

Schools, Neighborhoods, and Student Outcomes

The Intersection of Education and Community Development in Dubuque, Iowa

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ABSTRACT

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 and, ultimately, student outcomes. Additionally, we explore the changing demographics in Dubuque and the resulting implications to socioeconomic and racial diversity within the elementary school system.



KEY FINDINGS

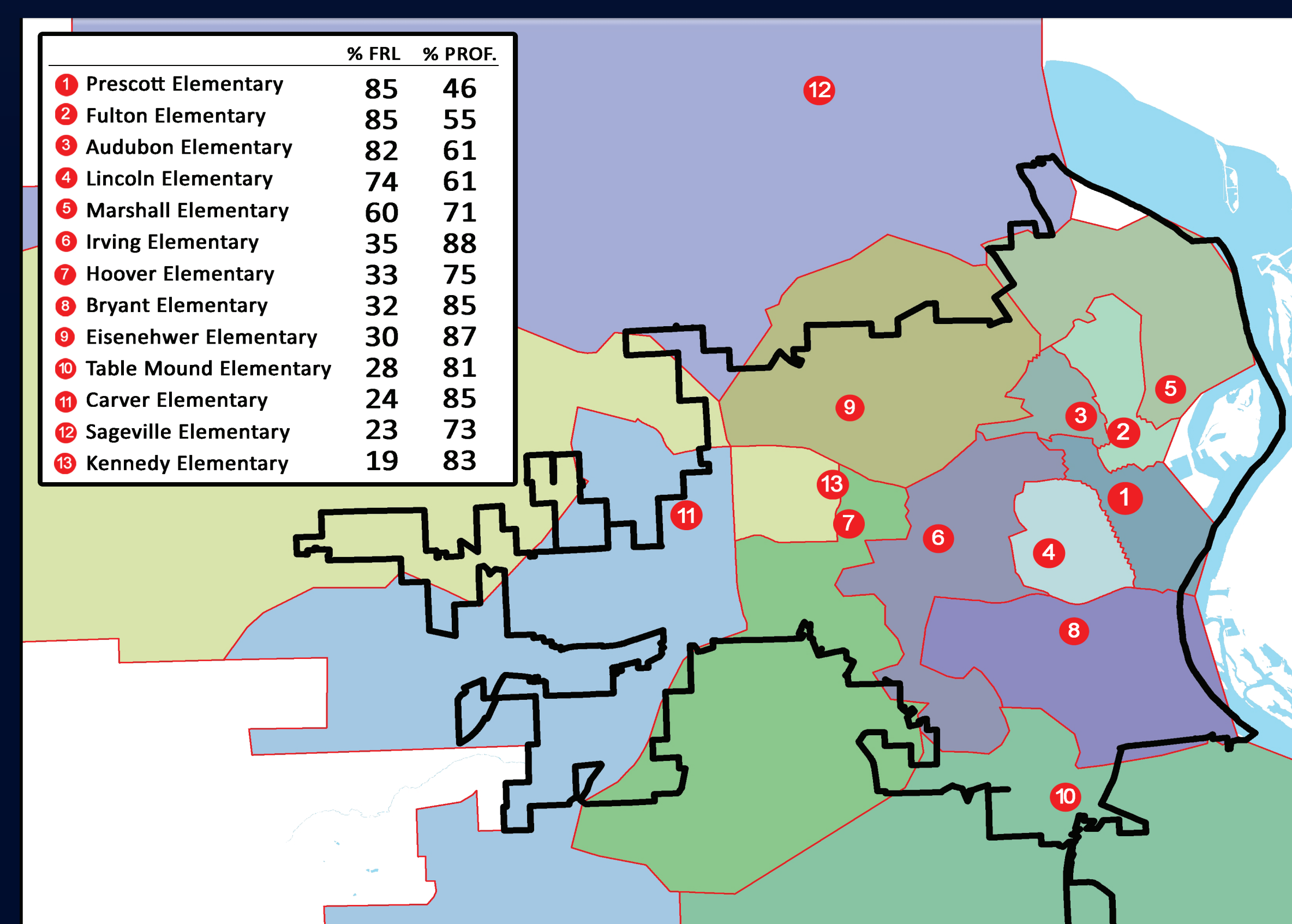
- Peer culture, teacher quality, and parental involvement are often the most significant variables impacting academic achievement.
- Data collection and management is vital to understanding spatial and temporal trends in education.
- The optimal education setting in a community requires close collaboration between city government and school district officials.
- Preferences by the community majority, in terms of both school policy and community development, may undermine educational equity.
- Communities should work together to clearly define short-term and long-term goals that address the needs of both education and community development.

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WHAT ARE the CHALLENGES of the NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL MODEL?

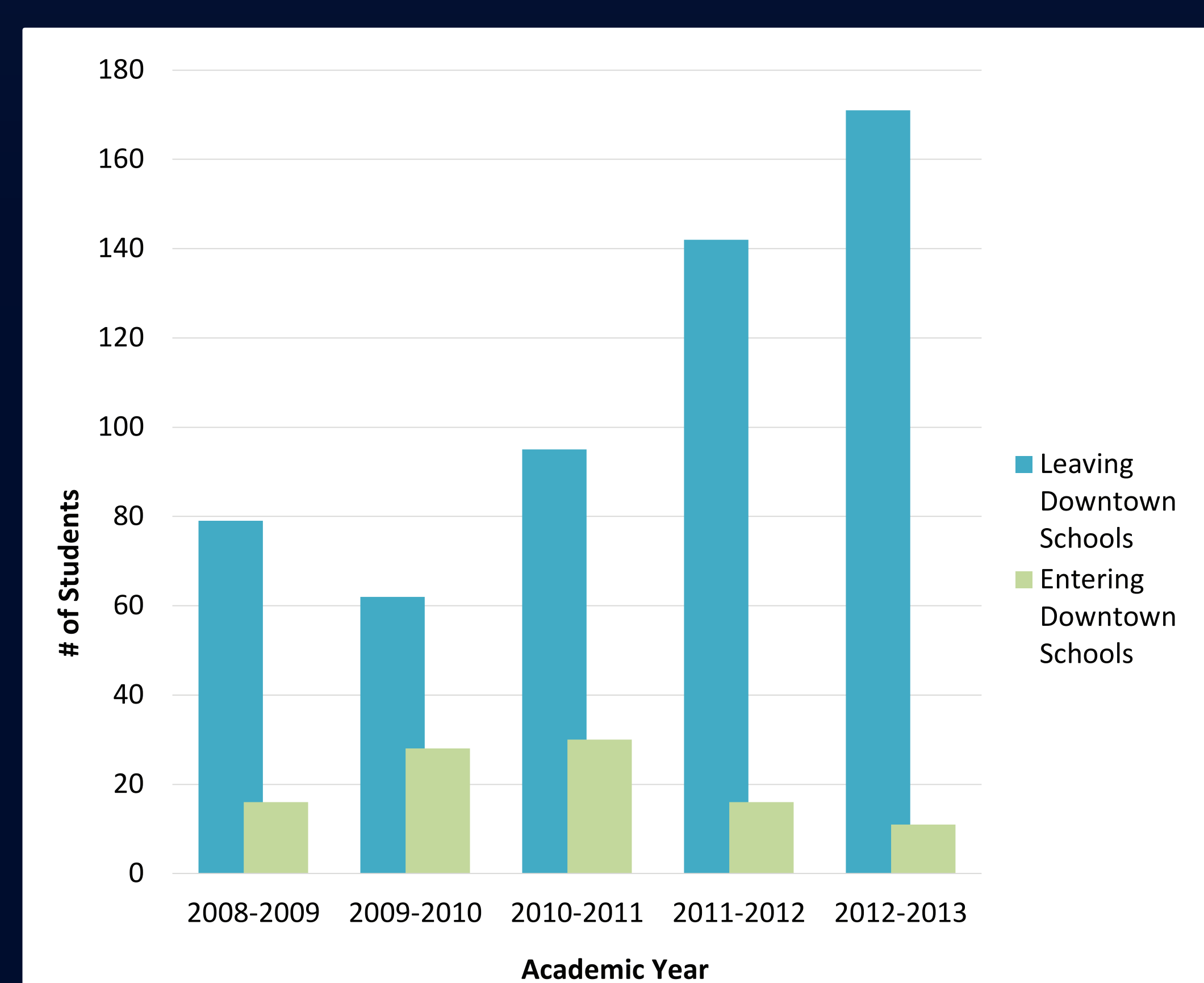
- Because housing tends to cluster by home value, populations are often effectively segregated by income. Consequently, neighborhood schools reflect the predominant socioeconomic characteristics of the surrounding households.
- Imbalanced income distribution creates concentrations of poverty in some 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.



Free and Reduced Lunch Rates and 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency in Dubuque's Public Elementary Schools (2007-2012 5-year Averages)

WHY SHOULD PLANNERS CARE about EDUCATION?

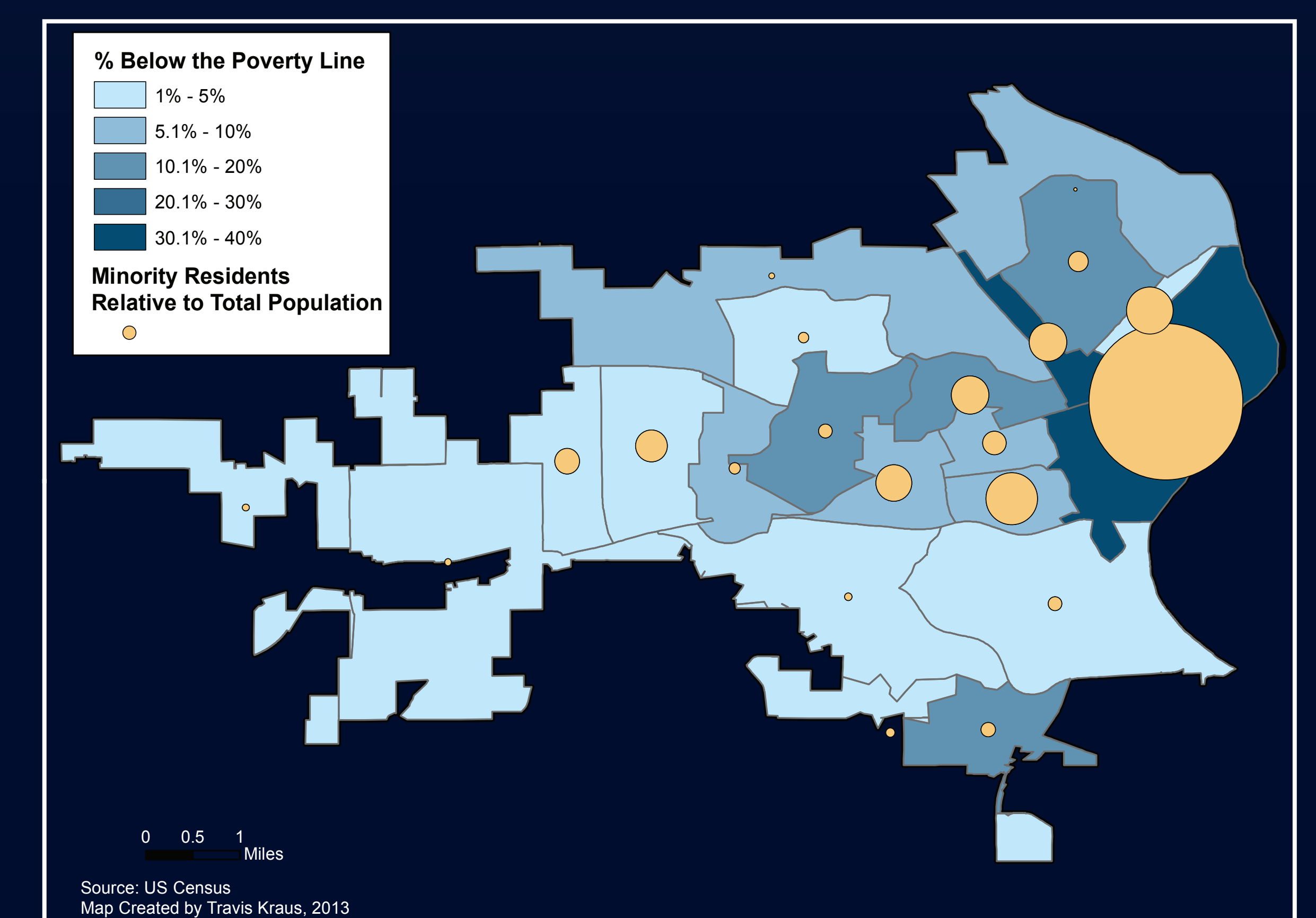
- AICP ethics dictate that planners "shall seek social justice by working and choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integrations".
- A negative relationship exists between housing preference and low-performing schools, which can lead to declining enrollment. Test scores can further drop as privileged families locate elsewhere. These self-reinforcing effects perpetuate relatively low home values in catchment areas of low-performing neighborhood schools.
- New school construction often occurs on the fringes of a community due to price and availability of land. School siting can, therefore, contribute to sprawl. New schools can also pull privileged students away from vulnerable 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.



Students Leaving and Entering Downtown Public Elementary Schools in Dubuque during 2012-2013 Academic Year Through Open Enrollment

WHY SHOULD SCHOOLS CARE about NEIGHBORHOODS?

- 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.



Percent of Residents Below Poverty Line and Minority Proportions by 2010 Census Tract in Dubuque, Iowa