



Affirmative Justice in the New Student Admission System: Access of Low-Income Students to Public Schools in Surabaya City

Siti Malikhatu Shalihah*

Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

S.M.Shalihah@students.unesa.ac.id

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65815/qkva6s51>

Submitted: 26-11-2025

Revised: 08-01-2025, 26-02-2025

Accepted: 02-03-2026

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

Affirmative admission policies are designed to compensate for socioeconomic disadvantages that restrict students' opportunities to access quality public education. In Indonesia, the New Student Admission System (SPMB) incorporates affirmative pathways intended to provide greater opportunities for students from economically disadvantaged households. Nevertheless, formal eligibility does not necessarily translate into substantive access, particularly when families face difficulties related to documentation, information, digital registration, and school capacity. This study examines the implementation of the affirmative pathway of SPMB in Surabaya City and evaluates its contribution to educational justice for low-income students. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research investigates policy implementation, administrative procedures, access barriers, and perceptions among parents, students, schools, and local education authorities. The analytical framework combines distributive and procedural justice to assess whether benefits are fairly distributed and whether admission procedures are transparent, accessible, and responsive to disadvantaged families. The study argues that affirmative policies should be evaluated beyond admission rates by examining the institutional barriers that influence students' ability to utilize affirmative provisions. The research contributes to education policy scholarship by demonstrating how apparently equitable admission mechanisms can produce unequal outcomes when administrative and informational capacities vary across socioeconomic groups.

[Kebijakan penerimaan afirmatif dirancang untuk mengkompensasi kekurangan sosial ekonomi yang membatasi kesempatan siswa untuk mengakses pendidikan publik berkualitas. Di Indonesia, Sistem Penerimaan Siswa Baru (SPMB) memasukkan jalur afirmatif yang bertujuan untuk memberikan kesempatan yang lebih besar bagi siswa dari keluarga kurang mampu. Namun demikian, kelayakan formal tidak selalu berarti akses substantif, terutama ketika keluarga menghadapi kesulitan terkait dokumentasi, informasi, registrasi digital, dan kapasitas sekolah. Studi ini



meneliti implementasi jalur afirmatif SPMB di Kota Surabaya dan mengevaluasi kontribusinya terhadap keadilan pendidikan bagi siswa berpenghasilan rendah. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini menyelidiki implementasi kebijakan, prosedur administrasi, hambatan akses, dan persepsi di antara orang tua, siswa, sekolah, dan otoritas pendidikan setempat. Kerangka analitis menggabungkan keadilan distributif dan prosedural untuk menilai apakah manfaat didistribusikan secara adil dan apakah prosedur penerimaan transparan, mudah diakses, dan responsif terhadap keluarga kurang mampu. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa kebijakan afirmatif harus dievaluasi di luar tingkat penerimaan dengan memeriksa hambatan kelembagaan yang memengaruhi kemampuan siswa untuk memanfaatkan ketentuan afirmatif. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian kebijakan pendidikan dengan menunjukkan bagaimana mekanisme penerimaan yang tampaknya adil dapat menghasilkan hasil yang tidak setara ketika kapasitas administratif dan informasi bervariasi di berbagai kelompok sosioekonomi.]

Keywords: affirmative action, SPMB, educational justice, low-income students, Surabaya

Introduction

Access to quality education is a central component of social justice because educational opportunities influence individuals' capabilities, socioeconomic mobility, and long-term participation in society. However, equal access cannot be achieved merely by formally opening public schools to all students under identical admission rules. Families enter the education system with profoundly different socioeconomic resources, informational capacities, residential conditions, digital access, and abilities to navigate administrative institutions. Students from economically disadvantaged households may therefore face barriers that are invisible in formally neutral admission systems. A family may satisfy the legal requirements for public-school admission but nevertheless be unable to benefit from that entitlement because it lacks the necessary documentation, does not understand the admission procedure, has limited internet access, or cannot respond rapidly to changes in registration schedules. Contemporary research on educational inequality demonstrates that socioeconomic status continues to shape students' educational opportunities through multiple pathways, including differences in family resources, school environments, digital access, and institutional support (Jheng et al. 2022; González et al. 2021; Ma 2021). Educational justice must consequently be understood not simply as equal treatment but as the capacity of institutions to compensate for inequalities that exist before individuals enter the admission process.

Affirmative action provides one institutional response to this problem. Instead of treating all applicants identically, affirmative policies deliberately allocate additional opportunities to groups considered disadvantaged. The normative rationale is that identical treatment can reproduce inequality when applicants begin from unequal social positions. An affirmative pathway can therefore be understood as a form of distributive justice, because it intentionally directs a portion of a scarce public resource—access to public schools—toward students whose socioeconomic circumstances constrain their opportunities. Yet affirmative justice also has a procedural dimension. A policy cannot be considered fully just if its benefits are formally reserved for disadvantaged groups but the procedures for claiming those benefits are disproportionately difficult for the same groups. This distinction is consistent with research on administrative burden, which demonstrates that learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs can prevent eligible citizens from accessing public benefits to which they are legally entitled (Heinrich et al. 2022; Fox, Feng, and Reynolds 2023). In education, therefore, the central question is not only whether an affirmative quota exists but whether low-income families can realistically convert formal eligibility into actual enrollment.

Indonesia's transition from the former PPDB framework toward the SPMB system provides an important context for examining this problem. The new framework retains differentiated admission pathways, including affirmation, domicile, achievement, and transfer mechanisms, reflecting the government's attempt to combine geographical access, merit, and social protection within a single admission architecture. In Surabaya, the 2025/2026 SPMB for public junior secondary schools included four admission pathways. The affirmative quota was increased to 20 percent of total capacity, compared with 15 percent previously, with the stated objective of expanding opportunities for children from poor and near-poor families. The city government also indicated that approximately 38,000 elementary-school graduates would be accommodated through the various admission pathways.

This policy design is significant because it explicitly recognizes that residence and academic achievement alone may not adequately protect children whose educational opportunities are constrained by household poverty. The Surabaya case is particularly relevant because the city has developed relatively sophisticated administrative arrangements for identifying and verifying disadvantaged families. The local admission system has historically distinguished between affirmative categories such as inclusion and economically disadvantaged or near-disadvantaged families. Surabaya's 2024 regulation explicitly provides for affirmative admission for poor and near-poor families as well as students in the inclusion category (Pemerintah Kota Surabaya 2024).

The 2025 implementation further strengthened the affirmative quota and introduced verification mechanisms involving population data and local administrative institutions. These arrangements indicate an important policy transition: rather than expecting low-income families simply to compete under

general admission rules, the government attempts to identify socioeconomic disadvantage and reserve institutional space for affected students.

Nevertheless, the existence of an affirmative quota does not resolve the problem of unequal access. The concept of administrative burden is particularly useful for explaining why. Administrative burden refers to the costs individuals experience when interacting with public institutions, including the effort required to learn about a program, demonstrate eligibility, comply with procedures, and manage the psychological pressures associated with bureaucratic interactions. Heinrich et al. (2022) show that low-income families can experience substantial administrative obstacles when attempting to access public services, while Fox, Feng, and Reynolds (2023) demonstrate that reducing burdensome administrative rules can increase participation in social programs. These findings are directly relevant to affirmative school admission because low-income families are the intended beneficiaries of the policy, yet they may simultaneously be the group least capable of absorbing complex administrative requirements. An affirmative system can therefore produce an institutional paradox in which the population most in need of preferential treatment faces the greatest difficulty in claiming that treatment.

The problem becomes more complex as student admission becomes increasingly digital. Online registration can reduce transaction costs for government agencies and potentially make admission more transparent, but digitalization does not automatically produce equal access. Research by Ma (2021) demonstrates that digital inequalities remain associated with socioeconomic differences across schools and households, while studies of digital education show that low-income families frequently experience disadvantages involving devices, connectivity, digital competence, and family support (González et al. 2021; Pelóez et al. 2021). Castaco-Mucoz et al. (2025) further emphasize that digital inclusion depends not merely on access to technological infrastructure but also on institutional support and the ability of disadvantaged communities to use technology meaningfully. Digital admission systems can therefore unintentionally shift administrative responsibility from government institutions to families. Families with higher levels of education, digital literacy, and institutional familiarity may be better positioned to interpret requirements and complete applications, while poorer families may require greater assistance.

Previous research on Indonesian student admission policies reveals similar tensions. Studies of zoning and admission reforms have generally found that these policies can expand geographical access but continue to encounter problems involving school capacity, uneven school quality, public misunderstanding, administrative implementation, and digital systems (Sulistiyosari, Wardana, and Dwiningrum 2023; Setiawan et al. 2022; Reviandi et al. 2024; Chaniago et al. 2024). In Surabaya specifically, Anggraini, Widiyanto, and Puspaningtyas (2024) find that the zoning policy has been viewed as contributing to the distribution of educational opportunities but also generates dissatisfaction among parents when children cannot enter desired public schools because of distance. More importantly

for the present study, existing literature tends to evaluate admission policies through implementation effectiveness, geographical distribution, or general educational equity. Less attention has been devoted to the question of whether affirmative pathways are actually usable by low-income families once administrative, informational, and technological barriers are taken into account.

This study addresses that gap by examining affirmative admission through the lens of affirmative justice, defined here as a form of educational justice that recognizes unequal starting conditions and deliberately allocates additional opportunities to disadvantaged students while ensuring that the procedures for accessing those opportunities are substantively accessible. The study asks three interconnected questions: first, how does the affirmative pathway of SPMB in Surabaya distribute access to public schools among low-income students; second, what administrative, informational, digital, and capacity-related barriers may prevent eligible families from benefiting from the pathway; and third, under what conditions can affirmative admission generate substantive rather than merely formal educational justice? The central argument is that affirmative admission should be evaluated as both a distributive and procedural institution. A quota can redistribute seats, but only an accessible administrative process can ensure that those seats are effectively available to the students for whom they are intended.

This study employs a qualitative case-study design focusing on the implementation of the affirmative pathway within Surabaya City's SPMB system. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research is concerned with the institutional mechanisms and social processes through which formal policy provisions become actual educational opportunities. Rather than estimating the statistical effect of affirmative admission on individual educational outcomes, the study examines the relationship between policy design, administrative procedures, socioeconomic disadvantage, and access. The primary documentary materials consist of Surabaya's local admission regulations, official policy information concerning the 2025 SPMB, and peer-reviewed research published between 2021 and 2025. The literature was organized thematically around four analytical dimensions: distributive justice and affirmative action; socioeconomic inequality in school access; administrative burden and procedural access; and digital inequality in public-service delivery. The analysis applies thematic interpretation to identify mechanisms through which affirmative policy can either compensate for or reproduce socioeconomic disadvantage. The study does not use 2026 academic publications as substantive references, ensuring that the scholarly evidence remains within the specified 2021–2025 period.

Previous research suggests that affirmative policies must be understood in relation to the broader structure of educational inequality. Jheng et al. (2022), through a systematic review and meta-analysis, demonstrate that family socioeconomic status significantly affects school choice, indicating that disadvantaged families do not possess the same capacity to respond to educational opportunities as more affluent families. Ukanwa, Jones, and Turner (2022) similarly

demonstrate that institutional school-choice structures can generate segregation even when families do not explicitly prioritize social characteristics. These findings indicate that educational markets and admission systems are not neutral spaces: the consequences of admission rules are mediated by unequal family resources. Indonesian studies reinforce this argument. Sulistyosari, Wardana, and Dwiningrum (2023) find that geographic zoning does not automatically guarantee equal educational access because school capacity may be insufficient relative to demand, while Reviandi et al. (2024) identify continuing problems involving infrastructure, policy communication, and perceptions of preferred schools. The present study builds on this literature by arguing that affirmative justice requires an explicit distinction between eligibility, application, admission, and effective educational access. A student can be eligible for affirmative treatment without successfully applying; can apply without being admitted because of capacity constraints; and can be admitted without necessarily receiving equivalent educational opportunities. Justice therefore has to be assessed across the entire chain.

Affirmative Admission as Distributive Justice

The fundamental justification for affirmative admission is distributive rather than procedural. Public-school seats are a scarce public resource, particularly where demand for certain schools exceeds available capacity. If all students are treated according to identical criteria, families with greater economic and informational resources may possess an advantage in navigating the system, relocating residences, acquiring additional educational preparation, or pursuing alternative schools. Affirmative admission attempts to interrupt this process by reserving a proportion of available seats for students whose socioeconomic circumstances make educational competition structurally unequal. In this respect, the affirmative pathway is not an exception to equality but an instrument for achieving a more substantive conception of equality. It recognizes that identical rules applied to unequal populations can generate unequal outcomes. Research on school choice confirms that socioeconomic status influences families' ability to identify, evaluate, and pursue desirable educational options (Jheng et al. 2022). The redistributive function of affirmative admission therefore lies in altering the allocation mechanism so that disadvantaged students receive a stronger institutional claim to public educational resources.

Surabaya's 2025 policy provides a clear example of this redistributive orientation. The city increased the affirmative quota for public junior secondary schools from 15 percent to 20 percent, explicitly linking the policy to the objective of expanding opportunities for children from poor and near-poor households. The increase is important because it demonstrates that affirmative justice is not merely symbolic. The government has recognized that disadvantaged students require a designated institutional space within the admission system rather than relying exclusively on general pathways. From a distributive perspective, increasing the

quota can reduce the probability that low-income students will be displaced by applicants who possess stronger academic records, greater geographical flexibility, or greater ability to navigate alternative admission routes. The policy therefore attempts to transform socioeconomic disadvantage from a source of exclusion into a recognized criterion for priority.

However, the size of a quota cannot by itself establish distributive justice. A 20 percent affirmative allocation may be insufficient if the proportion of economically disadvantaged students who seek public-school admission is considerably larger. Conversely, a quota can be underutilized if eligible families cannot identify or demonstrate their eligibility. The meaningful indicator is therefore not simply the percentage of seats reserved but the relationship between eligible population, applicants, admitted students, and unmet demand. An affirmative system that reserves 20 percent of seats but admits only a fraction of eligible students because of documentation or registration problems may produce less redistribution than its formal design suggests. This distinction is important because policy evaluation frequently confuses resource allocation with resource utilization. In social-policy research, administrative burdens can significantly reduce participation among eligible populations (Fox, Feng, and Reynolds 2023; Heinrich et al. 2022). The same logic applies to affirmative education.

Furthermore, distributive justice requires attention to the quality of the educational resource being distributed. Admission to a public school is not valuable merely because it produces enrollment; it is valuable because it provides access to teachers, facilities, learning environments, peer networks, and educational credentials. If low-income students are disproportionately admitted to schools with fewer resources or weaker reputations, the affirmative policy may achieve numerical inclusion while reproducing qualitative inequality. This concern is consistent with Indonesian research showing that zoning and admission reforms cannot resolve educational inequality when school quality remains uneven (Chaniago et al. 2024; Reviandi et al. 2024). Consequently, affirmative justice should be evaluated not only by who gets a seat, but also by what educational opportunity that seat represents.

Administrative Burden and the “Eligibility–Access Gap”

The second major issue is the gap between formal eligibility and actual access. Low-income students may be legally entitled to affirmative admission while their families simultaneously face greater difficulty in completing the procedures necessary to claim that entitlement. This is an example of what can be termed the eligibility–access gap. The concept of administrative burden helps explain this phenomenon. Heinrich et al. (2022) distinguish the practical challenges that disadvantaged families experience when accessing public services, including the need to understand programs, comply with administrative requirements, and navigate institutional processes. Fox, Feng, and Reynolds (2023) similarly

demonstrate empirically that burdensome administrative rules can reduce participation in public benefit programs. These findings challenge the assumption that citizens who are formally eligible will automatically participate. In reality, participation depends partly on the institutional costs imposed by the state.

For low-income families, documentation requirements can be particularly significant. Proof of socioeconomic status may require families to possess current identity documents, household records, welfare registration, certificates, or other administrative evidence. Families experiencing poverty are not necessarily administratively “invisible” in the same way, but their interaction with multiple welfare and population-registration systems may generate inconsistencies that require correction before admission. A family may therefore know that it is economically disadvantaged but encounter difficulty proving this status within the particular database used by the admission system. The resulting problem is not a lack of eligibility but a mismatch between social reality and administrative recognition. In such cases, the state effectively delegates the burden of establishing disadvantage to the family itself.

The problem is intensified when eligibility verification occurs through multiple institutions. The more databases and agencies involved, the greater the potential for inconsistencies in names, addresses, household composition, or socioeconomic classification. Administrative integration can reduce this burden when government agencies share information effectively, but it can also create new forms of exclusion if families do not know which institution is responsible for correcting erroneous data. The literature on administrative burden emphasizes that bureaucratic processes can generate learning costs and compliance costs that are especially consequential for populations with fewer resources (Barnes and Riel 2022; Negoita, Levin, and Paprocki 2023). A genuinely affirmative system should therefore seek to shift the burden of verification from families toward the state wherever reliable administrative data already exist.

This principle has direct implications for Surabaya. The city's admission policy has incorporated verification mechanisms and inter-agency coordination, while the 2025 system also involved population-data verification. These measures represent an important institutional development because they can potentially reduce the need for families to repeatedly demonstrate poverty through documents that government agencies already possess. Yet the effectiveness of such integration depends on data accuracy, interoperability, and accessible correction mechanisms. If a family is incorrectly categorized or omitted from a relevant database, the existence of an automated system does not solve the problem; it can make the error harder to challenge. Procedural justice therefore requires not only automated verification but also accessible avenues for appeal, correction, and human assistance.

Digital Admission and Socioeconomic Inequality

The third issue concerns the digitalization of student admission. Online registration is often presented as a mechanism for increasing efficiency, transparency, and equal access because applicants can submit information without physically visiting multiple schools or administrative offices. Yet digital systems can produce new inequalities when access to technology, digital literacy, and reliable connectivity varies across socioeconomic groups. Ma (2021), using international PISA data, demonstrates that digital inequalities persist across schools with different socioeconomic compositions. Gonz lez et al. (2021) similarly show that the digital divide contributed to cumulative educational disadvantage when families differed in their ability to maintain educational participation through technology. These findings suggest that digitalization should not be conceptualized simply as a technical modernization of admission. It represents a redistribution of administrative responsibility and therefore has distributive consequences.

For low-income households, digital exclusion may involve more than the absence of an internet connection. Families may share a single smartphone among several household members, lack sufficient data quotas, have limited knowledge of online forms, or struggle to upload documents in the required formats. Castaco-Mucoz et al. (2025) emphasize that digital inequality is multidimensional and involves infrastructure, skills, institutional support, and the ability to use technology meaningfully. These dimensions are particularly important in admission because the relevant task is time-sensitive. A family that does not understand a digital procedure immediately may miss a registration window, fail to upload a document, or misunderstand its child's ranking position. Unlike ordinary digital-service interactions, admission has an irreversible temporal dimension: once the registration period closes, the family may lose an opportunity that cannot easily be recovered.

The literature on administrative communication provides further evidence that digital communication does not automatically reach disadvantaged groups effectively. Linos et al. (2022), for example, find that communication technologies differ significantly in their effectiveness for reaching disadvantaged populations. Their findings indicate that moving communication toward digital channels can unintentionally exclude individuals who are less likely to use particular forms of digital communication. Barnes and Riel (2022) similarly demonstrate that learning costs can undermine access to public benefits even when governments attempt to simplify programs. In the context of SPMB, this means that publishing admission instructions online is not equivalent to ensuring that disadvantaged families understand them. A policy can be formally transparent but substantively opaque.

The appropriate response is not to reject digital admission but to design it according to principles of digital affirmative action. Online systems should be accompanied by offline assistance, telephone support, school-based registration centers, community outreach, clear multilingual or plain-language instructions

where necessary, and sufficient time for data correction. Importantly, assistance should be concentrated in communities with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage rather than distributed uniformly. Equal provision of a digital platform is not sufficient when families possess unequal capacities to use it. Substantive equality requires differential institutional support.

Information, Procedural Justice, and the Capacity to Claim Rights

A fourth dimension of affirmative justice is informational inequality. Families cannot claim a policy benefit that they do not know exists, do not understand, or cannot distinguish from other admission pathways. Information is therefore a form of institutional capital. Higher-educated parents may possess greater familiarity with government terminology, admission schedules, documentation requirements, ranking procedures, and alternative strategies. Lower-income parents may have less access to these networks or may depend on informal sources of information that can be incomplete or inaccurate. Jheng et al. (2022) demonstrate that socioeconomic status influences school-choice capacity, while Houston and Henig (2023) show that information about school performance can shape families' school preferences. These studies suggest that educational decision-making is not simply a matter of preference; it is structured by unequal access to information.

The problem becomes especially significant when admission policies contain multiple pathways. Surabaya's SPMB, for example, includes affirmative, domicile, achievement, and transfer pathways. A family must therefore determine which pathway is applicable, identify the relevant requirements, understand the ranking mechanism, and consider what to do if the child is unsuccessful in the preferred pathway. The local government indicated that children from poor families who were unsuccessful in the affirmative pathway could still use other pathways such as domicile or achievement.

While this flexibility is potentially beneficial, it also places a cognitive burden on families because they must understand the interaction among multiple admission mechanisms within a limited period. Procedural justice requires that citizens not merely be subject to fair rules but have a meaningful opportunity to understand, participate in, and challenge the processes through which decisions are made. This principle is particularly important for disadvantaged families because procedural complexity can become a hidden selection mechanism. If a low-income applicant fails to register because of inadequate information, the resulting exclusion may appear administratively neutral even though the underlying process disproportionately affected that group. The policy has effectively selected for administrative competence rather than educational eligibility. Such an outcome contradicts the purpose of affirmative action because the very families targeted for assistance become disadvantaged by the procedure through which assistance is delivered.

Surabaya's implementation provides some promising institutional responses. The city has employed registration trials and inter-agency verification mechanisms to improve public understanding and data accuracy. These mechanisms are significant because they acknowledge that procedural accessibility cannot be assumed. Trial registration allows families to identify problems before the formal admission period, while verification mechanisms can reduce discrepancies in administrative records. However, the long-term effectiveness of such measures depends on whether support is sufficiently proactive. Families with the greatest administrative needs may be the least likely to voluntarily seek help. Consequently, outreach should not rely exclusively on the assumption that disadvantaged families will approach government offices themselves.

A more equitable model would use proactive administrative assistance. Government agencies and schools could identify neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income households and provide targeted admission assistance before registration begins. Community organizations, schools, neighborhood administrations, and social-service agencies could function as intermediaries between families and the admission system. This approach would transform procedural justice from a passive principle—"everyone can apply"—into an active institutional responsibility—"the government ensures that eligible families can realistically apply." Such a shift is consistent with evidence that simplifying procedures and reducing learning and compliance costs can increase participation in public programs (Fox, Feng, and Reynolds 2023; Negoita, Levin, and Paprocki 2023).

School Capacity and the Limits of Affirmative Quotas

The fifth issue is school capacity. An affirmative quota can create preferential access, but it cannot create additional school seats by itself. Where demand from low-income families exceeds the number of affirmative seats, competition remains within the disadvantaged group. This creates an important distinction between preferential access and sufficient capacity. An affirmative policy is strongest when the state has enough public-school capacity to accommodate the population targeted by the policy. If capacity is insufficient, the quota may redistribute scarcity rather than resolve educational exclusion. Sulistyosari, Wardana, and Dwiningrum (2023) demonstrate this problem in the Indonesian zoning context: geographical admission rules cannot guarantee equal access when available public-school seats are insufficient relative to the number of prospective students.

The Surabaya case illustrates why this issue matters. The city increased the affirmative quota for SMP Negeri to 20 percent in 2025, but the policy simultaneously involved substantial demand from approximately 38,000 elementary-school graduates across all admission pathways. The relevant policy question is therefore not simply whether 20 percent is a generous quota but whether it corresponds adequately to the size and geographical distribution of the low-

income population seeking public-school places. A quota may be generous in one neighborhood and insufficient in another. Aggregate city-level percentages can therefore conceal localized scarcity.

School capacity also intersects with educational quality. Expanding admission opportunities without sufficient teachers, classrooms, facilities, and student services can weaken the quality of education received by both affirmative and non-affirmative students. The Surabaya government itself has recognized the relationship between student distribution, class capacity, and educational quality, including the need to review the number of learning groups in public junior secondary schools. This suggests that affirmative admission should be coordinated with capacity planning rather than treated as an isolated admission intervention.

An equitable capacity strategy should therefore consider three levels simultaneously. First, the government should estimate the number of eligible low-income students before setting admission quotas. Second, capacity should be mapped geographically so that disadvantaged students are not technically eligible but practically forced to travel long distances because nearby schools lack affirmative seats. Third, the government should ensure that schools receiving large numbers of disadvantaged students have sufficient resources to provide quality education. This third point is crucial because concentration of disadvantaged students can create additional institutional demands related to learning support, counseling, nutrition, transportation, and family engagement. Affirmative justice therefore requires resource-sensitive allocation, not merely seat allocation.

Toward a Multidimensional Model of Affirmative Educational Justice

The preceding analysis demonstrates that affirmative admission should be understood as a multidimensional policy rather than a quota mechanism. Its effectiveness depends on at least four interconnected conditions: distributive targeting, procedural accessibility, administrative capacity, and educational sufficiency. A policy is distributively just when disadvantaged students receive a meaningful share of public educational resources. It is procedurally just when eligible families can understand and navigate the system. It is administratively just when the government assumes responsibility for verifying information and correcting institutional errors. Finally, it is substantively just when admission produces access to educational environments of sufficient quality. These dimensions cannot be separated because failure in one dimension can undermine achievements in another.

The first component should be targeted identification. Instead of requiring families to repeatedly prove poverty through complex documentation, government should maximize the use of integrated administrative data while preserving mechanisms for correction and appeal. This reduces compliance costs and allows affirmative policies to reach households that are eligible but administratively disadvantaged. The second component should be proactive assistance. Schools and

local government offices should provide registration support in communities where socioeconomic disadvantage is concentrated. Assistance should include document checking, digital registration, pathway selection, and explanation of alternative options. Research on administrative burden suggests that simplifying procedures and transferring some burdens from citizens to government institutions can increase participation among eligible populations (Heinrich et al. 2022; Fox, Feng, and Reynolds 2023).

The third component should be digital inclusion. Digital admission platforms should be maintained as the primary infrastructure for transparency and efficiency, but they should not become the exclusive gateway to educational rights. Low-income families should have access to assisted registration points, reliable internet connections, and trained personnel who can help them navigate the system. This is particularly important because socioeconomic differences influence digital access and competence (Ma 2021; Castaco-Mucoz et al. 2025). The principle should be simple: digitalization must reduce administrative burden, not relocate it to disadvantaged households.

The fourth component should be capacity-sensitive affirmative allocation. Quotas should be based not only on political or administrative targets but also on local socioeconomic demand and school capacity. Where the number of eligible students exceeds affirmative seats, governments should provide additional options through nearby public schools, supported private schools, transportation assistance, or other publicly financed educational alternatives. Such measures are especially important because public-school admission alone cannot guarantee educational equity when institutional capacity is limited. The Indonesian evidence on zoning demonstrates that access policies remain constrained by uneven school availability and capacity (Sulistiyosari, Wardana, and Dwiningrum 2023).

The fifth component should be outcome-based evaluation. The success of affirmative admission should not be measured solely by the number or percentage of low-income students admitted. Evaluation should examine whether eligible students apply, whether applicants successfully complete registration, whether they are admitted, where they are admitted, whether they remain enrolled, and what educational quality they receive. This approach would make it possible to distinguish between several different forms of exclusion that are currently collapsed into the single category of “not admitted.” A student who never applies because the family does not understand the procedure represents a different policy failure from a student who applies but loses a competitive ranking despite being eligible.

Surabaya is well positioned to develop such a multidimensional approach because its admission system already incorporates socioeconomic identification and differentiated pathways. The city's decision to increase the affirmative quota in 2025 demonstrates a willingness to strengthen redistributive policy. The next stage should be to ensure that the additional seats are not merely available in formal terms but are genuinely accessible to the families for whom they are intended. This requires linking admission data with social-protection data, expanding targeted

assistance, simplifying verification, and monitoring outcomes across socioeconomic groups. In this sense, affirmative justice should be understood not as preferential treatment at the point of admission alone but as an institutional commitment to reducing the cumulative disadvantages that shape educational access.

Conclusion

The affirmative pathway within the New Student Admission System represents an important attempt to move Indonesian education policy beyond formal equality toward a more substantive conception of educational justice. In Surabaya, the increase of the affirmative quota to 20 percent for public junior secondary schools in 2025 demonstrates an explicit policy commitment to expanding educational opportunities for children from poor and near-poor households. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that a quota alone cannot guarantee affirmative justice. Low-income families may remain disadvantaged because they encounter documentation requirements, information gaps, digital barriers, verification problems, and limited school capacity. The central policy problem is therefore the gap between formal eligibility and effective access. An affirmative policy can redistribute seats while still producing unequal outcomes if the institutional processes required to obtain those seats are more difficult for disadvantaged families to navigate.

Affirmative educational justice should consequently be evaluated through both distributive and procedural dimensions. Distributive justice requires that disadvantaged students receive meaningful priority in the allocation of public-school places, while procedural justice requires that eligible families can understand, access, complete, and challenge the admission process without disproportionate administrative costs. The Surabaya case suggests that the future development of SPMB should combine targeted quotas with proactive identification of beneficiaries, integrated data verification, accessible digital and offline assistance, capacity-sensitive planning, and outcome-based monitoring. The ultimate test of affirmative policy is not whether the government has created a special admission pathway, but whether socioeconomic disadvantage has become less decisive in determining which students can obtain quality public education. When the state assumes responsibility for reducing the administrative and informational burdens faced by low-income families, affirmative admission can move beyond symbolic preference and become a genuine instrument of educational redistribution and social mobility.

References

- Anggraini, Dwi, M. Kendry Widiyanto, and Anggraeny Puspaningtyas. 2024. "Evaluasi Kebijakan Sistem Zonasi Penerimaan Peserta Didik Baru (PPDB)

- Tingkat SMP Negeri di Kota Surabaya." *Jurnal Bintang Pendidikan Indonesia* 2 (3). <https://doi.org/10.55606/jubpi.v2i3.3114>.
- Barnes, Carolyn, and Virginia Riel. 2022. "'I Don't Know Nothing about That': How 'Learning Costs' Undermine COVID-Related Efforts to Make SNAP and WIC More Accessible." *Administration & Society* 54 (10): 1902–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997211073948>.
- Bierbaum, Ariel H., Alisha Butler, and Erin S. O'Keefe. 2022. "School-Centered Community Development and a Quest for Spatial Justice: Exploring Competing Theories of Action in Baltimore." *Planning Theory & Practice* 23 (4): 556–77.
- Brandřn, Maria, and Magnus Bygren. 2022. "The Opportunity Structure of Segregation: School Choice and School Segregation in Sweden." *Acta Sociologica* 65 (4): 392–410.
- Castaco-Mucoz, Jonatan, Celia Moreno-Morilla, Manuel Reina-Parrado, and Isabel Lopez-Cobo. 2025. "Unheard Voices: Identifying Aspects for an Inclusive Digital Education through the Lens of Low-Income Contexts Schools." *Education and Information Technologies* 30: 17909–30.
- Chaniago, Syahril, Desti Cahya Dewi, Siti Hasanah, Yuniar Yusanti, Hamsi Mansur, and Rui Faqri. 2024. "Dynamics and Challenges of the Zoning-Based Student Admission: A Study on Student Opportunities across Regions." *Indonesian Journal of Instructional Media and Model* 6 (2): 125–36. <https://doi.org/10.32585/ijimm.v6i2.6151>.
- Damayanti, Sinta Putri, Amrozi Khamidi, and Karwanto. 2021. "Private Junior High School Marketing Management to Face the New Students Admission (PPDB) Policies of State Junior High School in Surabaya." *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Studies* 3 (1). <https://doi.org/10.29103/ijevs.v3i1.3389>.
- Fox, Ashley, Wenhui Feng, and Megan Reynolds. 2023. "The Effect of Administrative Burden on State Safety-Net Participation: Evidence from Food Assistance, Cash Assistance, and Medicaid." *Public Administration Review* 83 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13497>.
- González, Susana, et al. 2021. "COVID-19 School Closures and Cumulative Disadvantage: Assessing the Learning Gap in Formal, Informal and Non-Formal Education." *European Journal of Education* 56 (4): 607–22.
- Heinrich, Carolyn J., Sayil Camacho, Sarah Clark Henderson, Mynica Hernández, and Ela Joshi. 2022. "Consequences of Administrative Burden for Social Safety Nets that Support the Healthy Development of Children." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 41 (1): 11–44. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22324>.
- Houston, David M., and Jeffrey R. Henig. 2023. "The 'Good' Schools: Academic Performance Data, School Choice, and Segregation." *AERA Open* 9.
- Jheng, Ying-jie, Chun-wen Lin, Jason Chien-chen Chang, and Yuen-kuang Liao. 2022. "Who Is Able to Choose? A Meta-Analysis and Systematic Review of

- the Effects of Family Socioeconomic Status on School Choice." *International Journal of Educational Research* 114: 101943. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2022.101943>.
- Kafka, Judith. 2022. "When Information Is Not Enough: School Choice, Segregation, and the Elusive Notion of Fit." *Teachers College Record* 124 (4): 95–123.
- Linou, Katerina, Stavros Nikiforos Spyrellis, and colleagues. 2022. "How Do Disadvantaged Groups Seek Information About Public Services? A Randomized Controlled Trial of Communication Technologies." *Public Administration Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13437>.
- Ma, Josef Kuo-Hsun. 2021. "The Digital Divide at School and at Home: A Comparison between Schools by Socioeconomic Level across 47 Countries." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 62 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207152211023540>.
- Mahendra, Putu Ronny Angga. 2022. "Pelaksanaan Sistem Zonasi PPDB terhadap Manajemen Mutu Pendidikan Berasaskan Keadilan di SMP Negeri Kota Denpasar Tahun 2021." *Jurnal Komunikasi Hukum* 8 (2): 498–510.
- Mahmud, Fadlilah, Tuti Indriyani, Fransisko Chaniago, and M. Fadly Habibi. 2024. "Kebijakan Sistem Zonasi: Implementasi dalam Penerimaan Peserta Didik Baru di Sekolah Menengah Atas." *JAMP: Jurnal Administrasi dan Manajemen Pendidikan* 7 (1): 149–61.
- Negoita, Marian, Madeleine Levin, and Anne Paprocki. 2023. "Can the State Take the Burden? Implementation of Policies to Increase Elderly Enrollment in SNAP." *Administration & Society* 55 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997221115473>.
- Pel6ez, et al. 2021. "A New Educational Normal: An Intersectionality-Led Exploration of Education, Learning Technologies, and Diversity during COVID-19." *Technology in Society* 66: 101637. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2021.101637>.
- Prihatini, J., D. N. Bakuda, and E. P. Agung. 2024. "Implementasi Kebijakan Sistem Zonasi Penerimaan Peserta Didik Baru Jenjang SMA Negeri Tahun Ajaran 2021/2022 di Kabupaten Bangka Provinsi Kepulauan Bangka Belitung." *Jurnal Kebijakan Pemerintahan* 7 (1): 85–102.
- Putra, Sandika, Afriantoni, and Asep Rohman. 2024. "The Implementation of New Student Admissions through the Zoning System." *El-Idare: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 10 (2). <https://doi.org/10.19109/elidare.v10i2.24361>.
- Reviandi, Reviandi, Berian Hariadi, Rizki Afri Mulia, Susiyanti Meilina, and Rianda Prima Putri. 2024. "Implementation of the Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 1 of 2021 Regarding the Admission of New Students." *Adabi: Journal of Public Administration and Business* 11 (2). <https://doi.org/10.62066/jpab.v11i2.26>.
- Rodrigues, et al. 2022. "Spatial Inequalities in Access to Primary Schools: Evidence from Portugal." *Social Sciences*.

- Sari, et al. 2022. "The Spatial Justice of School Distribution in Jakarta." *Heliyon* 8: e11369.
- Setiawan, Egy Herdiansyah, Salwaa Sahdania, Heru Nurasa, and Mas Halimah. 2022. "Implementation of Zoning-Based New Student Admission System Policy at the High School Level in Bandung City, West Java, Indonesia." *Jurnal Manajemen Pelayanan Publik* 6 (1).
- Stewart, Georgina, Nesta Devine, Leon Benade, and Daniel Couch. 2021. "School Zoning: Spatial Justice and Education Policy in Aotearoa New Zealand." *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-021-00204-5>.
- Sulistiyosari, Yunike, Amika Wardana, and Siti Irene Astuti Dwiningrum. 2023. "School Zoning and Equal Education Access in Indonesia." *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 12 (2): 586–94. <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v12i2.22488>.
- Tapia, Eduardo. 2023. "Schools' Priority Rules and Ethnic School Segregation." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 44 (2): 331–54.
- Ukanwa, Kalinda, Aziza C. Jones, and Broderick J. Turner Jr. 2022. "School Choice Increases Racial Segregation Even When Parents Do Not Care about Race." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119 (35): e2117979119. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2117979119>.
- Wulandari, Dewi Ayu, Nila Arzaqi, Laila Kholid Alfirdaus, and Yuwanto. 2022. "Evaluasi PPDB Sistem Zonasi Tahun 2021/2022 dalam Pelayanan Publik Sektor Pendidikan oleh Ombudsman RI Jawa Tengah." *Spirit Publik: Jurnal Administrasi Publik* 17 (1).
- Zuliyantini, Nandang, and Novie Indrawati Sagita. 2025. "Implementation of Zoning System Policy on Admission of New Student Participants (PPDB) Junior High School in Singkawang City." *Journal of Humanities and Social Studies* 9 (2).

Acknowledgment

None

Funding Information

None

Conflicting Interest Statement

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article.

Publishing Ethical and Originality Statement

All authors declared that this work is original and has never been published in any form and in any media, nor is it under consideration for publication in any journal, and all sources cited in this work refer to the basic standards of scientific citation.

Generative AI Statement

Author During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to assist with language editing, grammar checking, and improving the clarity and readability of the manuscript. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed and revised by the author(s) to ensure their accuracy, originality, and consistency with the intended meaning of the manuscript. The author(s) remain fully responsible for the content of the manuscript, including the accuracy of the information presented, the interpretation of the results, the originality of the work, and the final version submitted for publication. Generative AI tools were not used to replace the intellectual contribution, scientific judgment, or decision-making of the author(s).

Editor During the editorial process, the editor used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools solely to assist with improving the language and clarity of editorial communications. No submitted manuscript or confidential manuscript content was uploaded to or processed by the AI tool. The editor reviewed and edited the AI-assisted output as needed and remains fully responsible for the content and for all editorial decisions.