The neighborhood school model has dominated urban landscapes in the U.S. for over a century, from Clarence Perry's notion of the neighborhood unit, in which self-contained neighborhoods cluster around centrally-located schools, to more recent New Urbanism concepts of community development. School facilities can provide parks and open space within a neighborhood, serve as community centers, promote healthy walking and biking habits, increase accessibility to extracurricular activities and provide many other benefits to a community. Proximity to a "high quality" school often significantly factors into housing choice.

However, the neighborhood school model can have undesirable consequences, such as low enrollments and inefficient use of resources, student populations segregated by class and race, and educational inequity among schools.

Our research analyzes the relationship between neighborhood schools, community development, and elementary student achievement in the Dubuque Community School District in Dubuque, Iowa. The school district and community currently face challenges related to imbalanced enrollment demographics and achievement gaps in the public elementary schools. In addition to exploring the existing school-neighborhood framework, we examine how various changes to school policy, transportation services, and facility use might affect neighborhood traits.

Imbalanced income distribution creates concentrations of poverty in some neighborhood schools. Students attending high-poverty schools may have worse educational experiences than if they were to attend more affluent schools.

Minorities, especially African-Americans, tend to live in low-income pockets near the urban core and, consequently, are disproportionately affected by educational inequity.

Efforts to balance poverty among schools often evoke strong emotional responses from the community. Political infeasibility can inhibit changes to the status quo.

Neighborhoods segregated by income can lead to high concentrations of poverty in neighborhood schools, which can result in lower academic achievement for all students in those schools, regardless of socio-economic status.

When neighborhoods and schools are effectively segregated by income, efforts to balance enrollment can significantly increase transportation-related costs.

Communities that foster social cohesion and healthy neighborhoods facilitate the educational process. Safe neighborhoods, for example, provide safe routes for young people to walk and bike to school.

Quality and quantity of rental housing correlates to renter mobility. Lower quality rental properties tend to turn over more quickly, and clusters of these properties potentially impact student mobility rates in neighborhood schools.

AICP ethics dictate that planners "shall seek social justice by working and choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integrations".

A negative relationship exists between housing preference and low-quality rental properties tend to turn over more quickly, and clusters of these properties potentially impact student mobility rates in neighborhood schools.

School policies not typically linked to community development can have significant impacts on neighborhood schools. Open enrollment policies, for example, can spur an exodus from vulnerable schools, exacerbating problems of inequity and school viability.