and community centers. The town halls will mobilize its attendees, through facilitating voting on critical tax levies and access to PECIC-certified childcare programs.



For **educators**, workshops on IDEA compliance will be promoted through union newsletters and district-wide emails, ensuring teachers have tools to address access gaps. Students will be mobilized through social media and school-based campaigns. We will encourage community engagement through social media. Grassroots efforts with trusted community figures, including faith leaders, coaches, and small business owners, will amplify our message.



Door-to-door campaigns in underserved neighborhoods will distribute flyers explaining the impact of tax levies and opportunities within the Special Path pipeline.

For **social media**, we will create *Project Bridge (Bridge the Access Gap)*. Project Bridge, led by us, will be active on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Its' website will detail our proposals, linking the project's social media account, as well as our own. The website will detail how various members of the community can get involved in the effort to bridge the access gap. To ensure accountability, quarterly surveys will assess campaign reach among parents, students, and educators, while social media analytics will refine content strategies.

Special Path relies on communication with ExcelTecc (and the TEACH program at Mayfield Heights High School), as well as daycares and high schools to dispense information about the Special Path pipeline. Institutions of higher learning will also need to be willing to promote the pipeline. Recruitment fairs hosted in partnership with Tri-C or CSU will attract potential educators, while collaborations with local daycares will highlight pathways to PECIC accreditation for non-degree holders.

Timeline

Due to its' comprehensive nature, we conservatively estimate about three months before any element of our proposal is made public. Between gaining traction for legislation, creating websites, collaborating with educational groups for the pipeline, and garnering necessary information about local leadership, the public's needs will best be served after careful research and collaboration.

Stakeholders

Part I of the stakeholders analysis will assess those that have the most influence on the effectiveness of the School Board Transparency and the Voter Empowerment Act.

Part II of the stakeholders analysis will assess the people that have influence in education and the would-be educators of special needs students.

1. Parents

Getting input from parents is vital in bridging the prevalent access gaps in K-12 education.

Active participation of parents in local, county, and statewide school board meetings to advocate for themselves and their families is consequential to carrying out our plans. Therefore, we also ask for the creation of panel discussions that could include experts not just in educational advocacy, but political advocacy. This would properly equip parents to advocate for their families and themselves.

2. Students

- ❖ **Special Education** - The new opportunities for high school, college, and former students to work in the field of special education, created by *Special Path*, are very reliant on student participation.
- ❖ **Access** - In addition to the panel discussions, we also propose the creation of workshops in outreach and advocacy, aimed at using social media and internet-oriented campaigning in order to reach more young people and promote their participation in local elections.

3. Legislators & Advocates

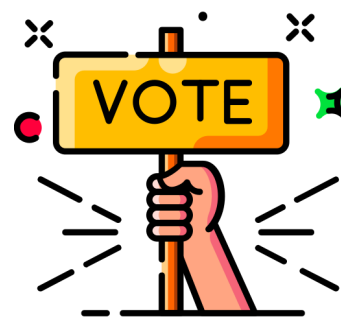
Our next group of stakeholders are legislators and advocates. By reaching out to mayors, school boards, city councils, advocates, and various bureaucratic officials, our proposal will be a product of the combined experiences, knowledge, and expertise from legislators and advocates.

4. Voters

Now, our last group of stakeholders is the biggest one of all. In fact, everyone in this room already is one, or will be soon. Any guesses?

Voters! In 2020, according to the National Civic League only 15 to 27% of eligible voters, across the entire United States, cast their ballot in local elections. Local elections often affect people's lives far more

directly than statewide or national elections. This pattern of low local election turnout *will be* broken by our proposal. Through advocating for change, and ensuring it lasts, voter participation will ensure that the access gaps in K-12 education are closed, through codifying legislation aligned with their needs, as well as electing effective representatives.



SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- ❖ **Comprehensiveness:** Not only does our plan cover students, but it covers parents, guardians, teachers, staff members at school districts, potential educators, and worried community members. This aligns with our goals and proposal aims: *ensuring access to academic/digital resources, embedding enrichment opportunities into standard curricula, and expanding student support systems for neurodivergent learners.*
- ❖ **Flexibility:** The structure of both pathways ensures that our plan remains achievable and flexible. The creation of the Centralized School Board Data System and Special Path program aim to meet the needs of existing problems. These proposals also draw from work that is currently ongoing.



- ❖ **Building on Existing Frameworks:** By integrating and expanding upon current initiatives, such as the Centralized School Board Data System and Special Path program, the plan leverages established frameworks to enhance efficiency and practicality, ensuring smoother implementation. This approach not only avoids redundancy but also fosters collaboration with stakeholders already engaged in the work, amplifying impact while maintaining alignment with proven strategies. Strengthening existing systems reinforces sustainability and accelerates progress by building on institutional knowledge and momentum.

Weaknesses

- ❖ **Participation & Cost:** Increased engagement at local leadership meetings, as well as the proposed *Special Path* pipeline, depend on active involvement from parents, educators, students, and community members. If individuals lack the time, resources, or motivation to participate meaningfully, our initiatives could lose momentum or fail to launch. Additionally, financial barriers to internet connectivity, sufficient device access, and even to digital literacy, all serve to hinder our message. We will need to pursue partnerships with local internet providers, community centers, or nonprofits to fill the gaps through subsidized internet, community tech hubs, or digital literacy support.
- ❖ **Capacity:** It is unclear whether our team has the capacity to lead long-term efforts. If led by us, we must designate clear roles and responsibilities. If a new team is needed, then securing funding for staffing and training becomes essential. If the initiative is to be embedded within existing institutions such as schools or local community organizations, we must ensure cooperation and willingness of our partners.



Opportunities

- ❖ **Bipartisanship:** Although the polarization of our political climate is only growing, there is a growing bipartisan recognition of the need for improved educational outcomes, especially for students with disabilities. This provides an opportunity for us to receive increased support for specialized educator training.
- ❖ **Digital age:** Social media offers platforms to mobilize many different types of community members. Local say in education will facilitate alignment with local or state-level initiatives, creating more targeted and adaptable solutions for OH-11.
- ❖ **Mental health awareness:** Given the increased awareness of mental health and social-emotional learning, there's a similar growing awareness of the importance of well-trained educators who can support diverse student needs.

Threats

- ❖ **Dismantling ED:** Recent efforts to dismantle ED will reduce federal support for education programs. Programs like Special Path, if implemented, would be subject to these cuts. ED provides oversight for special education and related programming. This leaves this oversight to States without uniform standards.
- ❖ **Trump Administration:** Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is threatened by the Trump Administration. Executive Orders and Trump aligned legislation, such as OH Bill 190, strips all students of unbiased education, and gives parents the right to restrict anything from being taught to all scholars in that specific school. There is a fine line between advocacy and censorship. Our proposal centers on parents advocating for *their children's* education; this is vastly different than choosing for all. The Trump Administration has also



begun to punish schools and educators who fail to comply with their censorship. With these punishments, education access gaps and disparities will grow.

- ❖ **Closure of OCR:** Seven out of twelve locations of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) including Cleveland's, were closed by the Trump Administration. OCR is responsible for ensuring equal access to education. In the long term, this will undermine public trust in the education system, making it harder to rally support or engage communities in the level of advocacy, discussion, and involvement we are promoting.

Conclusion

Our proposals offer a holistic, unique approach to bridging the access gap in K-12 education. By addressing access barriers associated with student supports and educator development we can quickly begin working to mobilize the entirety of OH-11. Our proposal sets an achievable, realistic precedent, for other congressional districts throughout the state of Ohio to mirror and aims to better service students across the United States.

Appendix

Access gap

Disparities between different groups in their access to resources, services, or opportunities.

Advanced Placement*® *(AP) courses

College-level courses offered in high school that provide students with a challenging curriculum and the opportunity to earn college credit by taking a final exam.

Disparity

A difference in level or treatment between two or more groups.

Neurodivergent

A nonmedical term describing those whose brains develop or work differently for some reason; neurodivergent people have different strengths & struggles from people whose brains develop or work more typically. While some people who are neurodivergent have medical conditions, neurodivergent is a nonmedical, umbrella term.

Neurotypical

A nonmedical term describing people whose strengths and challenges aren't affected by any kind of difference that changes how their brains work.

PECIC

The Professional Early Childhood Credential (PECIC), created by the Ohio State Leadership Team on Early Childhood to raise awareness, knowledge, competency, and confidence of professionals attending to the needs of children with disabilities, and their families, and to identify where Ohio is in its implementation of high-quality indicators.

Pipeline

The process by which individuals are recruited, trained, supported throughout their respective educations in order to become and remain educators.

Proficiency rate

Measures proportion of individuals demonstrating a certain level of skill or knowledge, often used in education and language assessment to gauge performance against a specific standard or threshold.

Redlining

This is a discriminatory practice in which financial services are withheld from neighborhoods that have significant numbers of racial and ethnic minorities.

Socioeconomic status

This is a way of describing groups of people based upon their education level, yearly income, and/or type of employment.

Special needs

Individualized care a person with a disability - whether physical, mental, behavioral, emotional, or learning difficulties - requires to ensure their safety, access to public amenities, or ability to succeed in certain contexts.

Tax levies

Property tax measures approved by voters to fund local school districts, typically presented as ballot initiatives, allowing voters to approve additional or renewed property taxes. Revenue generated from these levies funds various aspects of the education system, including salaries, classroom resources, extracurricular activities, and facility maintenance.

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