Dissertation Proposal

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"Three Essays on Economic Access to Public K-12 Education"

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In the first chapter, I document several empirical regularities concerning income segregation -- the tendency of households to sort by income across neighborhoods and school districts -- within commuting zones throughout the U.S. First, income segregation increases in commuting zone size -- more neighborhoods mean more opportunities to sort. Second, households with children are more income-segregated than households generally. Third, not all commuting zones exhibit high levels of income segregation across school districts, but practically all do across neighborhoods. The prevalence of income segregation across neighborhoods suggests public schools may exhibit income segregation, even when it is low at the school district level. The income composition of students at a school is linked to educational outcomes via both direct effects and peer effects. National School Lunch Program (NSLP) enrollment offers an intuitive school-level proxy for household income, but is potentially plagued by measurement error and systematic variation in program outreach and take-up. My proposed work investigates whether NSLP counts can reliably measure the extent to which residential income segregation reaches schools, and whether neighborhood-level income segregation correlates with increased dispersion in school quality measures.

For my second Heinz paper, I extended a general equilibrium sorting framework to compare the residential choices of households with and without children within a metropolitan region. For my second chapter, I am modifying this model to capture the key empirical regularities that give rise to the income segregation gap documented in the first chapter. I propose estimating the model in the manner of Epple et al. (2010) for the Boston metropolitan area. Potential counterfactual analyses include policies of school choice and public housing.

My third chapter stems from a unique dataset I have compiled in collaboration with a county-level human services department and a mid-sized urban school district. The dataset is comprised of a time series of student-level public school administrative data linked with human services utilization information. I plan to use a group-based trajectory modeling approach to identify latent behavioral groupings based on attendance and suspension patterns, as students progress through their K-12 education. I will investigate the extent to which these groupings correspond with usage or changes in usage of various human services (e.g., child welfare interventions, mental health counseling, public benefits usage). The approach will attend to issues such as nonrandom attrition, and the varying intensity of human services interactions under study. Finally, I will discuss potential quasi-experimental analyses, including the evaluation of an attendance intervention implemented at two schools in the middle of the time series.