

Executive Summary

Many Americans believe that urban schools are failing to educate the students they serve. Even among people who think that schools are doing a good job overall are those who believe that in certain schools, conditions are abysmal. Their perception, fed by numerous reports and observations, is that urban students achieve less in school, attain less education, and encounter less success in the labor market later in life.

Researchers and educators often link this perceived performance of urban youth to home and school environments that do not foster educational and economic success. Moreover, urban educators report the growing challenges of educating urban youth who are increasingly presenting problems such as poverty, limited English proficiency, family instability, and poor health. Finally, testimony and reports on the condition of urban schools feed the perception that urban students flounder in decaying, violent environments with poor resources, teachers, and curricula, and with limited opportunities.

This report addresses these widespread beliefs about the performance of urban students, and their family and school environments. Using data from several national surveys, it compares urban students and schools with their suburban and rural counterparts on a broad range of factors, including student population and background characteristics, afterschool activities, school experiences, and student outcomes.

A specific focus of this report is how poverty relates to the characteristics of the students and schools studied. Since, on average, urban public schools are more likely to serve low income students, it is possible that any differences between urban and non-urban schools and students are due to this higher concentration of low income students. In this study, the methodology used to explore differences between urban, suburban, and rural students and schools incorporates a control for the concentration of poverty in the school. Thus, this study allows comparisons to be made between urban and other schools and students, after factoring out

one major characteristic of urban schools that is often related to differences between schools—the higher concentration of low income students.

In addition, this report focuses on those urban schools that serve the highest concentrations of low income students, in light of national concern over these schools. Previous research has suggested that students from schools with high concentrations of low income students and students from urban schools would be expected to have less successful educational outcomes, less supportive home environments, and less positive school experiences than students from other schools. In fact, this study finds large differences between urban and non-urban schools and between high poverty and low poverty schools on most of the indicators of student background, school experiences, and student outcomes studied.

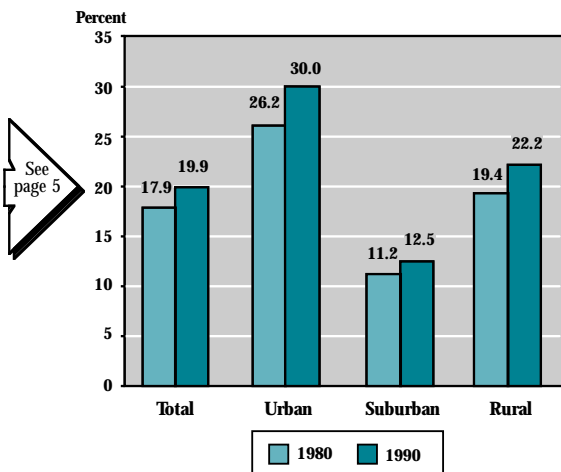
Students attending schools with both an urban location *and* a high poverty concentration were expected, therefore, to have particularly unfavorable circumstances. This report documents how urban high poverty schools and their students compare with their counterparts in other locations across many areas of concern, according to national surveys. Furthermore, the analysis specifically examines whether these schools and students compare less favorably than predicted, when considering together the effects of poverty concentration and an urban location. If the differences between urban high poverty schools and others are no greater than predicted, it indicates that the circumstances in these schools are related in predicted ways to the effects of poverty concentration and an urban location added together. However, if the differences are greater than predicted, it indicates that the effects of poverty concentration and location interact, and that the level for that particular measure exceeds the level that was predicted from these two effects alone. When this occurs, urban high poverty schools and their students are said to compare particularly unfavorably (or favorably, as the case may be) to other schools on that measure.

Student Characteristics

This study describes students who attended public schools primarily in the 1980s and examines their outcomes through 1990. Although the number of students in urban schools remained stable at about 11 million between 1980 and 1990, the proportion of those students who were living in poverty or who had difficulty speaking English increased over the decade. The proportion of students in urban schools who belonged to an Hispanic or “other” minority group (which includes Asians and Pacific Islanders) increased over the decade, while the proportion who were white declined and the proportion who were black stayed about the same. The increasing proportion of children with non-English backgrounds in urban locations has led to a greater proportion of children with difficulty speaking English in those locations.

Urban children were more than twice as likely to be living in poverty than those in suburban locations (30 percent compared with 13 percent in 1990), while 22 percent of rural children were poor in 1990 (figure A). Likewise, urban students were more likely than suburban or rural students to receive free or reduced price lunch (38 percent compared with 16 and 28 percent,

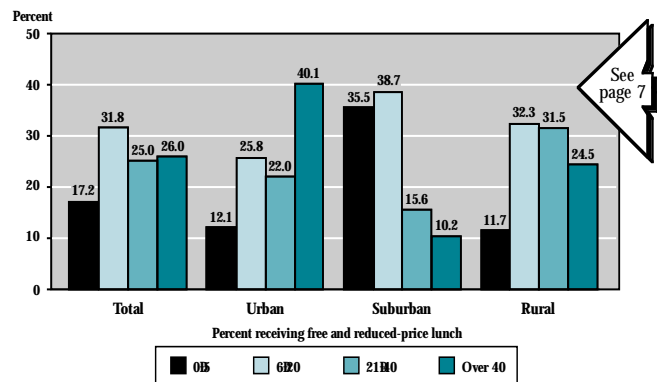
Figure A
Poverty rates for children under 18, by urbanicity:
1980 and 1990



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, Nos. 181 and 133.

respectively). It follows then, that urban students were more likely to be attending schools with high concentrations of low income students. Forty percent of urban students attended these high poverty schools (defined as schools with more than 40 percent of students receiving free or reduced price lunch), whereas 10 percent of suburban students and 25 percent of rural students did so (figure B). Previous research suggests that a high concentration of low income students in a school is related to less desirable student performance.

Figure B
Percentage distribution of students, by school
poverty concentration within urbanicity categories:
1987–88



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1987–88.

Aside from the greater likelihood of being poor and having difficulty speaking English, urban students were more likely than suburban students to be exposed to risks that research has associated with less desirable outcomes. Urban students were more likely to be exposed to safety and health risks that place their health and well-being in jeopardy, and were less likely to have access to regular medical care. They were also more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior, such as teenage pregnancy, that can make desirable outcomes more difficult to reach.

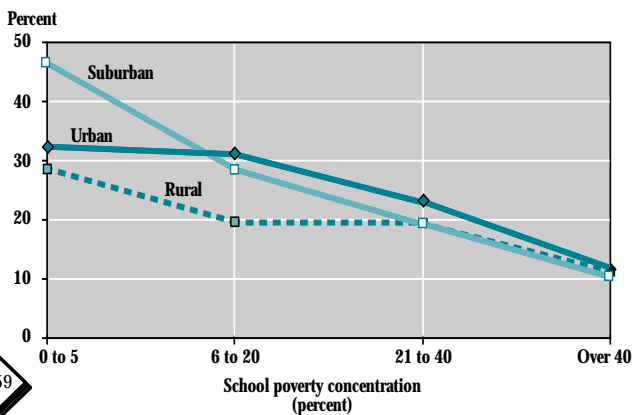
Student Background Characteristics and Afterschool Activities

Urban students were equally or more likely than other students to have families with certain characteristics that have been found to support desirable education outcomes, including high parental educational attainment, high expectations for their children's education, and frequent communication about school. However, there were some important exceptions. They were less likely to have the family structure, economic security, and stability that are most associated with desirable educational outcomes.

This section and those that follow use the analysis methodology described above to compare urban students with students in other locations while accounting for differences in school poverty concentration, and to compare students in urban high poverty schools with those in other high poverty schools. When compared to their suburban and rural counterparts, students in urban and urban high poverty schools were

- at least as likely to have a parent who completed college (figure C);

Figure C
Percentage of 8th-grade students with a parent in the household who had completed 4 years of college, by urbanicity and school poverty concentration: 1988



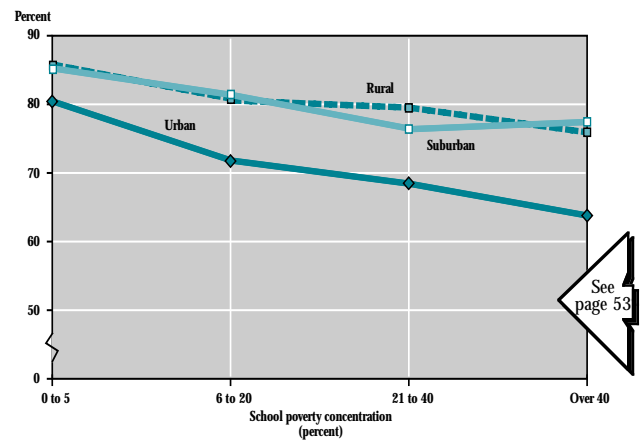
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Base Year Survey.

- at least as likely to have parents with high expectations for their education; and
- as likely to have parents who talked with them about school.

However, they were

- less likely to live in two-parent families (figure D);

Figure D
Percentage of 8th-grade students living in a two-parent family, by urbanicity and school poverty concentration: 1988



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Base Year Survey.

- more likely to have changed schools frequently; and
- less likely than some but not all other groups to have at least one parent in a two-parent family working.

When examining their afterschool activities, students in urban schools, overall, were just as likely to be offered school sports activities and to work after school as students in schools elsewhere, but were less likely to participate in school-sponsored sports activities, even after accounting for poverty concentration. The afterschool experiences of students in urban high poverty schools were similar to those of students in high poverty schools in other locations.

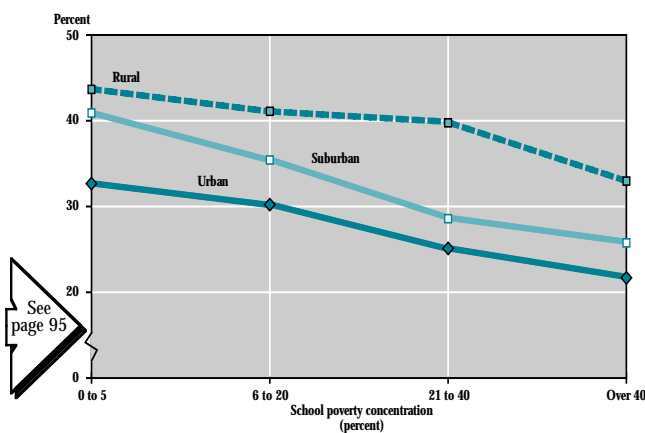
In all of the student background and afterschool characteristics studied, students in urban high poverty schools compared in predicted ways to those in other schools. The differences between these students and students in other schools were related to the effects of poverty concentration and an urban location added together.

School Experiences

This report examines a wide range of school experiences, including: school staffing and resources, school program offerings, and student behavior. It finds that students and teachers in urban schools had greater challenges to overcome in a number of areas compared to their suburban and rural counterparts, even when the higher concentration of poverty in urban schools is considered. For example:

- Urban schools had larger enrollments, on average, than suburban or rural schools at both the elementary and secondary levels.
- Urban teachers had fewer resources available to them and less control over their curriculum than teachers in other locations, as did teachers in urban high poverty schools compared with those in rural high poverty schools (figure E).

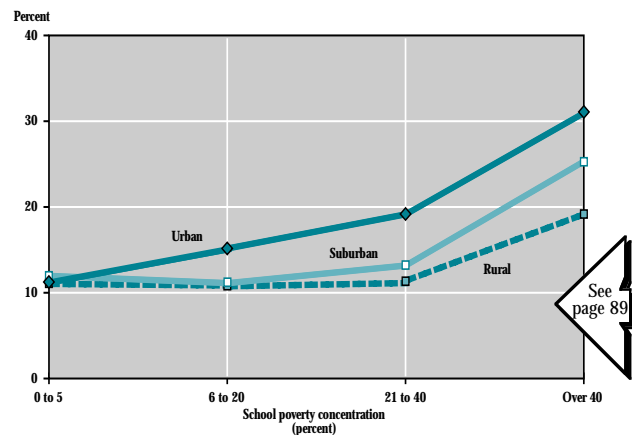
Figure E
Percentage of teachers who think that teachers have a great deal of influence on establishing curriculum, by urbanicity and school poverty concentration: 1987–88



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1987–88, Teacher File.

- Teachers in urban and urban high poverty schools had comparable levels of experience and salaries as their suburban counterparts, but they had more experience and higher salaries than most of their rural counterparts. However, administrators of urban and urban high poverty schools had more difficulty hiring teachers than their counterparts in most other schools (figure F).

Figure F
Percentage of principals who report difficulty hiring teachers, by urbanicity and school poverty concentration: 1987–88

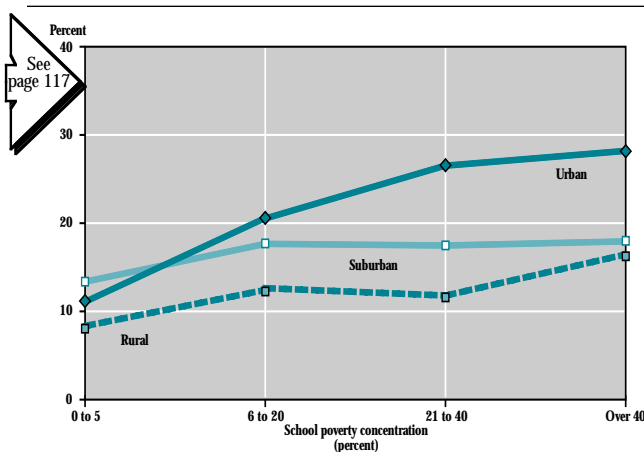


SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1987–88, Administrator File.

- Teacher absenteeism, an indicator of morale, was more of a problem in urban schools than in suburban or rural schools, and in urban high poverty schools compared with rural high poverty schools.
- Students in urban and urban high poverty schools were just as likely as their non-urban counterparts to be offered and to participate in certain programs and courses, with the following exceptions: they were more likely than their rural counterparts to have attended preschool, and they were less likely than most other groups to have attended schools with gifted and talented programs.

- Student behavior problems were more common in urban schools than in other schools, particularly in the areas of student absenteeism, classroom discipline (figure G), weapons possession, and student pregnancy. However, the use of alcohol was less of a problem in urban schools than in rural schools.

Figure G
Percentage of teachers of 8th-grade students who spend at least 1 hour per week maintaining classroom order and discipline, by urbanicity and school poverty concentration: 1988

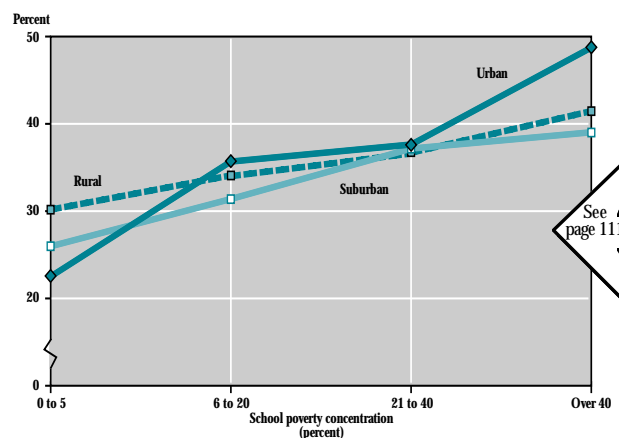


SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Base Year Teacher File.

- Students in high poverty schools regardless of location were less likely to feel safe in school, or to spend much time on homework than those in low poverty schools. However, students in urban high poverty schools were much more likely to watch television excessively (figure H) and to require more discipline by teachers in class compared with their counterparts in other locations; they were also more likely to be absent and possess weapons than those in rural high poverty schools.

Among the school experiences studied, urban high poverty schools and their students exceeded the levels predicted when considering the effects of urbanicity and poverty concentration in three areas: students

Figure H
Percentage of 10th-grade students who watch 3 or more hours of television on weekdays, by urbanicity and school poverty concentration: 1990



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, First Follow-up Student File.

were more likely to watch television excessively, less likely to have access to gifted and talented programs, and were more likely to have minority teachers (considered by many to be a favorable circumstance). The levels of these indicators were unusual when compared with non-urban schools, and were not explained solely by the effects of poverty concentration and location added together.

Urban high poverty schools often compared unfavorably to rural high poverty schools on measures of school experiences, but were often similar to suburban high poverty schools on these measures. Further analysis suggested that high poverty concentration in rural schools was not as strongly related to students' school experiences as it was in urban or suburban schools.

Student Outcomes

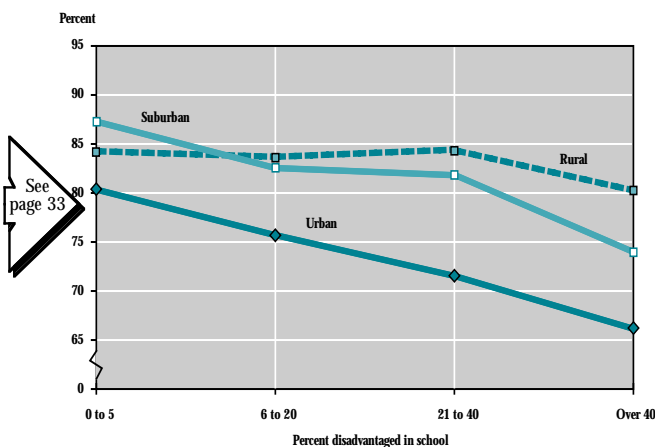
Many of the student background characteristics and school experiences of urban students outlined above would suggest that students in urban and particularly urban high poverty schools had greater challenges to overcome than did suburban or rural students in

achieving academically, attaining education, and encountering success in the labor market. This study finds important differences in the achievement, attainment, and economic outcomes of urban students compared with those in other locations. These differences were more pronounced at younger ages and many diminish with age. However, for a minority of students who attended urban schools, the likelihood of long-term poverty and unemployment was much greater than for those who attended school in other locations.

When urban students were compared with suburban and rural students, while accounting for the higher concentration of poverty in urban schools, and when students in urban high poverty schools were compared with those in other high poverty schools:

- 8th graders in urban and urban high poverty schools scored lower on achievement tests, but their 10th-grade counterparts scored about the same as those in other locations.
- Students in urban and urban high poverty schools were less likely to complete high school on time (figure I), but they completed postsecondary degrees at the same rate as others.

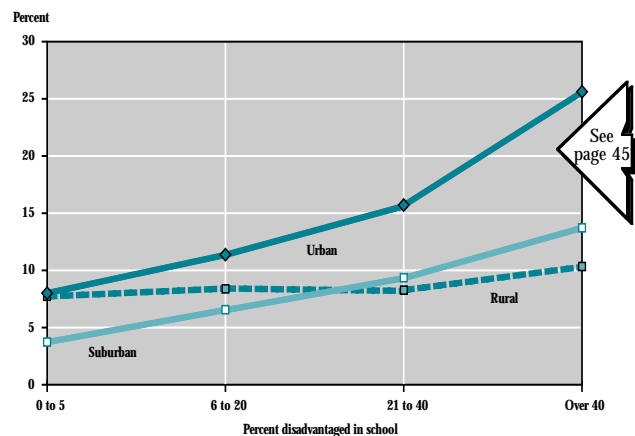
Figure I
Percentage graduating on time among the sophomore class of 1980, by urbanicity and percent disadvantaged in school



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School and Beyond Study, Third Follow-up Survey, 1986.

- Young adults who had attended urban schools had lower rates of participation in full-time work or school 4 years after most of them would have left high school, but had similar participation rates 7 to 15 years after high school; those from urban high poverty schools had levels of activity that were similar to those from other high poverty schools.
- Young adults who had attended urban and urban high poverty schools had much higher poverty and unemployment rates later in life than those who had attended other schools (figures J and K).

Figure J
Percentage of young adults living in poverty, by high school urbanicity and percent disadvantaged in high school: 1990

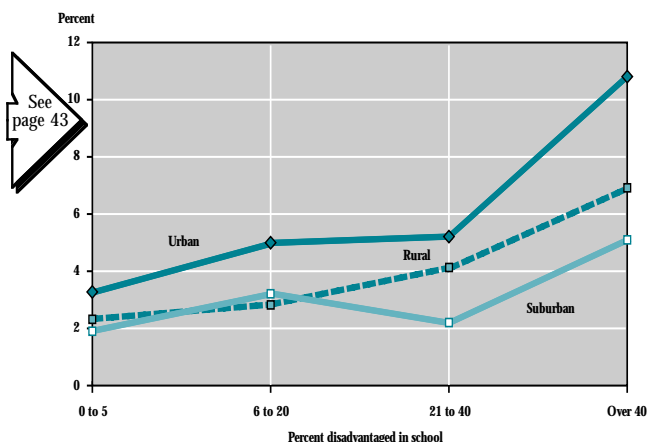


SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1990.

Although students in urban high poverty schools compared less favorably than students in high poverty schools located elsewhere on many measures, it is important to keep their absolute levels of performance in mind. Despite the challenges that students from urban high poverty schools face, the great majority of these students graduated from high school on time (66 percent), and during their young adult years, were more likely than not to be employed or to be in school full time (73 percent), and were living above the poverty line (74 percent).

The levels of the outcomes measured for students from urban high poverty schools would have been

Figure K
Percentage of young adults unemployed, by high school urbanicity and percent disadvantaged in high school: 1990



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1990.

predicted from the effects of poverty concentration and an urban location added together. Given the large overall variation on these measures by urbanicity and poverty concentration, the outcomes for these students were not unusual.

Discussion

Looking across all of the measures of student background, school experiences, and student outcomes studied, some general findings emerge:

- Urban students and schools compared less favorably to their non-urban counterparts on many measures even after accounting for the higher concentration of low income students in urban schools.
- Urban high poverty schools and their students performed similarly or more favorably than other high poverty schools and students on half of the measures studied. On these measures, large differences were found by school poverty concentration, so that high poverty concentra-

tion seemed to present equally challenging circumstances in all locations.

- On the other half of the measures studied, urban high poverty schools and their students compared unfavorably to other high poverty schools. These measures tended to show consistent differences by location across the levels of poverty concentration.
- When considering the large overall variations by location and poverty concentration, urban high poverty schools and their students, with few exceptions, were no different than the effects of location and poverty concentration added together would have predicted.

Previous research has suggested that students from schools with high concentrations of low income students, and students from urban schools would have less supportive family backgrounds, less favorable school experiences, and less successful educational outcomes than students from other schools. This study provides evidence that students in urban schools are more likely than those in other locations to have characteristics such as poverty, difficulty speaking English, and numerous health and safety risks that present greater challenges to them and their educators. This study also provides evidence that important differences do exist between the student background characteristics, school experiences, and outcomes of urban and other students, and that these differences represent more than that which can be attributed to differences in the school concentration of low income students. When these differences remain after accounting for poverty concentration, it is possible that the above-cited differences between urban and non-urban student characteristics, or other differences between urban, suburban, and rural locations come into play.

However, in every domain of students' lives studied—student background characteristics, school experiences, and student outcomes—there were instances where urban students and schools were similar to their non-

urban counterparts after accounting for poverty concentration, suggesting that some of the often-cited bleak perceptions of urban schools and students may be overstated. Given the greater challenges that urban students and schools face, the fact that they were similar to their non-urban counterparts on these measures suggests that they may not only be meeting the challenges, but performing above expectations in these areas.

Moreover, this report provides evidence that challenges the perception that urban schools with the highest poverty concentrations are always much worse off than other schools. The report documents large variations in schools and students in all of the important areas considered when assessing school performance—student background, school experiences, and student outcomes. Within this overall variation, differences between urban high poverty schools and other high poverty schools did not usually exceed differences between urban and other schools at other levels of poverty concentration. On half of the measures, urban high poverty schools did compare unfavorably to high poverty schools in other locations; however, in an equal number of cases, urban high poverty schools were similar or even compared favorably.

The findings from this study suggest certain areas where the differences between the student background, school experiences, and outcomes of students in urban and other schools—particularly in urban high poverty schools compared with other high poverty schools—are

most pronounced. These areas could benefit from further research:

Student Background

- Single-parent families
- School mobility

School Experiences

- Difficulty hiring teachers
- Teacher control over curriculum
- Weekday television watching
- Student absenteeism
- Classroom discipline
- Weapons possession
- Student pregnancy

Student Outcomes

- High school completion
- Poverty and unemployment of young adults