

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: November 16, 2012

Study: Housing Aid No Path to Better Schooling

By **Sarah D. Sparks**

The four largest federal programs to house families in poverty do not help these low-income parents get their children into higher-quality schools, particularly if they are black or Hispanic, according to a new [study](#).

The Washington-based Poverty and Race Action Council this week released its third in a series of studies on the intersection of federal housing and education policies. It analyzed families with children using the four most common forms of housing assistance, including:

- About 360,000 families with children who live in free- or reduced-rent public housing built and run by local governments;
- About 400,000 who live in privately owned homes subsidized by the Project-based Section 8 program;
- Roughly 900,000 families with children living in housing rented below the market rate because the building developers receive low-income-housing tax credits; and,
- About 1.2 million families, including 2.5 million children, who use housing-choice vouchers specifically intended to help poor parents move their children to better schools, by subsidizing payments for families renting in higher-priced areas.

Study authors Ingrid Gould Ellen, a public policy and urban planning professor at New York University, and Keren Mertens Horn, an assistant professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts Boston, analyzed the state ranking, as measured by students' scores on state mathematics and language arts tests, of schools nearest to the families in each of the four housing programs, as well as the percentages of minority students and those in poverty at those schools.

While the average proficiency percentile ranking in math and literacy in schools serving all households was 53, the researchers found rankings much lower for families using housing assistance: 19 out of 100 for those in public housing; 26 for those using housing-choice vouchers; and 28 for those in Section 8 housing. Only housing tax credits brought families closest to a school slightly above average for all poor families, 31 versus 30 for schools attended by poor students generally.

"All the federal housing programs are having the tendency to place children in lower-performing schools, and schools with much higher poverty," said Philip Tegeler, the council's executive. Only

[← Back to Story](#)

EDUCATION WEEK
**Multi-User
LICENSING**



**UNLOCK
ESSENTIAL
CONTENT**
Open your
team's potential

+ Click here for more info

about a quarter of eligible families receive housing assistance, he noted, and, "For those families lucky enough to get this assistance, we should be doing a better job of connecting these children to better life opportunities in the form of higher-performing schools."

While schools near all households in the study had, on average, just under 46 percent of students receiving federally subsidized free or reduced-price lunches, families receiving federal housing assistance ended up in far more concentrated poverty. The poverty rates at the schools these children now could attend ranged from 67 percent to 82 percent, depending on the housing program.

"To my mind, the study is highly significant," said Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Century Foundation. He noted that it confirms prior research that finds families using housing vouchers often ended up moving not far from their old neighborhoods, or "moving to a different neighborhood, but even though they physically moved, they kept their kids in the old school."

Part of the problem, he suggested, was that parents and children alike may feel out of place in a new school. "You can imagine this is not an easy thing for a low-income family to feel welcome and a part of more-affluent communities; that's a challenge," Mr. Kahlenberg said.

Ms. Ellen argued that it's not clear whether families don't feel comfortable moving away, or simply don't have the information and support to do so.

For example, she said, "The families who receive housing vouchers are often in very precarious positions, and their priority is just trying to find a roof and a safe place for their kids, not so much what the neighborhood schools are like."

Housing authority agents often provide lists of landlords known to accept tenants receiving assistance, she said, but these can end up restricting families' search to lower-income neighborhoods.

RELATED BLOG



[Visit this blog.](#)

The report comes just as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has begun to use **incentives** for housing grant programs to coordinate more closely with school districts.

Some local housing programs, such as one in Montgomery County, Md., have had greater success improving students' access to high-quality schools by requiring all housing developments of 50 units or more to dedicate 15 percent of those units to affordable housing units.

Mr. Kahlenberg argued that school districts can take the lead in integrating housing by opening their enrollment to more districtwide, as opposed to zoned, student-assignment policies.

"Many middle class families chose to locate to an area based on the promise that their kids could go to high-quality, middle-class schools," Mr. Kahlenberg said. "Once you break the automatic tie between a residential area and a particular school, people are more willing to live in integrated neighborhoods. In school districts that have public school choice options, housing tends to be less segregated."