

Capital Transformation and Class Replication: School District Housing Policies and Educational Inequality from the Perspective of Bourdieu's Theory

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ABSTRACT

To promote high-quality and equitable development of compulsory education, China has implemented a no-examination, proximity-based enrollment system to ensure equal educational starting points. However, this policy has given rise to practical issues such as speculation in school district housing markets, spatial disparities in educational resources, and social stratification. Drawing on Bourdieu's analytical framework of "field-capital-habitus" and social reproduction theory, this study systematically examines the comprehensive capital transformation chain and class replication mechanisms underlying school district housing policies. The research reveals that the proximity-based enrollment system uses property ownership and household registration as criteria for school placement, establishing a stable capital conversion pathway: family economic capital can be exchanged for institutionalized cultural capital through purchasing school district properties; the embodied cultural capital cultivated at these schools can subsequently generate renewed economic value, forming a closed-loop appreciation cycle. The educational field employs symbolic violence to misrepresent wealth disparities as differences in subjective family investment, concealing the logic of institutionalized class reproduction. Lower-income groups face structural educational exclusion due to deficiencies in economic, cultural, and social capital, transforming compulsory education into a tool that amplifies wealth gaps and solidifies class boundaries. Relying solely on end-of-chain regulations in the real estate market cannot fundamentally address this issue. Only through systemic reforms — including teacher rotation, group-based school management, lottery systems across multiple schools, and reducing the linkage between property ownership and school admission quotas — can we balance educational resources across the region, dismantle the monopoly of prestigious schools as symbolic assets, and ultimately break the one-way flow of capital toward high-quality educational resources, restoring the original principle of equitable and inclusive compulsory education.

1.Introduction

Educational equity serves as the cornerstone of social fairness and a core value in modern national governance. As the foundational component of the national education system, compulsory education bears the essential mission of breaking down barriers rooted in social origins, facilitating upward mobility for disadvantaged groups, and strengthening the foundation for a society of shared prosperity. The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly called for "accelerating high-quality and balanced development of compulsory education to promote educational equity." The Outline of the Plan for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035) issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council further identifies narrowing disparities between schools, urban and rural areas, and different demographic groups as key tasks in this endeavor. The Opinions on Establishing a Basic Public Education Service System with High Quality and Balance, jointly released by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, clearly defines development goals: continuously reducing four major educational gaps across regions, urban-rural divides, schools, and social groups, ensuring all school-age children have equal access to public education resources of comparable quality. To implement these strategic objectives, China has long upheld a policy of admission to compulsory education without entrance exams based on proximity to residence, which embodies a strong commitment to equity. This system eliminates selective entrance examinations, uses actual residential locations and household registration as primary criteria for allocating school places, and removes interference from non-standardized factors such as academic scores, personal connections, or political influence. Its aim is to eliminate artificial barriers to school selection and establish an inclusive, impartial, and equally accessible public education system. The Ministry of Education has been continuously implementing the Sunshine Enrollment Initiative for primary and secondary schools. The 2026 special plan once again emphasizes governance measures including strict control over irregular school selection practices, promotion of multi-school zoning systems, balanced teacher rotation policies, and crackdowns on property-linked school placement speculation. Multiple regions have simultaneously issued bans prohibiting real estate developers and intermediaries from using "school district properties" or "access to prestigious schools" as marketing gimmicks to induce home purchases, aiming to eliminate the inappropriate linkage between educational resources and the real estate market at its source. Both the top-level policy design and these sustained governance efforts embody society's practical expectations for achieving equal access to compulsory education, breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty, and reducing the constraints imposed by social status on educational development.

However, after more than a decade of comprehensive implementation and ongoing reforms, a significant gap persists between the original intent of the nearby school enrollment policy and the realities of urban education governance. The policy has given rise to a series of persistent structural contradictions: it has not effectively addressed the underlying imbalance in public educational resource distribution but instead fostered new market-driven competition patterns—residential prices around prestigious schools have risen irrationally, school district

properties have evolved into a large-scale speculative capital market; educational competition among families has shifted entirely to the property acquisition stage, with purchasing capacity becoming a prerequisite for accessing elite schools; high-quality educational resources exhibit pronounced spatial concentration and stratification, widening the educational disparity between children from different social classes. Property ownership, wealth accumulation, and admission eligibility to top schools are rigidly interconnected, turning family economic capital into direct credentials for accessing quality institutional education. What should serve to bridge social divides and promote mobility has instead become a tool amplifying wealth disparities and solidifying class boundaries, with the vision of educational equity continuously eroded by mechanisms of class reproduction. Despite regional initiatives such as multi-school zoning, teacher rotation programs, and equal rights for renters and buyers, the system's mechanism of prioritizing property-based access to premium educational resources remains unaddressed, leaving issues like institutionalized educational exclusion and urban spatial stratification unresolved (Shu & Wakabayashi, 2026; Gilraine et al., 2025).

The comprehensive theoretical framework developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on cultural capital, field, habitus, and social reproduction provides a mature and coherent classical analytical framework for systematically examining the educational inequality issues arising from school district housing policies. Within Bourdieu's analytical paradigm, the educational field is not an objective, neutral platform for talent selection based solely on merit; rather, it serves as the central arena where economic, cultural, and social capital engage in continuous interaction, facilitating intergenerational transmission of social stratification and reinforcing existing social hierarchies. Schools employ an implicit form of "symbolic violence" through standardized educational evaluation systems, rationalizing and naturalizing inherent class-based resource disparities as subjective differences in individual aptitude and family investment in education, thereby perpetuating and strengthening the original social stratification structure via institutionalized educational screening mechanisms.

School district housing serves as the most intuitive and representative real-world example for examining the mechanisms of capital transformation and class reproduction in contemporary China. A review of existing literature in educational sociology and urban sociology reveals that numerous studies have employed Bourdieu's field theory and cultural capital theory to analyze issues such as family relocation behaviors, market-driven school selection practices, and spatial disparities in educational resources. The academic community generally agrees that differences in household capital endowments are the underlying drivers behind the school district housing speculation boom and the exacerbation of educational inequality. However, existing research still exhibits significant theoretical limitations: most studies merely dissect the unidirectional effects of economic or cultural capital without establishing a comprehensive causal chain, failing to systematically elucidate how the nearby school enrollment policy, as a key institutional mediator, integrates the entire cycle of "economic capital investment → acquisition of objective cultural capital → institutionalization of cultural capital ownership → cultivation of embodied cultural capital → intergenerational transmission of social status". Additionally, current research rarely incorporates interdisciplinary dimensions such as urban spatial production, the gentrification of school districts, and local government land growth alliances to thoroughly analyze the

deep-seated mechanisms through which school district policies institutionalize and conceal educational exclusion, thereby perpetuating class segregation in urban residential spaces—a gap in theoretical explanatory power (Freidus, 2019).

Addressing the aforementioned research gaps, this study employs Bourdieu's three-dimensional analytical framework of "field–capital–habitus" and the core concept of social reproduction as its primary analytical tools. Grounded in China's institutional reality of compulsory education based on proximity-based enrollment policies and the recent context of quality-oriented educational equity reforms, it systematically dismantles the comprehensive capital transformation mechanism behind school district housing. The analysis reveals how such housing serves as a spatial strategy for middle-class and elite groups to maintain and reinforce their social status, elucidating how proximity-based enrollment rules leverage property ownership and household registration systems to establish covert, institutionalized mechanisms of educational exclusion, thereby perpetuating intergenerational stratification across society. Through systematic theoretical examination, this study provides insights for addressing urban educational inequality, optimizing resource allocation policies in compulsory education, and mitigating the class-solidifying effects of the education system, ultimately supporting the implementation of reform objectives outlined in the National Education Development Plan regarding educational equity and enhanced social mobility.

2. Bourdieu's Core Theories and Their Applicability to the Analysis of School

District Housing Issues

Bourdieu transcended the traditional sociological paradigm of binary oppositions, abandoning the singular perspectives of subjectivism and objectivism, and established a comprehensive sociological analytical framework integrating "field, capital, and habitus(Bourdieu, 1986)." Building upon this framework, he formulated the central thesis of social reproduction. This theoretical system accounts for both macro-level social structural constraints and micro-level individual actions within families, enabling precise analysis of educational spatial differentiation arising from the school district housing boom. It clearly elucidates the intrinsic interconnections among urban housing prices, the scarcity of resources at prestigious schools, and social strata, providing a robust theoretical tool for examining educational inequality underlying school district housing dynamics (Maton, 2014;Bourdieu, 1986).

2.1 Three Forms of Cultural Capital: School District Properties as the Core Element of the Complete Capital Transformation Chain

Bourdieu transcended the narrow definition of capital in traditional economics, which confined it solely to economic assets such as money and material goods, proposing a broader concept of capital divided into three core types: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital, with cultural capital serving as the central variable explaining educational stratification and intergenerational class transmission. He further refined the internal forms of cultural capital, categorizing them into embodied cultural capital, objectified cultural capital, and institutionalized cultural capital; these forms are not mutually exclusive but can transform into one another

depending on specific institutional and market conditions. The cyclical transformation among these three types of cultural capital constitutes the fundamental mechanism underlying the sustained operation of the school district housing market(Klimczuk, 2020).

First, embodied cultural capital refers to the implicit cultural endowments internalized within an individual's physical and mental being, which cannot exist independently of the person's subjectivity. It represents a stable characteristic gradually formed through long-term family cultural immersion and sustained educational investment, encompassing intangible elements such as innate temperament, aesthetic taste, logical thinking patterns, language expression habits, self-directed learning abilities, reading and critical thinking skills, and artistic perception(Noble, 2022). Embodied cultural capital exhibits strong intergenerational transmission properties. Families from privileged backgrounds maintain systematic and meticulous educational investments over time—through daily reading environments, regular art education programs, structured study tours, quality parent-child communication, and standardized learning practices—which ultimately cultivate children's intrinsic qualities aligned with elite schools' assessment criteria. In key evaluation dimensions such as classroom participation, written composition, practical application, artistic proficiency, and logical reasoning, children from privileged families naturally possess competitive advantages. Conversely, children from disadvantaged families face systemic disadvantages due to limited economic resources, parents' educational levels, and work commitments, making it difficult for them to provide comparable long-term cultural cultivation. This inherent disparity in embodied cultural capital continues to widen during compulsory education (Keysar, 2026;Bernelius & Kosunen, 2025).

Second, objectified cultural capital refers to cultural resources embodied in tangible physical forms—material assets that can be traded, owned, and transferred. In a narrow sense, it encompasses physical cultural products such as book collections, paintings, musical instruments, science education equipment, and educational cultural merchandise. Expanding to urban educational spaces, school district properties tied to admission privileges at prestigious public schools represent the most iconic form of this objective cultural carrier in contemporary society(Lareau et al., 2018). While ordinary residential properties serve only basic living and recreational functions, school district properties additionally provide access to scarce cultural assets—including elite faculty from top-tier schools, specialized curricula, high-quality peer networks, and higher academic success rates. These properties thus become materialized vessels for premium educational resources, with ownership rights transferable through real estate transactions. Families can directly acquire these culturally embedded assets attached to real estate by making monetary payments.

Third, institutionalized cultural capital refers to standardized credentials officially certified by the state and educational institutions, possessing legally recognized social validity. These formal symbols can directly confer advantageous positions in scenarios such as academic advancement, job hunting, and social evaluation. Typical examples include academic certificates, admission quotas to prestigious schools, exam results from middle school and college entrance examinations, and certifications from official competitions. When families invest substantial financial resources in purchasing school district properties, their primary motivation lies not in the property's residential function but in securing admission quotas to renowned public schools. This school

enrollment status granted through the school district system constitutes a classic example of institutionalized cultural capital (Adam, 2016). During basic education, such enrollment determines students' access to qualified teachers and teaching resources; over the medium to long term, attending prestigious schools translates into opportunities for high-quality secondary education, higher admission rates to top universities, and competitive advantages in the job market, serving as a key driver for social mobility and maintaining social status.

The three types of cultural capital form a complete, progressive, and recyclable value-added chain: Families first utilize their existing economic capital to purchase school district housing as an objective cultural asset; leveraging the real estate-based household registration system, they acquire institutionalized cultural capital in the form of admission qualifications to prestigious schools; students receive systematic education at top-tier institutions while simultaneously cultivating embodied cultural capital within their family's cultural environment; upon completing primary and higher education, their academic credentials and school records (institutionalized cultural capital) translate into higher salaries and better career opportunities, generating new rounds of family economic capital that fund the purchase of school district housing for future generations and support family education investments. These three capital categories thus form a closed-loop cycle of value appreciation, with school district housing serving as the core intermediary link throughout this process.

2.2 Field and Habitus: The Struggle for School District Location Within the Educational Field

"Field" and "habitus" are two interdependent, mutually shaping core concepts within Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Their interaction fully explains the collective behavior of parents from different social strata competing to purchase homes in school districts, revealing how proximity-based enrollment policies reshape the fundamental dynamics of educational competition.

Firstly, the educational field constitutes a relational network woven from diverse actors and objective social relationships. Within the compulsory education framework, five core stakeholders emerge: government education authorities, public primary and secondary schools, real estate developers, parent groups across different socioeconomic strata, and school-age students. The central scarce resource contested by all participants is high-quality public educational resources (Yoon, 2020). Prior to the implementation of the proximity-based enrollment policy, competition primarily revolved around individual student academic performance, family social connections, and school selection costs. Following the introduction of district allocation systems based on property ownership and household registration status, the scope of competition has expanded significantly—from individual students to entire families—and evaluation criteria now extend beyond personal academic ability to include the tangible dimension of family housing purchasing power (Perez, 2024).

Families from different social strata occupy entirely distinct structural positions within the education system based on their respective total stock of economic, cultural, and social capital: core school districts of prestigious universities represent advantageous zones where families can secure priority access to scarce teaching resources and advanced educational pathways; in

contrast, school districts of ordinary public schools and suburban areas lacking such prestigious institutions occupy disadvantaged marginal positions, with children from these areas receiving only basic educational resources of lower quality. The spatial division of urban school districts essentially embodies the physical manifestation of advantageous and disadvantaged positions within the education system.

Secondly, *habitus* (also translated as survival mentality) refers to the enduring behavioral tendencies, value judgments, and action logics that social strata gradually internalize within long-term stable living environments. It exhibits characteristics of cross-scenario transferability and intergenerational transmission, with distinct *habitus* patterns across different social classes directly determining parents' decision-making strategies regarding school district housing policies.

The middle class has developed a highly prevalent "education anxiety habit" in contemporary society: they rely on academic qualifications and professional skills to maintain a decent standard of living, lack stable wealth safeguards such as substantial real estate or family assets, and their social status is heavily dependent on diplomas and professional credentials. A widespread consensus exists within this group—that education at prestigious schools is essential for children to maintain their current middle-class status and avoid social mobility downward. Driven by this mindset, the vast majority of middle-class families are willing to cut daily expenses, deplete years of savings, and bear decades-long mortgage burdens; they even sacrifice living space and quality of life to purchase small, dilapidated homes in prime school districts, viewing the acquisition of such properties as a necessary long-term investment for their families.

The working-class, rural populations, and migrant worker groups exhibit entirely distinct survival patterns: constrained by persistent low incomes, unstable employment, and limited educational attainment, these families prioritize covering basic living expenses and find it difficult to allocate substantial funds to property purchases. Additionally, having long been excluded from high-quality education systems, they struggle to anticipate the long-term social mobility benefits associated with enrollment in prestigious schools, leading to a conservative approach toward educational investment and ultimately choosing to avoid competing for housing in school districts of top-tier institutions, either voluntarily or involuntarily (Gupta, 2023).

The social habits of the elite class are characterized by consistent and low-anxiety educational investment: substantial economic capital eliminates significant financial burdens associated with purchasing school district properties; such purchases serve merely as a routine means to maintain familial social status. Beyond housing, they also invest in various cultural resources—including private academic tutoring, overseas study programs, and art instruction—thereby eliminating any resource depletion pressure stemming from school district competition for this elite group.

Field-specific rules continuously shape the distinct habits of different social strata, while habits internalized within these strata in turn drive parents to engage in property capital competition within the field. The nationwide craze for school district housing is a direct product of the ongoing interaction and mutual reinforcement between educational field institutions and the survival habits of various social classes.

2.3 Social Reproduction: The Symbolic Violence of Education in Concealing Class Replication

The theory of social reproduction forms the core foundation of Bourdieu's educational research, with its central argument being that the public education system serves as a covert instrument for class reproduction. Schools employ standardized assessment systems to perpetuate symbolic violence, misrepresenting capital disparities stemming from family background as differences in individual effort. Its revolutionary core proposition asserts that the modern state-run public education system does not function as a social ladder promoting upward mobility or narrowing class gaps, but rather as an efficient and concealed mechanism for class reproduction. Through seemingly objective, fair, and neutral standardized selection and evaluation systems, schools implement "symbolic violence," reinterpreting innate class differences determined by family background as subjective variations in students' innate talents and parental investment in education, thereby ensuring intergenerational replication of existing social stratification structures.

The privileged class holds the discourse power in cultural evaluation; the assessment criteria of prestigious schools align with the embodied cultural capital of the middle class, while students from disadvantaged backgrounds remain consistently at a disadvantage in evaluations. Class disparities are thus institutionalized and legitimized. The ruling elite and dominant groups have long maintained control over defining cultural evaluation standards: the curriculum, assessment metrics, and teacher evaluation systems of elite schools all measure success against the embodied cultural capital of the privileged class. Students who excel in standardized written exams, possess artistic talents, demonstrate fluent written and oral communication skills, or have extensive extracurricular experiences are more likely to gain school recognition. Children from privileged families are exposed to these evaluation criteria from an early age, receiving continuous positive feedback that steadily builds their institutionalized cultural capital; in contrast, children from disadvantaged backgrounds inherently lack such cultural exposure, remain consistently disadvantaged in school evaluations, and are often labeled as "underqualified or insufficiently diligent." Thus, class differences are legitimized through educational assessment mechanisms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Altan, 2026).

Applying the theory to the practical context of school district housing policies, the nearby enrollment system ostensibly establishes an equalization principle of "examination-free admission for all and enrollment based on proximity." The policy text targets all school-age children and contains no explicit exclusion clauses targeting specific groups, creating a formal appearance of absolute equality. However, the system deliberately downplays the stringent economic barriers associated with property ownership and household registration status, while intentionally ignoring the underlying logic that wealth accumulation determines access to quality education (Calef, 2025). This policy fosters the illusion of equality—that anyone willing to invest can purchase a school district property to secure a place in a prestigious school—and this symbolic manipulation effectively masks the inequitable distribution of educational resources stemming from structural wealth disparities, thereby legitimizing how privileged classes leverage property ownership to access high-quality educational resources and perpetuate intergenerational social mobility (Frost & Stewart, 2026).

In the context of school district housing, the nearby-enrollment policy appears egalitarian in form but deliberately ignores the economic barriers tied to property ownership and household registration, creating a false impression of universal access to school placements through purchasing district homes. This masks educational exclusion stemming from wealth inequality and fosters widespread societal acceptance of a system where property ownership secures premium educational resources and enables intergenerational social mobility.

The general public often attributes the outcome of competition for school district housing to parents' commitment to their children's education and willingness to endure hardships for them, completely overlooking the inherent wealth disparities among families. Policy communications consistently emphasize the fairness of proximity-based enrollment and admission without entrance exams, while avoiding discussions of structural flaws such as uneven distribution of school district resources and the mandatory linkage between property ownership and school placements (Rice, 2022). Through symbolic manipulation, the educational gap arising from wealth disparity is reduced to individual differences in family investment choices; thereby, the education system perpetuates structural class divisions between urban and rural areas, affluent and impoverished populations, and middle-class versus lower-income groups through school district housing policies.

3. The Transformation from Economic Capital to Cultural Capital: The Capital Alchemy of School District Properties

The policy of compulsory education enrollment based on residential property ownership and household registration serves as the core criterion for school district allocation, establishing a stable, predictable, and exclusive mechanism for capital conversion at the institutional level. School district housing functions like a form of "capital alchemy" in society, legally transforming economic capital—primarily manifested as currency, deposits, or real estate—into highly scarce, long-term appreciating institutional cultural capital. This entire capital conversion mechanism inherently possesses a class-selective function, while its underlying inequality logic remains highly concealed and difficult for the general public to perceive directly.

3.1 School district properties as officially recognized capital conversion instruments

Before the implementation of the nearby-enrollment policy, the mechanism linking economic capital with high-quality educational resources operated in a gray area: approaches such as school selection fees, private connections, and off-campus advanced tutoring could bridge the gap in educational opportunities but lacked official institutional support, facing multiple constraints including policy oversight, transaction risks, and geographical limitations. Consequently, the transformation of economic capital into institutionalized cultural capital remained unstable and unpredictable.

The institutional design linking property ownership and household registration to school district enrollment rights directly grants ordinary residential properties additional educational benefits at the public policy level, transforming real estate into an officially recognized and

legally compliant vehicle for capital conversion. While standard commercial residences possess only residential utility value with market prices fluctuating based solely on floor area, location, unit layout, and supporting amenities, school district properties offer not only residential functionality but also a unique cultural advantage: admission eligibility to prestigious public schools—a non-replicable scarce benefit. Consequently, the substantial expenditure incurred by families purchasing such properties is no longer merely a daily living expense but represents a strategic cultural investment aimed at ensuring their children's long-term development.

The comprehensive, closed-loop capital transformation pathway follows a clear sequence, with each step implemented through the nearby school enrollment policy: Initial investment comes from household-owned economic assets (bank deposits, property holdings, annual disposable income, financial investments, etc.). Purchasing school district housing via real estate transactions secures properties linked to prestigious schools, thereby acquiring tangible cultural capital. Meeting strict school district allocation requirements through property ownership and household registration grants access to admission quotas at top public schools, generating institutionalized cultural capital. Students receive years of systematic education at these institutions while simultaneously developing embodied cultural capital within their family's cultural environment. Upon completing primary and higher education, the accumulated institutionalized cultural capital—including school enrollment records and academic credentials—enables students to secure higher salaries and better career opportunities, accumulating new rounds of household economic capital that funds future educational investments and school district purchases. The complete cycle operates as: Economic Capital → School District Housing (Tangible Cultural Capital) → Prestigious School Enrollment Status (Institutional Cultural Capital) → Embodied Cultural Capital → New Generation Economic Capital, with the nearby school enrollment policy serving as the foundational mechanism for this systemic process (Abdulkadiroglu & Andersson, 2023).

It is precisely because public education policies have established this stable, predictable, and universally accessible channel for capital conversion that a housing-buying frenzy in school districts has persisted for over a decade across major cities nationwide, enabling economic capital to circulate seamlessly through real estate agencies, developers, and schools.

3.2 The strong exclusivity of capital conversion: Economic thresholds screen out vulnerable households

The number of planned schools, enrollment quotas, and total available housing units in premium public schools within urban core areas are subject to rigid caps. The combination of scarce educational resources and limited residential options in school districts has maintained a chronic supply-demand imbalance, continuously driving up property prices around these prestigious schools. This naturally creates a stringent economic barrier that stratifies households across different social strata (Dall'erba et al., 2021; Artemov & Tomoeda, 2025).

Families with varying economic backgrounds exhibit starkly divergent approaches to the challenges of purchasing school district properties: High-income middle-class families, business owners, and privileged groups within state institutions possess ample disposable funds, enabling them to easily acquire properties in prime school zones without compromising basic living

expenses or facing obstacles in converting financial resources into cultural capital; average working-class households with limited savings and slow income growth must exhaust savings from both spouses and three generations of parents to secure admission to prestigious schools, while also bearing heavy mortgage payments over 20–30 years—a burden that significantly compromises long-term quality of life and erodes family resilience; low-income migrant workers, rural families, subsistence allowance recipients, and flexible employment groups are entirely unable to afford school district property purchases costing millions or even tens of millions of yuan, lacking both the means for full payment and eligibility for bank loans, thus being excluded from the competitive system for elite school districts and permanently deprived of access to scarce institutionalized cultural assets.

The most fundamental injustice of this screening mechanism lies in the fact that the criteria for allocating degrees from prestigious universities completely disregard individual students' innate talents, learning attitudes, and levels of effort, relying solely on the family's overall economic capital as the sole admission criterion. Compulsory education itself is a universal public resource intended for all school-age children and should theoretically be accessible to all social groups without discrimination; yet it employs market-based property prices to create a stratification system, effectively excluding low-income families with limited economic means from access to high-quality educational resources. This capital-based allocation mechanism inherently carries an exclusionary nature toward disadvantaged groups at its core (Sifat et al., 2026).

This wealth-based preliminary screening shifts educational inequality from within schools to the property purchase stage: even before students enter school, their access to educational resources is predetermined by family wealth, while the inclusive nature of public education is completely undermined by the capital-driven logic of the real estate market.

3.3 The high degree of concealment in conversion logic: Class disparities are disguised as autonomous choices

The class stratification caused by school district housing perfectly aligns with the core characteristic of "misidentification" in Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence: the general public fails to recognize the structural institutional inequalities underlying such housing arrangements, instead attributing the stratification effects solely to individual families' voluntary choices, thereby completely obscuring the true logic of inequality (Pearman & Swain, 2017).

On one hand, public opinion and real estate marketing narratives consistently shape a unified narrative: purchasing a home in an educational district at a high price represents a personal, autonomous choice made by responsible parents to secure their children's future, serving as a direct reflection of the importance placed on family education. Real estate developers and agents continually promote anxiety-inducing slogans such as "education changes destiny" and "one cannot fall behind at the starting line," portraying home purchases in school districts as a positive and commendable family behavior; societal discourse often simplistically defines families unable to afford such homes as those unwilling to invest in their children's futures, lacking long-term planning, and deliberately ignoring the fundamental constraint of inherent wealth disparities among families.

On the other hand, policy communications consistently emphasize the fairness of the nearby school enrollment system, repeatedly highlighting its advantages in being exam-free, based on proximity, and free from selection tests. They rarely address the underlying design flaws, such as severe disparities in resource allocation across urban school districts and the mandatory linkage between high-quality school placements and property ownership. The policy only highlights superficial equality in the rules themselves, while avoiding discussions of the class divisions arising from their implementation, and simplifies the structural gaps created by the system's design to mere individual differences stemming from varying family preferences regarding educational investment.

Under the dual discourse framework, educational stratification driven by disparities in economic capital exhibits remarkable concealment. The general public struggles to comprehend the underlying logic of capital reproduction behind school district housing policies; class replication relies on symbolic violence to gain widespread social acceptance, enabling the persistent maintenance of unequal distribution patterns over time.

4. The School District Housing Policy as a Spatial Strategy for Social Stratification Replication

The social impact of school district housing has long transcended the narrow scope of real estate transactions and family education. At its core, it represents a systematic spatial strategy employed by urban privileged classes leveraging the policy of nearby school enrollment, aimed at achieving spatial concentration within their social strata and ensuring stable replication of intergenerational class status. Local governments, real estate developers, and prestigious public schools form a stable alliance for mutual benefit growth, collectively advancing the gentrification process of urban school districts. This process solidifies dual segregation—both residential and educational—at the physical urban level, continuously narrowing access pathways for lower-income groups to high-quality educational resources across social strata.

4.1 The middle class's drive for social mobility fuels anxiety over school district competition

In post-industrial urban societies, diploma inflation, intense workplace competition, and heightened industry rivalry have become prevalent social realities. Academic credentials no longer serve as an absolute guarantee for stable social status, leaving the middle class plagued by persistent anxieties about social mobility decline (Byun et al., 2023). The accumulation of wealth within this demographic relies heavily on individual professional skills, educational qualifications, and stable full-time employment, lacking passive sources of financial security such as family businesses or substantial rental income. Should children fail to access quality basic education or obtain diplomas from prestigious universities, they are highly likely to lose decent employment opportunities, fall into the lower-income working class, and ultimately lose their original middle-class lifestyle standards and social standing.

Driven by this inherent impulse for class-based self-preservation and reproduction, the middle class regards enrollment in prestigious public schools as a key tool for maintaining social status boundaries and ensuring upward mobility for their children. A place at a top school no longer merely signifies higher educational quality but has become an essential symbol for middle-class families to preserve their social identity. Influenced by shared educational anxiety among the middle class, urban residents across major cities have developed a highly unified collective strategy: they flock en masse to areas surrounding elite schools to secure housing within existing school districts, actively sacrificing living space, comfort, family savings, and leisure budgets in exchange for admission to these prestigious institutions(Gao et al., 2022).

A large number of middle-class families have simultaneously flooded into the school district market, and collective home purchases continue to drive up average housing prices in these areas. The rising property costs, in turn, heighten the economic barriers to competition within school districts, naturally excluding low-income working-class and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This ultimately leads to a spatial concentration of the middle class around prestigious schools. Within communities within the same school district, residents share similar income levels, unified educational values, and homogeneous social norms, forming closed-off middle-class social circles that reinforce class identity through spatial segregation(Liu et al., 2025; Bischoff & Tach, 2018).

4.2 The "Government–Renowned Universities–Developers" Growth Alliance creates spatial zoning for the class structure

The municipal government, real estate developers, and prestigious public schools have formed a tightly integrated interest-sharing alliance through land development, educational infrastructure, and property value appreciation. Together, they benefit from the land appreciation, property transaction taxes, and sales profits generated by the establishment of these elite schools, collectively driving the hierarchical segmentation of urban space based on school district quality.

From the perspective of local governments, land transfer revenue serves as the primary funding source for urban infrastructure development and fiscal operations. Introducing high-quality prestigious schools as part of a development project can significantly increase land sale prices and boost land-related fiscal revenues. Additionally, school-affiliated residential developments stimulate real estate transactions, generate additional tax revenues such as deed taxes and value-added taxes, and promote the growth of commercial and service sectors within the area, thereby contributing to regional economic development. Consequently, local governments generally prioritize allocating premium school resources to new residential development zones, leveraging school district boundaries to solidify the region's educational advantages.

From a real estate developer's perspective, access to prestigious schools constitutes the core marketing selling point of a property development; the presence or absence of such school districts directly determines pricing and sales momentum. Developers proactively collaborate with local governments and top-tier schools to establish branch campuses or co-develop educational programs, positioning educational resources as the key driver for property value appreciation. By leveraging the school district concept, they achieve high-priced sales and secure substantial development profits.

From the perspective of prestigious public schools, collaborating with newly developed large residential communities for educational partnerships enables them to secure new school facilities, dedicated educational funding, and corresponding teaching staff quotas from local governments. This approach expands institutional capacity, enhances physical infrastructure, leverages real estate market momentum to strengthen the school's regional identity, and establishes a stable, mutually beneficial alliance among all parties involved.

Through the sustained operation of the Growth Alliance, urban physical spaces have been clearly stratified according to school district resources: areas served by prestigious schools have been developed entirely as high-priced, premium residential developments targeting middle-class and affluent populations; suburban areas with ordinary public schools and no access to elite institutions are designated solely for low-cost housing projects and old resettlement residences serving low-income workers, migrant laborers, and rural migrants. The school district zoning policy institutionalizes this spatial division through administrative mechanisms, linking urban residential locations directly to the tiers of educational resources available to children. Different social strata remain physically segregated across various city districts, while institutional pathways for lower-income groups to access prestigious school placements across districts continue to narrow, transforming urban spatial differentiation into a long-term, stable educational divide.

4.3 The orialization of School Districts: The Spatial Occupation and Exclusion by the Middle Class

The gentrification of school districts represents a tangible manifestation of competition for spatial positioning within the educational field (Song et al., 2023). When applied to urban physical spaces, Bourdieu's concept of this spatial competition manifests as the widespread gentrification process observed in major Chinese cities. The middle class leverages substantial economic capital to purchase high-priced existing homes near prestigious schools, rapidly occupying old urban areas traditionally inhabited by low-income residents. This trend continuously drives up property prices, rents, and daily living costs, compelling long-term residents with limited means to relocate due to unsustainable living expenses.

The surrounding areas of prestigious schools have undergone a complete social stratification shift within just a few years: originally low-income families gradually relocated to remote suburban areas with inadequate educational resources, while all residents were replaced by middle-class families with sufficient financial means and shared anxieties about education. This has resulted in homogeneous, closed middle-class residential communities within these school districts. Residents share access to high-quality public educational resources, similar income levels, and unified cultural values, forming an interconnected network of social capital; in contrast, displaced low-income groups are forced to move to peripheral suburban school districts with poor infrastructure, average teaching quality, and subpar academic performance.

The gentrification process in school districts generates dual forms of class exclusion: first, physical spatial exclusion, where rising housing prices and living costs completely drive lower-income families out of areas surrounding prestigious schools; second, exclusion within the educational sphere, as children from disadvantaged backgrounds relocate with their families to

underperforming school districts, permanently losing access to the institutional cultural capital associated with elite schools. This entire process relies on market transactions and property price dynamics, devoid of administrative enforcement measures for forced displacement, exhibiting high concealment and efficiently facilitating intergenerational social stratification replication through subtle urban spatial segregation (Quarles & Butler, 2018).

5. The Institutionalization of Cultural Capital and the Continuous Reproduction of Class Boundaries

The admission to prestigious schools obtained through school district housing purchases constitutes standardized, officially certified institutional cultural capital. The legitimacy of these cultural symbols, accumulated over decades by elite institutions, continually reinforces identity boundaries between social strata, fostering persistent structural educational exclusion that resists individual intervention, thereby solidifying and widening the class divide between affluent and impoverished communities as well as urban and rural areas.

5.1 The Symbolic Value of Prestigious Universities: The Monopoly of Cultural Legitimacy

Throughout the entire field of basic education, leading public elite schools have accumulated unique symbolic capital that enjoys widespread cultural legitimacy across society. Primary and secondary schools, universities, employers, and the general public universally recognize that the institutionalized cultural capital produced by these schools commands higher exchange value. Long-term policy support, years of attracting high-quality students, and consistently outstanding academic performance have enabled these schools to monopolize scarce educational resources within their regions—including top-tier teaching staff, specialized curricula, direct admission pathways to prestigious high schools, and recommendation quotas for various competitions—thereby establishing a regional monopoly over cultural resources.

The symbolic legitimacy of prestigious schools has fostered a unified societal perception: the general public widely considers students from these institutions to possess superior comprehensive abilities and academic competence compared to those from ordinary schools. Employers and key high schools prioritize candidates with backgrounds from prestigious schools when selecting applicants or job seekers. This collective perception further reinforces parents' strong demand for school district housing; families with substantial financial means spare no effort to secure access to this prestigious status. Consequently, society-wide pursuit of prestige associated with elite schools exacerbates competition in the school district housing market, continuously raises its economic threshold, and perpetuates educational inequality stemming from capital mobility.

Renowned schools leverage their institutional cultural capital monopoly to continuously consolidate their dominant position in the education sector, while ordinary and underperforming schools have long suffered from inadequate resource allocation and a gradual erosion of symbolic

capital. This has widened the gap in educational resources between elite and conventional schools, leading to an expanding disparity in returns from capital reallocation.

5.2 School District Housing: Visualized Spatial Segmentation Markers for Social Stratification

The administratively defined school district boundaries are determined primarily by property ownership status, creating clear, intuitive, and visually distinct stratification markers within urban spaces. A single street, a wall, or a river can divide two school districts with vastly different educational resources; significant disparities emerge in average housing prices along both sides of the street, residents' income levels, and the teaching faculty and educational opportunities available to children.

This concrete spatial marker transforms abstract, intangible social class disparities into visible urban landscapes: ownership of a home in a core school district has become an external indicator for assessing a family's economic and cultural capital. Class competition within the education system no longer begins only after students enroll; it starts as early as when families purchase property. Class distinctions extend from within schools to the entire urban living space, creating hierarchical divisions across all aspects of daily life, education, and social interaction.

Long-term, persistent spatial demarcation of school districts continuously reinforces psychological boundaries between social strata: middle-class and elite groups actively cluster in prestigious school districts, while lower-income populations are passively concentrated in underperforming ones. Daily interactions among residents from different social circles and their children's educational experiences remain largely isolated, exacerbating cognitive disparities and resource gaps between classes and thereby solidifying the status divide across society (Freidus, 2019).

5.3 Structural Educational Exclusion Caused by Multiple Capital Deficiencies Among Vulnerable Groups

Low-income families face comprehensive systemic disadvantages in the competition for school district housing, stemming from their simultaneous lack of economic capital, embodied cultural capital, and social capital. These combined deficiencies create insurmountable structural barriers to educational access. This disadvantage is not an individual issue arising from parents' neglect of education or students' lack of effort, but rather an objective outcome of institutional rules and imbalanced capital distribution.

First, the scarcity of economic capital constitutes the most fundamental barrier for low-income families to enter the education market. With relatively low income levels and limited asset accumulation, these households are unable to afford the high total cost of purchasing homes in prestigious school districts, nor can they meet banks' requirements regarding mortgage payments and creditworthiness. This fundamentally disrupts the pathway from "economic capital → school district housing → institutionalized cultural capital," leaving them even ineligible to compete for access to quality educational resources.

Second, the scarcity of embodied cultural capital exacerbates competitive disadvantages within schools. Even when a small number of students from low-income families gain admission to

prestigious universities through special channels, their families often lack long-term exposure to cultural environments rich in reading, arts, and educational research activities. Moreover, parents typically have limited educational backgrounds and are unable to provide after-school tutoring or cognitive development training for their children. As a result, these students consistently lag behind middle-class and elite children who have enjoyed comprehensive cultural enrichment from an early age in terms of classroom performance, comprehensive assessments, and extracurricular engagement, making it difficult for them to fully leverage the resources of top-tier institutions to build institutionalized cultural capital.

Third, there is a lack of channels to compensate for the weakness in social capital. Parents from privileged backgrounds possess extensive personal networks and industry-specific social connections, enabling them to leverage their social capital to access additional educational resources such as elite school admission quotas, competition recommendations, and transfer opportunities; conversely, the social circles of lower-income groups are predominantly composed of low-income individuals who lack social networks capable of connecting with schools and educational institutions, leaving no alternative means to address the shortcomings in school district resources.

The triple-layered capital disparities create a closed-loop structural exclusion mechanism. While school evaluation systems and school district zoning policies appear neutral and objective on the surface, they actually rely on differences in capital endowments to automatically screen students, continuously widening the gap in basic education between children from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby perpetuating social stratification generation after generation. Public education should inherently bridge resource gaps caused by socioeconomic origins; yet it instead amplifies the capital divide through school district housing policies, solidifying intergenerational inequality.

6. Conclusion

Using Bourdieu's comprehensive theoretical framework of cultural capital, field practices, and social reproduction to analyze the current housing boom in school districts across China, it becomes evident that such property investments represent the most typical and compelling manifestation of contemporary urban society's "capital alchemy." The policy mandating nearby enrollment for compulsory education establishes institutional rules based on real estate ownership and household registration to create a stable, legal, and universally accessible mechanism for capital conversion. Families can legally transform their monetary economic capital into high-value institutional cultural capital—namely admission rights to prestigious schools—through school district properties as intermediaries. Meanwhile, students' embodied cultural capital developed through years of systematic education at elite institutions will translate into higher incomes and superior social status during future academic pursuits or career opportunities, thereby generating new rounds of family economic capital. This process ultimately forms a complete cyclical loop: "economic capital → objectified cultural capital → institutionalized cultural capital → embodied cultural capital → additional economic capital," ensuring intergenerational stability of social advantages through this capital circulation system.

Throughout the operation of the entire capital circulation and class replication mechanism, driven by inherent anxiety about social mobility decline, the middle class collectively floods into prestigious urban school districts to compete for scarce residential properties in these areas. This continuously drives up housing prices and fuels a widespread phenomenon of "school district gentrification" across major cities nationwide. By purchasing high-priced homes in these zones, the middle class achieves social mobility upgrading within the same demographic bracket, creating spatial concentration of peers while employing property price barriers to implicitly exclude disadvantaged groups. Simultaneously, the education system perpetuates what Pierre Bourdieu termed symbolic violence—deliberately concealing structural educational inequalities rooted in wealth disparities—and reduces class differentiation arising from school district competition to mere individual variations in educational investment willingness. Consequently, this mechanism that allocates quality educational resources through property ownership and replicates existing social class structures gains broad societal acceptance and legitimacy.

To break this self-perpetuating cycle of class reproduction, relying solely on short-term real estate regulatory measures, purchase and sales restrictions on school district properties, and curbing property speculation—these peripheral interventions can only provide temporary relief and fail to address the root cause of educational inequality. The key reform approach to resolving the social stratification issues stemming from school district housing policies lies in balancing public high-quality compulsory education resources across regions, weakening the symbolic capital monopoly held by top-tier public schools, gradually dismantling the strong institutional link between property ownership and admission eligibility to prestigious schools, and cutting off at the policy level the stable pathway through which economic capital unidirectionally transforms into high-quality cultural capital.

Through systematic institutional reforms—including teacher rotation, group-based school management, balanced allocation of educational funds, random lottery systems for multi-school zoning, and the elimination of rigid links between housing ownership and school placements—these measures aim to diminish the financial value appreciation inherent in school district properties. This approach restores compulsory education to its essence as a universal, equitable, and balanced public service, removes the inherent class-reproduction function embedded in the education system, creates stable pathways for disadvantaged groups to achieve upward social mobility through educational effort, addresses the dual inequalities of spatial and educational stratification caused by school district housing, and ultimately achieves the original policy objective of ensuring equal starting points in compulsory education.

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