



URBAN EDUCATION RESEARCH AND POLICY ANNUALS

Foreword: Innovative Toolkit

When we think of the term innovative, several definitions come to mind. It might evoke the idea of new ways of doing things, fresh ideas, or approaches that break away from the norm. Innovation often focuses on creative methods and procedures, introducing novel concepts that drive progress. A toolkit, on the other hand, is a set of resources designed to address specific tasks or problems, aiming for effective and efficient solutions.

Together, these words '*innovative toolkit*' highlight a collection of resources crafted to solve problems through creative solutions, efficiency, and forward-thinking strategies. In the realm of urban education, the need for innovative tools is paramount. These tools must be designed to tackle the complex challenges faced by urban communities and schools. An innovative toolkit in this context should focus on addressing critical issues, providing educators and policymakers with the means to foster meaningful improvements and drive transformative change.

With great enthusiasm, I introduce this special issue on urban education in the southern region, focusing on Texas and Tennessee, as the authors dig into their innovative toolkits, inviting you to explore fresh perspectives and ideas. This collection features insightful research and thoughtful perspectives addressing some of the most significant challenges and developments in this critical area. As a doctoral student at Texas A&M University and a veteran educator with approximately 20 years of experience, I have closely followed the evolution of urban education. I have viewed its critical issues within our state, noting ways we can make changes to best serve students. I am thrilled to present such an instructive set of works in this special issue.

This issue highlights the various aspects and persistent concerns of urban education in Texas, covering a wide range of topics from policy to the critical issues affecting Black teachers. At a time when the United States is experiencing rapid growth and demographic shifts, it is crucial to engage in meaningful dialogue and share innovative solutions that can drive progress, benefit school settings, and inspire future research.

Approximately 80% of students in the United States reside in or near urban areas. In Texas, 83.7% of the population lives in urban areas (Brannen, 2023). According to the most recent 2020 U.S. Census Bureau data, Texas has experienced a 15% population increase over the last decade, bringing the total number of residents to 29 million. This growth is primarily concentrated in urban areas, influenced by economic benefits, changes in labor markets, and housing costs (Kim et al., 2020). As the second most populated state in the nation, Texas includes major cities such as Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas, which rank as the 4th, 7th, and 9th largest cities in the country. These top ten rankings indicate significant growth and urban development within Texas.



Additionally, Texas is home to the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the 8th largest school district in the United States and the largest in Texas. Recent reports indicate that in 2023, Texas continues to be the top state in the U.S. for relocation (PR Newswire, 2024; USA Today, 2024). With this rapid growth, many areas have had to reassess how they support residents and provide services, particularly in education. As more individuals move into previously less populated regions, the need for solutions to address emerging challenges becomes paramount. This is especially critical for school districts, whose responsibilities are significantly affected by the population density in urban communities (Howard & Milner, 2021; Lastra-Anadón, 2018).

School districts, also known as local education agencies, are tasked with:

1. Educating and nurturing students,
2. Employing and supporting the professional development of teachers and other staff, and
3. Providing academic growth opportunities in various subjects, such as literacy, STEM, and social studies.

While urban schools present benefits and opportunities to their stakeholders, they also face unique challenges, including funding issues, infrastructure limitations, and high teacher attrition. Due to the density, diversity, and socioeconomic characteristics of urban areas, schools within these regions face significant challenges (Cardona & Rodriguez, 2023; Dolph, 2017). Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach involving collaboration among educational stakeholders.

As seen in other large states, expanding urban territories encounter disparities that directly affect the growth of students living in these areas. This special issue delves into the unique circumstances of urban schools in Texas, offering a roadmap for transformative education. The continuous and steady growth of urban areas and the transition of smaller geographic regions must be addressed in education by acknowledging necessary changes. I hope this analysis will foster in-depth research, leading to proactive measures to alleviate the stressors experienced by this population and ultimately serve as a model for other urban communities.

In this issue, you will find articles that explore various dimensions of urban education in mainly Texas, offering new insights and methodologies that challenge conventional thinking. Notably, Dr. Kimberly Sterin's work on the school choice debates in Texas provides a fresh perspective on policy, while Dr. John Williams' analysis of school discipline highlights the impact of school discipline and leadership. Each contribution has been carefully selected to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of urban education and to stimulate further discussion and investigation.

In the following article titled, *Subversive Scholarship: Exploring Fugitive Pedagogy at a Historically Black College and University in Texas. Do We Do It*, Crawford offers a comprehensive examination of the preservice teacher curriculum. The author explores the balance between state mandates and the unique educational missions of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in teacher preparation programs. The study finds that while HBCUs strive to maintain their commitment to cultural relevance and Black empowerment, they are also navigating the constraints of state-sanctioned certification requirements.

In the discussion of *Black teachers in Turner & Redwine Johnson's You Know I've Been Holding On: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Black Women Teachers and Influencing Factors for Retention*, the study examines the challenges contributing to high attrition rates among Black women teachers in urban schools. In this selection, the authors focus on how race, gender, and class intersect in their experiences. Using qualitative narrative inquiry, the research uncovers the intense stress and need for resources that influence their retention.

In the article *Examining the Moderating Effect of Teacher Experience on Academic Achievement in Urban Schools: A Critical Spatial Analysis of Access*, Holtz expands her focus beyond Texas, examining Tennessee's urban education landscape due to its similarities with Texas. This comparison has important implications for Texas. Using critical race spatial analysis (CRSA), Holtz maps the geographic distribution of experienced teachers and explores the relationship between student demographics and academic achievement. The study underscores how inequitable access to experienced teachers, particularly in historically marginalized communities, negatively affects student outcomes.

The authors Redwine Johnson & Gooden dig into the representation of STEM teachers and Black students in their article, "*Is Texas Holding 'Em?: The Influence of Black STEM Teachers on Black Student Achievement.*" It examines the underrepresentation of Black STEM teachers and its impact on Black students' academic achievement and experiences in STEM subjects. The findings aim to inform policy decisions and promote a more inclusive and supportive environment in STEM education, contributing to a more diverse and innovative workforce.

Sanders, Gooden, and Amin dive into the dynamics of math in urban schools in their article, *Mathematics & Science Achievement in Texas Urban Schools: A Multilevel Multinomial Logistic Regression Analysis*. It investigates mathematics and science achievement in Texas urban schools, utilizing a multilevel multinomial logistic regression analysis of Texas Education Agency data. It examines how various student and school-level factors, such as socioeconomic status, discipline, and course tracking, affect students' performance on standardized exams. The study highlights disparities in achievement tied to student demographics, teacher retention, and school resources.

The Original Scam: A Critical Race Policy Discourse Analysis of the School Choice Debate in Texas explores the lengthy history of Texas policies on school choice. It explores the racial ideologies embedded in school choice policies, specifically the Education Savings Account (ESA) program proposed in Texas during the 88th legislative session. Through critical race theory (CRT) and discourse analysis, it examines how pro-school choice rhetoric, particularly from Republican leaders, perpetuates racial inequality by framing school choice as "education freedom".

In the last article, Nicholas-Hoff & Williams offer a relevant discussion of the interconnection of school discipline and leadership in *Got A Match?: How School Leaders' Race Affects Suspension Odds Among Black Students in Texas Urban High Schools*. The authors examine how the race of school leaders affects suspension rates for Black students in urban Texas high schools, revealing disparities in disciplinary practices. The study underscores the importance of implementing culturally responsive discipline policies to mitigate systemic biases.

For the readers of this special issue, I encourage you to explore the articles thoroughly, reflect on their insights, and contemplate their implications for our collective efforts to enhance urban education. Each article offers valuable perspectives and innovative solutions that can drive meaningful change in our educational systems.

By engaging with this research, you are contributing to a vital dialogue about the future of urban education. I urge you to take these insights back to your own communities and institutions, implement the strategies discussed, and share your experiences and outcomes. Your active participation is crucial in fostering a future where every student in Texas and Tennessee has access to high-quality education, well-equipped educators, and the resources and tools they need to reach their full potential.

Together, we can create a more equitable and effective educational landscape by giving schools, teachers, and various educators more to put in their educator toolkit. Let this special issue be a catalyst for ongoing research, collaboration, and action. Join us in this mission to transform urban education and make a lasting impact on the lives of students and educators alike.

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Special Guest Editor

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