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**THE LOSS OF NEIGHBORHOOD SECONDARY SCHOOLS: HOW THE
DISTANCE A STUDENT LIVES FROM THEIR SCHOOL CAN AFFECT THEIR
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

By
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A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Psychology
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Masters of Arts in School Psychology
at
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Roberta Dihoff

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Abstract

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THE LOSS OF NEIGHBORHOOD SECONDARY SCHOOLS: HOW THE DISTANCE
A STUDENT LIVES FROM THEIR SCHOOL CAN AFFECT THEIR ACADEMIC
ACHIEVEMENT

2010/11

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Master of Arts in School Psychology

The purpose of this study is to examine whether the distance a student lives from their school influences their academic achievement. In detail, this study has correlated the distance in miles a student lives from his or her school with their grade point average at the end of their freshman and junior years. Data has been collected from 100 participants at two private high schools in southern New Jersey, Our Lady of Mercy Academy and Saint Augustine College Preparatory School. Both schools are grades ninth through twelfth. Both schools are catholic schools but you do not have to be catholic to attend. Both schools operate off of a 4.0 grade point average scale. The data collected was archival dating back no more than ten years ago. Each participant's town of residence was given as well as their GPA's from ninth and eleventh grades. A test for correlation was used to determine the effect of distance on a student's academic achievement. The researcher hypothesizes that students who do not attend neighborhood schools and therefore must commute will not do as well, academically, as students who do attend neighborhood schools.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The idea of a “neighborhood school” dates back as far as the late eighteen hundreds, early nineteen hundreds. Then, school reformers believed that students should not be required to walk very far to school. They believed that a half of a mile was the farthest any child should have to walk. This belief was again brought to light in the late nineteen-forties after World War II when the National Council on Schoolhouse Construction (NCSC) stated that schools should be built in locations where the greatest number of students could walk. These locations, within the neighborhoods, should be near public amenities such as playgrounds and libraries. (McDonald, 2010) Now researchers believe that neighborhood schools should allow at the very most for a ten minute walk or a two and a half minute bike ride (Ewing, Forinash, & Schroeer, 2005).

More recently in 2004 the debate over neighborhood schools was brought up again. The Council of Educational Facility Planners International and the Environmental Protection Agency stated that neighborhood schools are desirable for a number of reasons including its smaller size, the community involvement, high quality education, and the ability for children to walk or bike to school safely. (McDonald, 2010)

This past decade has sparked more and more interested in the debate over neighborhood schools versus smart-growth schools versus transportation mandated schools. Neighborhood schools are favorable for many communities because they provide a safe commute to school for children of all ages by way of walking or biking. When parents where asked across the country why their children do not walk or bike to

school the most popular two answers were because of the long distance and because of the lack of sidewalks. Another reason that neighborhood schools are preferred is because the walking and biking promotes healthy children. Recent health trends have shown that the more children that walk or bike to school the less the average rate of obesity, diabetes and asthma in children. The loss of neighborhood schools over the past few years has shown as the rates of childhood obesity have sky-rocketed. (Ewing, Forinash, & Schroer, 2005)

Due to the economy redistricting has become more and more popular over the last couple of years. When a school district redistricts it typically changes the “boundaries” between neighborhoods that determine which school a child will attend. When the economy goes downhill districts engage in this activity to save money. Redistricting disrupts many aspects of the school mainly the loss of neighborhood schools. The school district will either build one large school and send all the students to that one school or close down some neighborhood schools and send students to the “closest” one to them. When building one large school for every child it makes it harder for parents to become involved and harder for students to get involved in afterschool activities or stay after for extra help because everyone is following a bus schedule. Working parents of these students now have to rely on a bus to bring their son or daughter home. When eliminating some schools the student may get split up from their classmates that they have grown up with and live near. This has been proven to be detrimental to the students’ academic achievement in the long run. (Bogart & Cromwell, 2000)

Redistricting is not only detrimental to the student and their family but it can hurt the entire community as a whole. A study done on Shaker Heights School District

explored the problems caused by redistricting. Students' and their families' lives were disrupted and consequently house values in the entire district dropped by 9.9%. (Bogart & Cromwell, 2000)

As research has shown the loss of neighborhood schools is an increasing problem. Neighborhood schools provide stability for the children, their families as well as the community as a whole. It maintains a safe environment for children to be raised in and allows for parent activity in their schools. The fear is that neighborhood schools will disappear completely and future academics of our country will worsen. Students who have to ride a bus twenty minutes, forty-five minutes, or even an hour will not do as well in school as those who live across the street. A study such as this must be done to examine the point that many issues factor into a child's academic success.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine whether the distance a student lives from their school influences their academic achievement. In detail, this study has correlated the distance in miles a student lives from his or her school with their grade point average at the end of their freshman and junior years.

Data has been collected from 100 participants at two private high schools in southern New Jersey, Our Lady of Mercy Academy and Saint Augustine College Preparatory School. Both schools are grades ninth through twelfth. Both schools are catholic schools but you do not have to be catholic to attend. Both schools operate off of a 4.0 grade point average scale. The data collected was archival dating back no more than

ten years ago. Each participant's town of residence was given as well as their GPA's from ninth and eleventh grades.

The researcher hypothesizes that students who do not attend neighborhood schools and therefore must commute to school will not do as well, academically, as students who do attend neighborhood schools.

1.3 Operational Definitions

1. Proximity to school: the distance a student lives from their school, in this case their high school, in terms of time it takes to get to school (measured in minutes).
2. Grade Point Average (GPA): a measure used to illustrate a student's academic achievement. 4.0 scale is used.
3. Neighborhood school: a smaller school built directly in the center of a neighborhood where all the children who attend can walk or bike ride safely in a short time. Only children who live in closely in the surrounding areas of the school attend. A large town/city can be made up of many small neighborhood schools. Transportation may or may not be provided since the key is walking or biking.
4. Smart-growth schools: a school that is built for the entire community to use, unlike a neighborhood school that may only caterer to a certain section of the town/city. These schools are usually bigger and can facilitate all sports, recreation activities, and town/city activities after school hours. Brings students in by bus from every individual "neighborhood" in the community.

5. Transportation-mandated schools: for the purpose of this study it is a school that no student can walk or bike to safely. Only means of getting to school is by bus or car.
6. Academic achievement: the success a student gains from attending school and completing what is needed of them to go on and contribute in a positive manner to their community.

1.4 Limitations

This study's sample was limited in a number of ways. First, all of the students sampled were between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. Prior research has shown the significance of neighborhood schools for children of elementary age (McDonald, 2010). A study of children, ages kindergarten through twelfth grade would have been best. Second, the sample was taken from two private schools where tuition is paid in order to attend. Therefore, the majority of the sample came from students with very good socioeconomic backgrounds. A sample of students from a vast range of socioeconomic backgrounds would have given results that could be generalized to a larger population. And lastly, the sample size was relatively small. A sample with hundreds of participants from all over the United States would also make the results easier to generalize. Also, two groups, one from neighborhood schools compared to one from transportation-mandated schools would have been much better.

1.5 Summary

Chapter two will discuss in much more detail prior research on neighborhood schools and their effects on a student's academic success, specifically their grade point average.

In chapter three the design of the study will be discussed. Results of the study will then be presented in chapter four.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

As indicated, neighborhood schools provide an environment for children to be surrounded by neighbors in a school system that promotes healthy growth, academic achievement, and a sense of community pride. Neighborhood schools allow parents to be involved in their child's school environment. Here, parents can volunteer when needed, attended sporting games and after school activities, and most likely get to know teachers very well.

A transportation-mandated school or smart growth school disrupts all of these concepts. The parents cannot get involved as much or as often because of the travel time and distance. Students may end up spending a lot of time in the car or bus going to and from school, which cuts down on their time with their families as well doing homework and studying. This in turn can affect the amount of sleep they get per night and consequently affect their academic achievement. This study investigates the cause and effect of poor academic achievement in transportation mandated schools.

2.1 School Choice

Research within the past few years has shown many parents have chosen to send their children to schools other than their designated neighborhood school. The process of parents sending their children to schools other than their neighborhood schools is referred to as school choice. There has not been much research done on the effects of leaving your children in their neighborhood school but there has been a lot on sending them to another school. Some research has found that there seems to be no difference in academic

achievement for students attending neighborhood schools and those who have chosen to attend another school. What this research has shown is there is an achievement gap between students of different races. A large majority of Caucasian children attend schools outside their neighborhood school and show high academic achievement. This relationship leads many to believe that non-neighborhood schools have high achievement rates but in actuality it is a race difference. (Ledwith, 2010)

Parents now have a variety of schools to choose from for their children. Some of them include designated neighborhood schools, magnet schools, charter schools, voucher programs for private schools and catholic schools, and the new distance learning schools (Andre-Bechely, 2005). Like all things there are pros and cons for all of these schools. All of them indirectly affect each other. Many researchers have argued that attending neighborhood schools allows for more parent involvement which in turn leads to greater academic achievement (Kang, Shumow & Vandell, 1996). Others have found that children to attend non-neighborhood schools have lower academic achievement and higher rates of conduct problems than their neighborhood school counterparts (Witte, Bailey & Thorn, 1992). Researchers all agree that a positive indicator of academic achievement, especially for reading and math, is the parents' involvement in the school (Kang et al., 1996). Lubienski and Lubienski (2006) found that students attending their neighborhood schools scored higher in math than those who attend non-neighborhood schools. Another positive side of attending neighborhood school is the sense of community the child feels in school and out of school (Lubienski, Lubienski & Crane, 2008). It has been found that a strong sense of community in school can lead to better teaching and learning (Lubienski et al., 2008).

The rise of magnet schools has become a debated issue across the country. Some argue for these schools to give especially bright children the type of curriculum they need. And some argue that magnet schools cause neighborhood schools to be filled with disadvantaged and low academic achieving students. Research has shown that attending school with children who are of a higher socioeconomic status can increase academic achievement. Whatever the reasoning for this, magnet schools have been known to cause a large concentration of poverty level students to accumulate in neighborhood schools because those of higher status have gone to non-neighborhood schools, such as magnet schools. (Neild, 2004)

The new era of distance learning has also impacted the education system. Neighborhood school enrollment is decreasing because parents and students now have so many options for education. Distance learning gives access to everyone to learn. This organized learning technique teaches students through media. There is no teacher unless requested. (Collins, 2008) researchers have found that the academic achievement of those who choose distance learning over more traditional types of learning is no different. However, these children lose a very important component of schooling, socialization. (Blomeyer, Cavanaugh, Gillan, Hess, & Kromrey, 2004)

As shown, the ability for parents to choose their children's place of education can be good and bad. For the traditional institution of neighborhood schools this option is extremely detrimental. The child loses an important component of education and that is socialization especially within one's own community. The quality of neighborhood school's education can also be affected if most children in the higher socioeconomic classes leave to go to non-neighborhood schools. Opinions of neighborhood schools then

shift. More and more parents could start to take their children out of these schools. This could cause parents to move and before anyone knows it an entire community is abandoned.

2.2 School Location

The idea of neighborhood schools came about so children could be educated amongst their own peers in an area close to home. This way children could walk or bike to school and pollution could decrease. Many years ago educators and policymakers argued that children should not have to commute more than a half of a mile to school. Therefore, schools should be located within walking distance for the greatest number of children possible (i.e. a neighborhood school). Schools located within a neighborhood not only decreases pollution and congestion but it allows for the entire community to use its resources. The library can be used for everyone, the gymnasium can be used for community meetings, and playgrounds can be used by families after school hours. (McDonald, 2010)

Researchers have found that school location is extremely important to children's academic achievement (Gordon & Monastiriotis, 2007). The journey a child takes to school, either walking, biking, by bus, or by parent, can take away from the child's learning experience. Many parents feel the travel distance and time is worth it if the child is getting a better education (Allen, 2007).

Some states have taken upon themselves to counter for this train of thought. School boards want parents to send their children to their school of choice for reasons besides their neighborhood school gives a poor education. Improving neighborhood

schools will allow students to be educated closer to home and decrease bus pollution. It also allows for community's to become invested in their local school and increases parent involvement. Here the students' proximity to school is most important. (Cohen-Vogel, Goldring, Smrekar, & Taylor, 2006)

2.3 Neighborhood Schools

Research on neighborhood schools has focused largely on the impact these schools have on children's health. Neighborhood schools allow children to walk or bike which leads to lower rates of obesity. Some of have found that students who live close enough to school to walk or bike show higher rates of walking and biking (Ewing, Greene & Schroeer, 2004). A problem lies in the ability of these children to walk or bike. Sidewalk availability to and from school was a huge factor in parents allowing their children to walk or bike (Ewing, Forinash & Schroeer, 2005).

Surveys given in 2001 showed that less than 15% of students aged 5-15 walk or bike to school. Thirty-three years before 48% of students reported walking or biking to school. What has changed? Reports have shown that now only 31% of students live close enough to school to walk or bike and in 1969 ninety percent lived within one mile of their school. The large decrease in walking or biking has caused the childhood obesity rate in this country to sky rocket. If students lived close enough to their neighborhood schools and had a safe route to take, more and more would choose to walk to bike. (Ewing et al., 2005)

Again and again in research parent involvement in their children's school is said to be a main factor in high academic achievement. This is why many researchers argue

for neighborhood schools. Less parent involvement due to schools located farther from home can affect the quality of the school dramatically. In addition, student involvement in after school activities is difficult because these students cannot walk home after they are finished. (Bogart & Cromwell, 2000)

Cook, Payne & Sinha (2005) studied the potential impact of neighborhood schools. They found that higher academic performance was shown when students attended school with a majority of other students from the same neighborhood. One reason for this might be that students who attend school within their neighborhood develop tight social ties with classmates and other individuals within their community. Math and reading scores also proved higher in neighborhood schools. Therefore, as stated before, neighborhood schools have a positive influence on children's development. (Cook, Payne & Sinha, 2005)

The main idea in most studies on neighborhood schools is the impact the community has on the child and the school. Communities have been found to have positive effects on children developmentally and academically. This has become the central idea in the argument for keeping neighborhood schools across America.

2.4 Community/Neighborhood Impact on a Child's Education

Research has shown that a children's relationship with their neighborhoods, families, peer groups, and school can positively influence school success. If neighborhood in which the child is raised is supportive and safe high academic achievement rates have been found. If the grows up in an environment where people want

them to succeed then they have a greater rate of succeeding. (Bowen, Glennie, Powers, & Rose, 2008)

It has been shown that it is important for schools and communities to work together. The conditions within a community directly affect the environment within the school. It is the school's job to promote positive outcome for all of their students. Therefore, communities also need to support its residents in order to raise children positively. (Wiseman, 2009)

As stated, school, neighborhood, and family have a direct influence on school outcomes. Crime and violence in the community, poverty and neighborhood dissatisfaction have an impact on how children are raised. And directly affect their education. Reports have shown that African American children who are raised in neighborhoods with an average of higher household incomes demonstrated higher rates of high school graduation. This may be because of the income of both parents which could result in more discipline in the household (i.e. more focus on academic achievement and graduating). (Grogan-Kaylor & Woolley, 2006)

Socioeconomic status has also been found directly related to a child's reading development. A child's resources, experience and interaction with their family and community can result in higher or lower levels of reading. The quality of the community in which a child is raised is key. The quality of the community affects the quality of the school which consequently affects the child's development. The research has shown that schools and neighborhoods quality affect children as they mature. Thus, the contributions

of the neighborhood are extremely important. They need to be positive. (Aikens & Barbarian, 2008)

The neighborhood connectedness with their school is another factor in academic success (Gross, Iachan, Overpeck, Ross, & Thompson, 2006). The loss of connectedness can leave a child with a huge decrease in social supports (Sergiovanni, 1994). This loss in social supports reflects the student's motivation and eventually can decrease the rates of high school graduation for the entire community. Dropout rates increase in these types of communities and unemployment is affected. These effects are detrimental to society as a whole. (Vartanian, 1999)

2.5 Commuting

Along with community affects on education, commuting to and from school can positively affect a child's academic achievement. Commuting not only decreases the rate of childhood obesity but it can cause the "feel good factor". This is when children arrive to school with a more positive state of mind due to the same amount of physical activity from walking or biking. Physical activity has always been positively correlated with mental health. Students who exercise, even if it is just a little, feel better about themselves and do better academically. Research suggests that children should walk or bike to school regularly. (Bentley, Clough, Fishlock, Hulley, Morrell, O'Brien, and Radmore, 2008)

The new era process of school choice has increased the amount of commuting to and from school by car or bus (Marshall, McDonald, Meyer, Rajangam, Wilson, & Wilson, 2010). Not only has this increase caused more pollution and roadway congestion but it has been shown to increase stress rates in adults and children. The stress of the

morning commute affects adults attitudes and performance, relationships between family members, emotional well-being and societal issues (Gonzalez & Novaco, ?). The stress the parents feel getting children to school and making it to work on time affects everyone in the family. The stress is also felt by the child and can cause problems in school, both academically and socially.

Commuting for parents has been around for ages but recent research has highlighted some major problems with this practice. It is acknowledged that parents commute so their kids can go to the school of their choice (in their neighborhood) but the effects on the parents work and job satisfaction is rarely discussed. Commuting has been found to be a detriment to job satisfaction. These parents feel stressed and tend to regret taking such jobs. (Spies, 2006)

2.6 Job Satisfaction

The idea behind researching commuting and job satisfaction is to transfer that idea to commuting to school for children. If commuting to work for adults causes stress and low levels of satisfaction then the children at school must feel similar. Two studies on job satisfaction by Perdue, Peterson & Reardon (2007) and Johnson & Smith (1985) showed that low levels of job satisfaction were related to stressors such as commuting.

2.7 Summary

There are many factors that can contribute to a child's academic success. Prior research has shown that neighborhood schools have a higher parent involvement and shown a sense of community pride. Transportation-mandated schools do not shown such positive factors. Children are often times on the bus for a long time and this can disrupt

sleep, homework, and family time. Due to these detriments the child's schoolwork could be significantly affected. Therefore, poor academic achievement could be due to transportation mandated schools.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The data collected was completely archival. Transcripts between 2001 and 2005 were used and the subjects were randomly selected. That is, every twentieth student's information was used. The name of the actual participant was not given; each person was assigned a number before the researcher was even given the list. The lists were each numbered one through fifty and next to each number was the subjects home town and their final grade point average for their first and third years of high school.

The distance from each subject's home town to the high school was calculated. The final grade point averages were correlated with this calculated distance to see if distance from home to high school affects a student's academic achievement.

3.2 Subjects

The subjects of this study were one hundred and one high school aged students, fifty males and fifty-one females. All of the data collected was archival, therefore the name as well as the race and ethnicity of each subject was completely unknown. However, the high schools that provided the data both had diverse populations. Both high schools were catholic high schools located in Southern New Jersey. It is not required that students be a catholic to attend. Both schools were also considered college prep schools. And one school was all boys and the other all girls. Each subject's final cumulative grade from their freshman and junior year were collected. Each subject's hometown was also collected.

3.3 Procedure

The data was collected by each of the schools principals and reported as a list to the researcher. The principle's looked up transcripts from 2001-2005 and selected every twentieth student's home town and grade point averages were recorded. The lists were picked up by the researcher once they were ready. Once all the data had been collected and received the calculations began.

Distance from home to school. The distance from the participants' home to their school was calculated using the data given. Distances were calculated using an online source for directions called mapquest.com. Distances ranged from within one minute to seventy-two minutes away.

Academic Achievement. For the purposes of this study, academic achievement was measured in terms of final grade point averages. To control for possible confounds two years were correlated. The final cumulative GPA for each subject's freshman and junior year (first and third years) were used.

Correlation. A test of correlation was used to determine whether distance from home to school affects a student's academic achievement. A positive correlation would show that distance does affect a student's academic achievement. A negative correlation would show that distance does not affect a student's grade point average. Both years were correlated against the distance calculated to control for possible confounds such as; adjustment to high school, tougher classes, or self-esteem.

Descriptive Statistics. Descriptive statistics were calculated to shown the means and standard deviations for the distance from home to school as well as freshman and junior year final grade point averages.

3.4 Summary

In sum, a test for correlation was used to determine the effect of distance on a student's academic achievement. All of the data was archival and completely anonymous. Also, possible confounds were controlled for. Will distance prove to affect academic achievement?

Chapter 4

Findings

The researcher hypothesized that students who attend their neighborhood high schools do better, academically, than those students who attend transportation-mandated schools. After statistical analyses were completed the researcher failed to reject the null. That is, the data showed no significance.

The data was calculated to see if there is a significant positive correlation between the distance (in minutes) a student lives from his or her school and their final grade point average for their freshman and junior year. After the correlations were complete results showed ($r(99) = -.156, p = .118$) a negative correlation between distance from home to school and freshman year final GPA. A negative correlation was shown for junior year final GPA ($r(99) = -.012, p = .903$) as well.

After seeing no positive correlation the researcher separated the data set by gender. Again no significance was shown. For males, junior year GPA's and distance were correlated and results showed $r(48) = -.054, p = .709$. For females, junior year GPA's and distance were correlated and results showed $r(49) = .017, p = .904$. For males, freshman year GPA's and distance were correlated and results showed $r(48) = -.173, p = .230$. For females, freshman year GPA's and distance were also correlated and results showed $r(49) = -.142, p = .321$. a negative correlation was shown for both genders in both years measured.

Descriptive statistics were also conducted the results showed the mean for distance equaled 32.94 with a standard deviation of 14.51. Freshman year final GPA had

a mean of 3.28 with a standard deviation of .6934 and junior year final GPA had a mean of 3.26 with a standard deviation of .7322. Table 1 shows these results.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Distance from Home to School	Freshman Year Final GPA	Junior Year Final GPA
Mean	32.94	3.28	3.26
Standard Deviation	14.51	.6934	.7322

Chapter 5

Conclusion, and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the distance a student lives from his or her school can affect their academic achievement. Prior research has shown neighborhood schools are a much more positive environment for students and their families. There are many reasons for this including, a sense of community pride, a greater amount of parent involvement, and walking or biking to and from school.

Most transportation-mandated schools, such as the two used in the current study, require many students to commute long distances to and from school. The average amount of time traveled to school for this sample was thirty minutes. This does not take into account traffic, red lights, etc. Therefore, the researcher hypothesized that distance can affect grades.

But a negative correlation was found between distance and final grade point average for their freshman and junior years. That is, distance seems to have no affect on a student's academic achievement. Gender was also examined and no difference was shown. The descriptive statistics helped to explain why no significance was found because it showed that a majority of the students lived far away from school (mean=32.94). It also showed that the average GPA for freshman and junior year were high (3.28 and 3.26), this may be due to the fact that both schools are considered college prep type schools.

5.2 Recommendation

Future studies should think about diversifying the sample much more. Gathering data from different types of schools with students who come from different socio-economic statuses would be much more beneficial. Both schools used in this study required tuition to be paid in order to attend. Using students from public schools may make a difference and help to support the hypothesis. Also gathering data from neighborhood schools and comparing it to the data collected from transportation-mandated schools could show a better comparison in GPA's and distance from home to school.

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