

Matthew Gardner Kelly

*Dividing the Public: School Finance and the Creation of Structural Inequity*

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Matthew Gardner Kelly's premier book, *Dividing the Public: School Finance and the Creation of Structural Inequity*, documents the origins of inequality in public school finance systems in the United States. Drawing on deep archival research spanning the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, including the creation of multiple new quantitative historical datasets, Kelly casts the state as a key agent in the creation of localized finance systems, challenging the prevailing assumption of the "supposedly deep roots of localism in school funding" (4). More than simply highlighting the complexity of actors in shaping these systems, he exposes the interplay of education as a spatial commodity, race-based exclusion and segregation, and what it means for schools to be truly "public."

The book focuses on the creation of systems of education and roots these systems in the racial project of the United States. Using a newly compiled national dataset, he details how "expropriated Native American land [was] used to capitalize K-12 school funds" (34). This analysis sets the stage to identify the ways in which systems of education reinforced the colonization of space and the commodification of land, such as the use of educational systems to add value to land and to create racially segregated enclaves, property rights in schools, the fight over localization versus centralization of funding, and how localization reinforced district boundaries as a means of exclusion.

While providing insight into national systems and expansions, Kelly puts a primary emphasis on tracking the development of educational systems in California since its inception into statehood through the 1950s. While the duality of tracing a single state in great depth while also addressing broader patterns was overwhelming at times, the strain to keep track was well worth the impact. Kelly documents how a state-backed education system was used to attract the "largest number of white families to the Pacific Coast as quickly as possible" (37) in the middle of the nineteenth century, noting that legislators "assumed that schools would increase the value of land. The idea that establishing schools was a mechanism for creating value and extracting revenue was reiterated routinely, at every level of government" (52). Later, he shows how these same themes repeat at district levels in competition with one another, vying for residents and wealth and creating the seeds of persistent inequality. As Kelly states, "It was not enough to buy and sell schools with land: the emerging Anglo-American elite increasingly cast the development of schools in *other* communities across California as a threat to their own" (67).

It was in this emerging competition that localization of funds developed, tied once again to the profitability of land. Yet even early localization of funding was met with opposition, as the seeds of inequality created an early challenge to a "public" system. The ability to raise property taxes, enforce boundaries, and annex land, Kelly argues, were tools allowed for by the state that "created a system of competing

publics” (127). Throughout, Kelly highlights the ways in which states were active agents in creating unequal, localized education finance, while never letting local districts off the hook for their own roles.

*Dividing the Public* is an apt title, succinctly describing the book’s key argument: state actors, supported and encouraged by local ones, divided the definition of public schools and in so doing, divided the people in pursuit of education as a local versus collective and common good. The book could have easily taken a narrower focus on the connection between schools and real estate, or the spread of the district property tax, or the creation and enforcement of school boundaries. Instead, Kelly takes on the much more difficult task of weaving each of these histories together and highlighting how each one reinforces the next. Importantly, this weaving together simultaneously breaks apart the idea of what “public” education even is.

I come to this book not as a historian, but as a quantitative scholar of modern education finance and policy who takes history seriously to guide my work. Throughout, I was astonished by the similarities to today—issues I considered wholly “modern” appeared far earlier in educational history than I ever knew. I saw echoes of modern debates around whether money matters in schools, desegregation, vouchers, school choice, private fundraising organizations, and so much more. It is a bold book that disrupts the assumption that the localization of schools is the sole product of grassroots community building and instead calls in all actors and institutions (states and districts, of course, but also broader institutions of property ownership and white supremacy) that have *collectively* built an unequal system.

The implications of the book for today are made clear—implicitly throughout and explicitly in the book’s epilogue. To conclude, Kelly brings the reader back to the present, a time when “nearly every state has ruled on at least one legal challenge to how lawmakers have decided to fund schools inequitably” (199). While these state school finance reforms have undoubtedly helped equalize funding across rich and poor school districts, Kelly argues that “Jurists have left the root sources of funding disparities untouched and given the same legislative bodies responsible for the initial constitutional violation wide latitude to recreate the same disparities down the road” (199). It is with these words that I encourage all education policy scholars—whether you think you study school finance or not—to engage with this book so that we can better address these “root sources” to work towards sustainable, equitable educational systems.

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