

# Where do children in affordable housing go to school?

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Parents looking to buy a home know the feeling: Do they go for the bigger, nicer and more affordable house in the area not known for

having great schools? Or do they go for the smaller, dated and more expensive residence in the neighborhood with great schools?

But what happens when parents have no choice in the matter at all?

Spencer Shanholtz, a researcher at the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, conducted a study to ascertain the level of access that economically disadvantaged people have to good schooling.

**Q. Where are the high-performing schools within the state and how did you go about identifying them?**

A. In my study, a school proficiency index developed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development was used to measure [school performance](#). It identifies fourth-grade reading and math performance levels at the neighborhood level.

School proficiency varies widely across Virginia. High-performing schools tend to be clustered in the suburbs around the state's major metro areas, such as Richmond, Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. Certain rural neighborhoods also display some of the highest school proficiency levels.



Spencer Shanholtz says improved residential choice among lower-income households can help their children gain access to quality schools. Credit: Dan Addison, University Communications

**Q. What was the correlation between school performance and median home value?**

A. A pattern emerges when median home value is compared to the school proficiency index: a neighborhood's high median [housing](#) value is correlated with its high school proficiency level.

This may come as no surprise to many, yet it has important implications for many families struggling to afford housing at all, let alone in an area where their children can attend a good school. Housing costs essentially

price a large portion of Virginians out of the opportunity to attend a high-performing school.

## **Q. How does subsidized housing play into all this?**

A. When we map subsidized housing locations, it is evident that the majority of the subsidized housing locations are outside of the high-performing school districts. The average school proficiency level available to those living in subsidized properties in Virginia is 39.5—10 points lower than the statewide average of 49 available to all housing units. Only 9% of neighborhoods with subsidized housing have access to the top one-fourth of school proficiency.

## **Q. Overall, what were your big takeaways? Did anything surprise you?**

A. Most kids who grow up in subsidized housing in Virginia do not have access to high-quality schools.

Attendance at a high-performing school is critically important in determining short-term academic performance and long-term life outcomes, such as college attendance, poverty, lifetime earnings and health. The relationships presented here demonstrate the difficulty of obtaining subsidized housing in an area where a family can send their children to a quality school.

What surprised me was that this issue has been persistent and unchanging over the past 50 years. As the number of new subsidized housing units put into service has increased dramatically since 1970, the average school proficiency of the neighborhoods where these properties are placed has remained consistently low over time. Subsidized [housing units](#) are placed in neighborhoods with the same low school proficiency

as they have been in the past, rather than being placed in areas with higher school proficiency.

## **Q. What are some potential housing policy solutions?**

A. Decreasing the mismatch between high-performing schools and students from low-income households depends on either decreasing the disparities in public education quality or using housing policy to promote the co-location of [low-income households](#) with high-quality schools.

Since subsidized housing is frequently placed in less desirable areas that tend to have low [school](#) proficiency, shifting state and local housing policy may help to improve the situation. This could simply include prioritizing, incentivizing and supporting the development of affordable housing near quality schools. Zoning changes that increase density and require a certain percentage of affordable housing near good schools would also help.

## **Q. Anything else you'd like to add?**

A. Improved residential choice among lower-income households can help their kids access quality schools. It is important that kids from economically disadvantaged families have access to good education so that they will have a better outlook for employment, income and overall wellbeing than their parents' generation.

Provided by University of Virginia

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