



Elementary Age Population Decline, School Closures, and Access to Public Elementary School Options in St. Louis City

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Key Points

In this brief, we examine the relationship between changes in the elementary age population in St. Louis City, school closures, and access to public elementary school options across the city. We find:

1. The elementary age population (five-to-nine year olds) in St. Louis City declined by 2,000 children between the 2010–14 American Community Survey (ACS) and the 2015–19 ACS.
2. Forty-nine of 79 city neighborhoods (62%) lost five-to-nine year olds, and these neighborhoods lost on average 32% of their elementary age population.
3. Most of the elementary age population decline was driven by a decrease in the number of Black five-to-nine year olds in north city.
4. The highest numbers of five-to-nine year olds per square mile are in neighborhoods in southeast city.
5. Half of public elementary age students attend district schools, and half attend charter schools.
6. Thirty-two of the city's neighborhoods have no schools serving elementary age students. Twenty-three have only district schools, 11 have only charter schools, and 13 have both.
7. The ratio of elementary schools to children is higher in south city neighborhoods than in north city neighborhoods.
8. Charters are more likely to be located in neighborhoods with relatively higher-performing rather than lower-performing district schools.



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Introduction

St. Louis City is by some measures a choice-rich environment. In 2021-22, half of all public elementary school students in the city attended charter schools, and Saint Louis Public Schools (SLPS) offers magnet schools and district open enrollment.¹ Yet, choice options are not equally distributed throughout the city. SLPS is also experiencing a steady decline in enrollment, which led to the closure of eight schools at the end of the 2020-21 school year. In this brief, we examine the relationship between changes in the elementary age population in St. Louis City, recent school closures, and access to public elementary school options across the city.

St. Louis City Elementary Age Population Declined 12% Over 10 Years

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), the elementary age population (five-to-nine year olds) living in St. Louis City declined from approximately 17,300 children in the 2010–14 ACS to 15,300 children in the 2015–19 ACS. Forty-nine of 79 city neighborhoods (62%) lost five-to-nine year olds between these two periods, with declining neighborhoods losing on average 32% of their elementary age children and eight neighborhoods losing over half of their age five-to-nine population (Figure 1).² These eight neighborhoods include Fairground, Visitation Park, Hi-Pointe, Forest Park South East, Walnut Park East, Midtown, Academy, and Skinker DeBaliviere.

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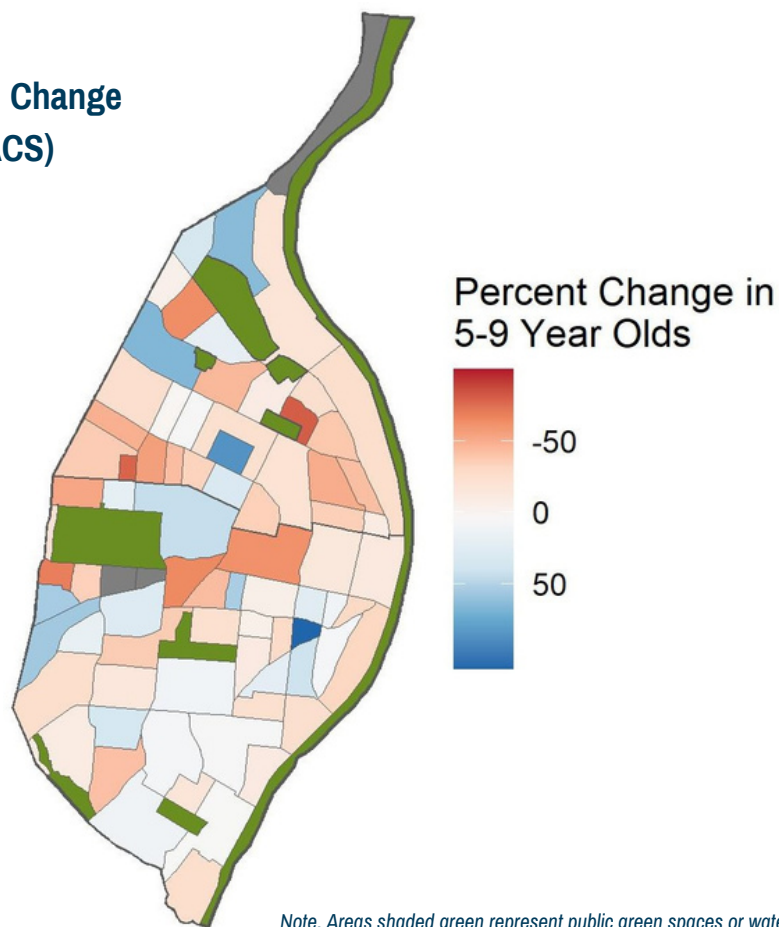


¹ We use data on public school enrollment (2021-22) and standardized test scores (2018-19) from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and school location data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). DESE data is not yet available for 2022-23.

² The City of St. Louis publishes decennial census data at the neighborhood level, including total population and over 18 population by racial group. For the purposes of this brief, we were interested in the city's elementary age population. We accessed American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year data on the number of 5-9 year olds in each racial group by census tract from the U.S. Census Bureau. We estimate the number of 5-9 year olds in each neighborhood using areal weighting. If $\frac{1}{3}$ of a census tract lies in a neighborhood, it contributes $\frac{1}{3}$ of its total elementary age count and counts by race to the counts for that neighborhood. Thus each neighborhood's numbers are estimated from the portions of census tracts that fall within that neighborhood.

Forty-nine of 79 city neighborhoods (62%) lost five-to-nine year olds between these two periods, with declining neighborhoods losing on average 32% of their elementary age children (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:
Elementary Age Population Change
(2010–14 ACS to 2015–19 ACS)**



Most of the decline in five-to-nine year olds throughout the city has been driven by a decrease in the Black elementary age population. Citywide, the elementary age population declined by 12%, and both the Black and White age five-to-nine populations experienced similar percent declines. However, this represents a loss of approximately 1,300 Black children and 550 White children. Declines in the Black elementary age population were almost entirely from north city neighborhoods (Figure 2), which lost 1,250 Black five-to-nine year olds. The north side also lost 110 White five-to-nine year olds during this time, while the area of the city south of Delmar lost approximately 40 Black and 440 White elementary age children (Figure 3). Neighborhoods in north city with a declining elementary age population lost 78 children on average, while south city neighborhoods with a decline in the number of five-to-nine year olds lost 56 children on average (Appendix A).

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Figure 2:
Black Elementary Age Population
Change (2010–14 ACS to 2015–19 ACS)

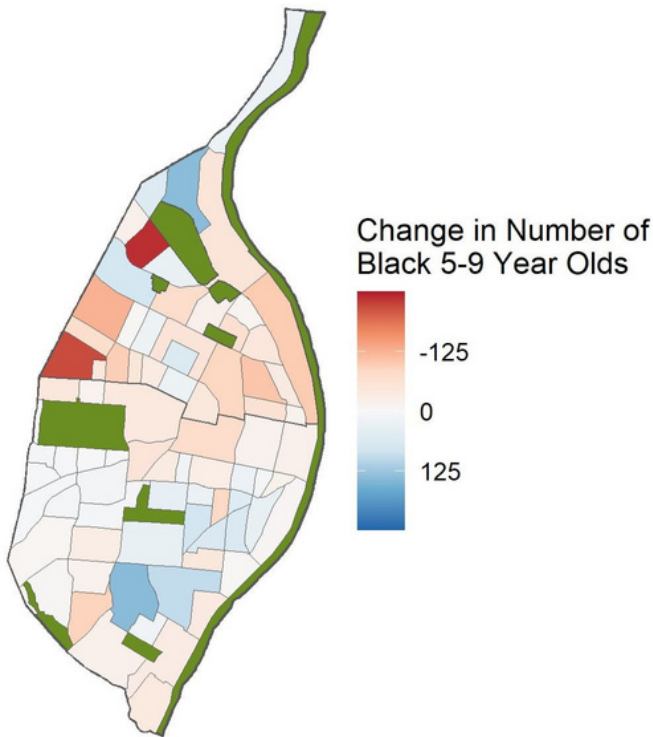
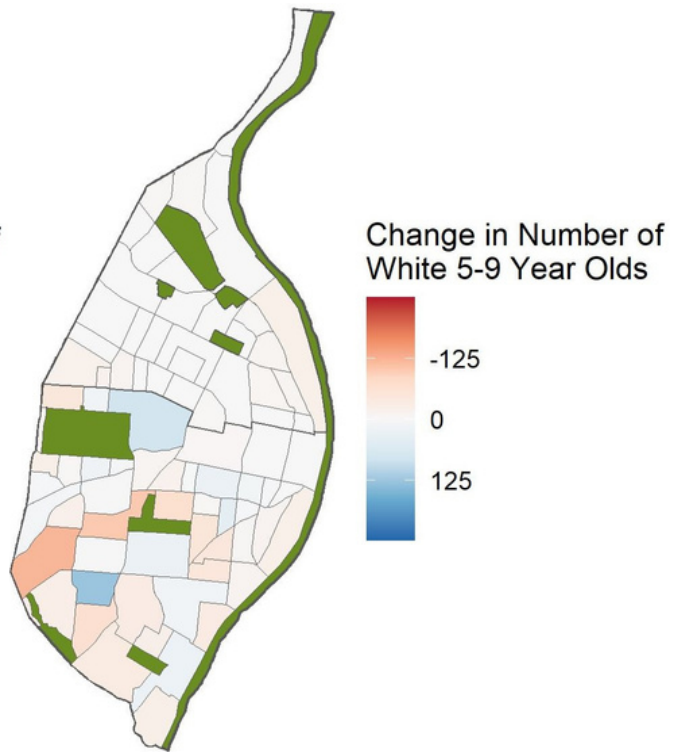


Figure 3:
White Elementary Age Population
Change (2010–14 ACS to 2015–19 ACS)



Though most (23 out of 32) north city neighborhoods experienced a decline in elementary age population, four neighborhoods north of Delmar experienced a greater than 50% increase. These include Riverview, The Ville, Mark Twain Industrial, and Baden. An additional five north city neighborhoods experienced a smaller increase in their age five-to-nine population.³

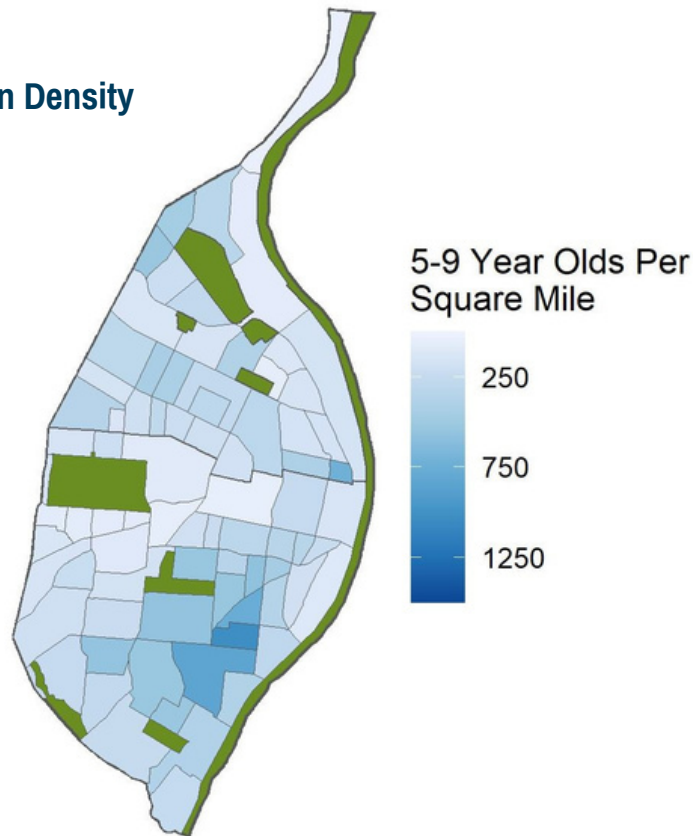
Most Elementary Age Children Live in Southeast City

Of the approximately 15,300 elementary age children living in St. Louis City today, 66% live south of Delmar. The greatest concentration of elementary age children is in the southeast portion of the city, with the highest numbers of five-to-nine year olds per square mile in the Gravois Park, Dutchtown, and Benton Park West neighborhoods (Figure 4). Columbus Square has the highest child density per square mile among north city neighborhoods. Child density is lowest in neighborhoods along the north portion of the Mississippi River and in neighborhoods directly south and east of Forest Park. The elementary age population in the city is 60% Black, while the elementary age population in neighborhoods north of Delmar is 95% Black.

³North Pointe, Vandeventer, Mark Twain, Kingsway East, and Kingsway West

The greatest concentration of elementary age children is in the southeast portion of the city, with the highest numbers of five-to-nine year olds per square mile in the Gravois Park, Dutchtown, and Benton Park West neighborhoods (Figure 4).

**Figure 4:
Elementary Age Population Density
(2015–19 ACS)**



Population Decline has been Accompanied by Dozens of District and Charter School Closures

The decline in the elementary age population and the growth of the charter school sector has been accompanied by a steady enrollment decline for Saint Louis Public Schools.⁴ This decline left an infrastructure built for more than 110,000 students serving just over 21,300 students across 68 buildings, and, in 2020–21, SLPS announced the intended closure of 11 schools in the district due to low enrollment and related funding issues.⁽¹⁾ SLPS ended up closing eight schools, including four elementary schools in north city. The stated intention of the closures was to reallocate funding amongst the remaining facilities and thus enhance and expand academics and support services in those schools.^(1,2)

⁴ In 1998, with the passage of the state's first charter school law, St. Louis City became one of only two urban areas within Missouri in which charter schools were permitted to operate.⁽⁵⁾ As the 34th state to pass this type of legislation, Missouri hoped to both "end three decades of court-ordered desegregation" and begin providing choice to bolster public school systems.^(5,6) Most charter schools in the state are sponsored by a higher education institution, and all are allowed to pursue their own status as a Local Education Agency (LEA), which allows funding to go straight to the charters.⁽⁵⁾ Legislation passed in 2012 allowed charter schools to open in other parts of the state under certain conditions. The Leadership School opened in the fall of 2022 as the first charter school in St. Louis County.⁽⁷⁾

The issue of school closures is not limited to district schools experiencing enrollment declines. Of the 54 charter school buildings that have opened in St. Louis since 2000, 17 have shut down due to academic or financial troubles, with Arch Community School as the most recent closure.^(3,4) The Missouri Charter Public Schools Association asserts that closure of charter schools is a foundational part of the “autonomy for accountability model.”⁽⁵⁾ If annual performance results fall below the district’s, if the charter is identified as persistently low achieving by DESE, or if a high school fails to provide a graduation rate of 73% (without dropout recovery as its mission), sponsor intervention is mandated with revocation of the charter as a potential consequence.⁽⁵⁾ St. Louis garnered national attention in 2012 for the largest charter school closure of its kind when it shut down the Imagine Schools over growing concern about academic performance, leaving over 3,800 displaced students.⁽⁵⁾

Ratio of Elementary Schools to Children is Higher in South City Neighborhoods than in North City Neighborhoods

It is important to understand the relationship between where elementary age children live and where schools are located, recognizing that neighborhood boundaries do not correspond to school attendance boundaries. We first describe the district and charter sectors and then examine how access to schools serving elementary aged students differs across the city. Finally, we consider whether charter schools are located near district schools with higher or lower test scores.

In 2021–22, there were 40 district schools and 27 charter schools in the city serving approximately 17,400 elementary aged students, evenly divided between these two sectors.⁵ The average district elementary or eleMiddle school served 218 students, and the average charter elementary or eleMiddle school served 322 students.⁶ We map these schools by neighborhood, finding that 32 of the city’s 79 neighborhoods had zero elementary or eleMiddle schools in 2021–22 (Figure 5). Twenty-three neighborhoods had only district schools, 11 neighborhoods had only charter schools, and 13 had both (Figure 6).⁷

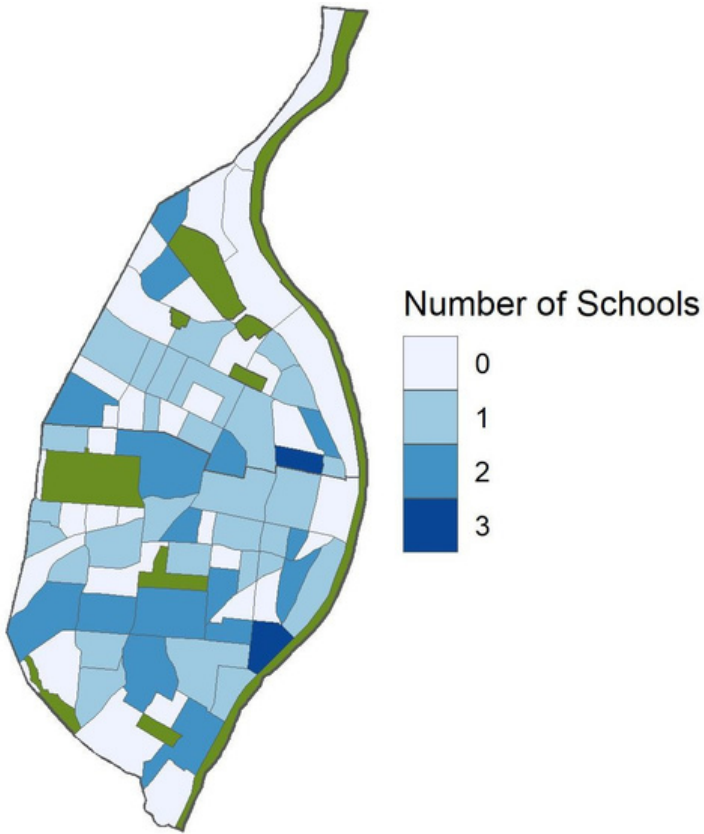
In 2021–22, there were 40 district schools and 27 charter schools in the city serving approximately 17,400 elementary aged students, evenly divided between these two sectors.

⁵This number is higher than the total number of five-to-nine year olds living in the city. Five-to-nine year olds generally attend kindergarten through 4th grade, while the elementary and eleMiddle schools in our analysis may also include grades 5-8.

⁶We define elementary schools as schools that serve students no older than the sixth grade. EleMiddle schools have grades in both the elementary and middle school ranges (for example, K-8).

⁷The 2021 closure of four north city SLPS elementary schools increased the number of neighborhoods with only charter schools from nine to 11.

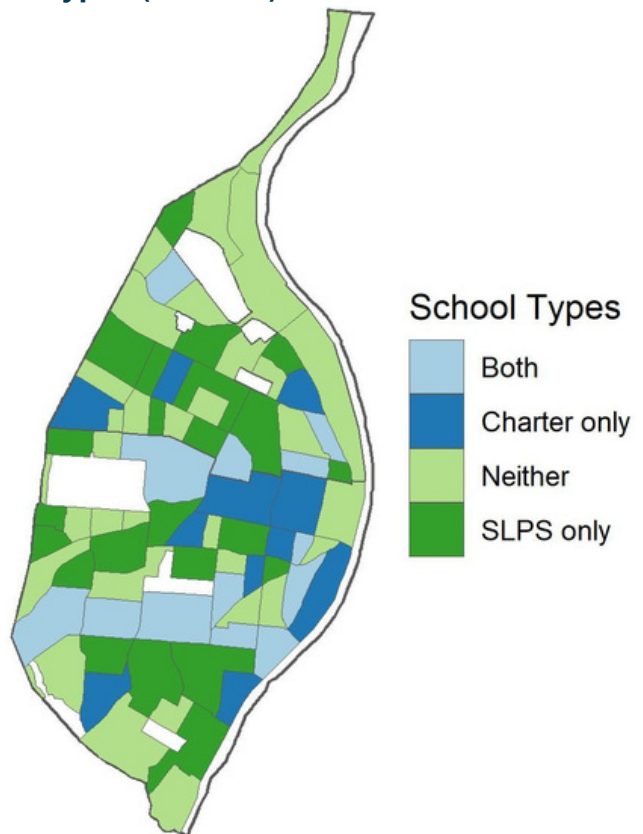
Figure 5:
Elementary and EleMiddle Schools
(2021–22)



Thirty-two of the city’s 79 neighborhoods had zero elementary or eleMiddle schools in 2021–22 (Figure 5).

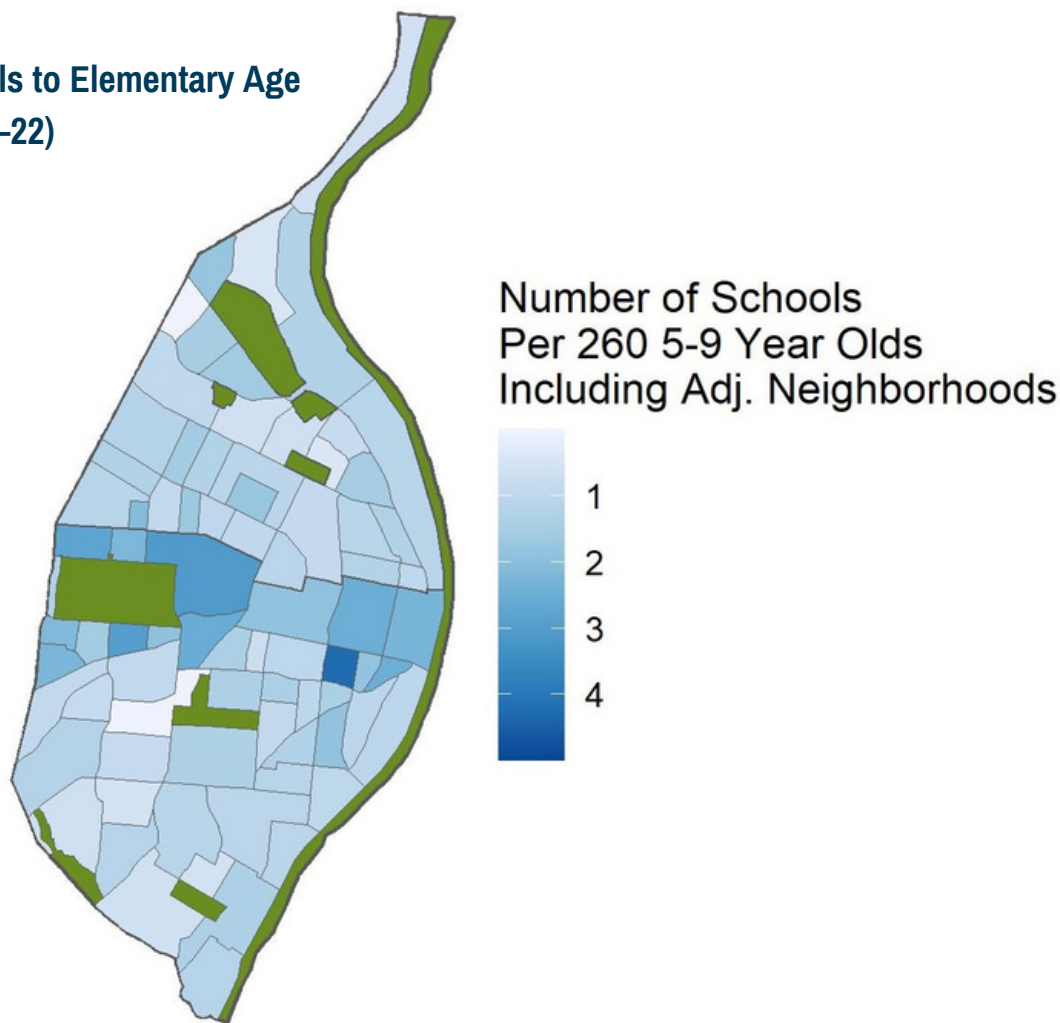
Figure 6:
Elementary and EleMiddle School
Types (2021–22)

Twenty-three neighborhoods had only district schools, 11 neighborhoods had only charter schools, and 13 had both (Figure 6).



To account for the fact that children can attend schools across neighborhood boundaries, we find the total number of schools in each neighborhood and all adjacent neighborhoods. We also find the total number of elementary age children in the same area and calculate how many schools are available for every 260 children, the average size of St. Louis City elementary and eleMiddle schools in 2021-22 (Figure 7). Neighborhoods in north city have an average of 1.1 schools for every 260 children in the neighborhood and all adjacent neighborhoods, with a range from 0 (Walnut Park West) to 2.1 (Visitation Park). South city neighborhoods have an average of 1.5 schools for every 260 children, with a range from 0 (Southwest Garden) to 4.3 (Lafayette Square).

Figure 7:
Ratio of Schools to Elementary Age Children (2021–22)



Neighborhoods in north city have an average of 1.1 schools for every 260 children in the neighborhood and all adjacent neighborhoods, with a range from 0 (Walnut Park West) to 2.1 (Visitation Park). South city neighborhoods have an average of 1.5 schools for every 260 children, with a range from 0 (Southwest Garden) to 4.3 (Lafayette Square).

Charter schools sometimes choose to locate in areas where traditional public schools have relatively low test scores, and we observe in St. Louis that math proficiency is generally higher in charter schools than in non-gifted district schools in the same neighborhoods (Appendix A). However, our analyses indicate charter schools in St. Louis may not be targeting the highest-need areas. District math proficiency is lowest on average in north city (average proficiency rate of 4.6% compared with 21.8% in south city; Figure 8). Yet, charters are more likely to be located in neighborhoods with relatively higher-performing rather than lower-performing district schools and most likely to be located in south city or the central corridor (Figure 9; Appendix A). Even taking into account where the elementary age population lives, children living in south city have more charter schools nearby. Neighborhoods in north city have an average of 0.4 charter schools for every 260 elementary age children in a neighborhood and all adjacent neighborhoods, while south city neighborhoods have on average 0.7 charter schools for every 260 five-to-nine year olds.

Figure 8:
SLPS Elementary and EleMiddle
Math Proficiency (2018–19)

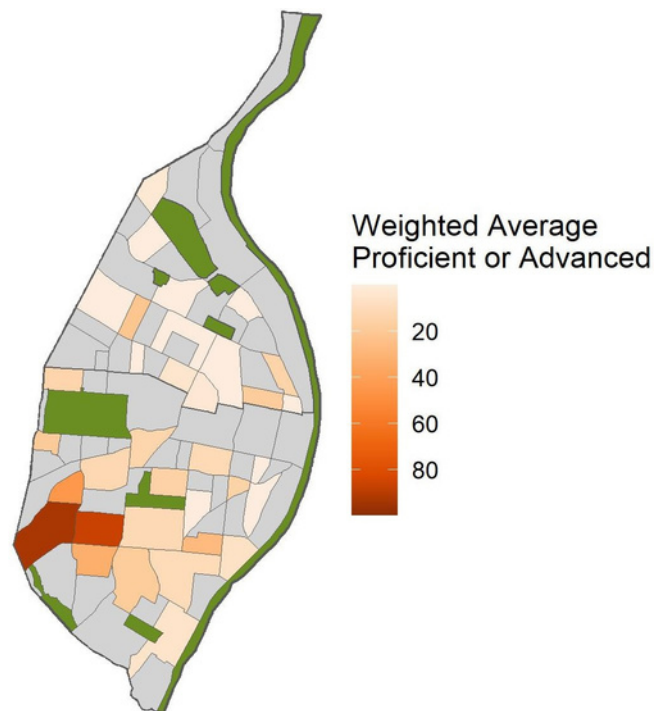
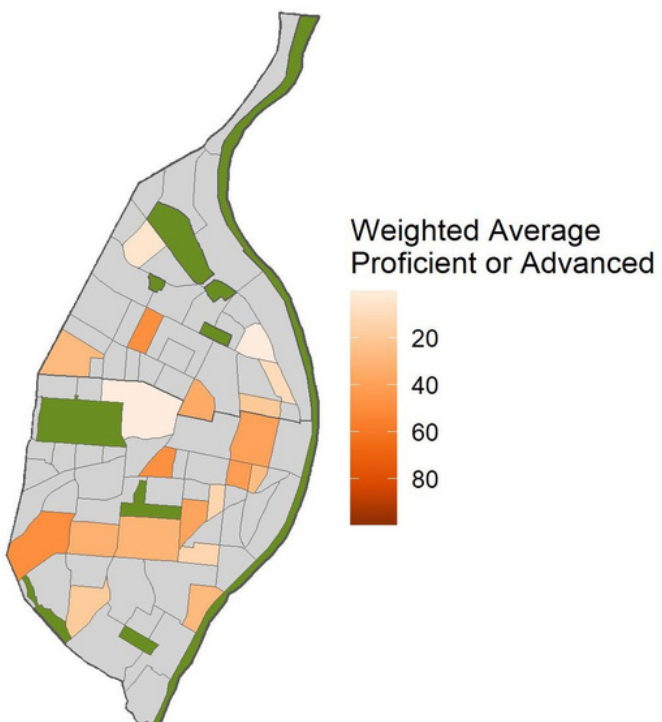


Figure 9:
Charter Elementary and EleMiddle
Math Proficiency (2018–19)



Charters are more likely to be located in neighborhoods with relatively higher-performing rather than lower-performing district schools and most likely to be located in south city or the central corridor (Figure 9; Appendix A).

Conclusion: Inequitable Access to Public Elementary School Options

In this brief, we present a portrait of the citywide distribution of public schools serving elementary aged students, as it relates to the city's elementary school age population by neighborhood. We recognize that neighborhood boundaries do not directly correspond to school attendance boundaries, yet it is likely that school proximity plays an active role in school decision-making for families across the city. Families in south city neighborhoods have greater access to nearby public elementary school options, even given the distribution of the elementary age population. In addition, though school choice in St. Louis often takes the form of charter schools, charters are more likely to be located near district schools with relatively higher rather than lower test scores. We hope this brief contributes additional contextual information for policymakers strategizing the future of the St. Louis City public elementary school landscape.

Families in south city neighborhoods have greater access to nearby public elementary school options, even given the distribution of the elementary age population.

Appendix A. Elementary Population and School Choice Options by Neighborhood

#	Neighborhood Name	5-9 Year Olds 2015-19 ACS	Change from 2010-14 ACS	Schools	Types	Avg. MAPSLPS	Avg. MAPCharter
1	Carondelet	501	21	2	SLPS	5.2	
2	Patch	242	-83	0	Neither		
3	Holly Hills	207	-41	0	Neither		
4	Boulevard Heights	403	45	0	Neither		
5	Bevo Mill	711	59	2	SLPS	18.4	
6	Princeton Heights	224	-159	1	Charter		18.5
7	Southampton	386	100	1	SLPS	32.7	
8	St. Louis Hills	295	-30	0	Neither		
9	Lindenwood Park	288	-99	2	Both	93.7	48.9
10	Ellendale	124	45	0	Neither		
11	Clifton Heights	109	17	1	SLPS	44.4	
12	The Hill	96	21	1	SLPS	11.8	
13	Southwest Garden	141	-79	0	Neither		
14	North Hampton	210	-37	2	Both	86.7	31.8
15	Tower Grove South	828	78	2	Both	11.2	29.9
16	Dutchtown	1261	74	1	SLPS	10.2	
17	Mount Pleasant	219	-27	1	Charter		27.8
18	Marine Villa	188	-59	3	Both	6.5	*
19	Gravois Park	453	-136	2	Both	27.3	13.1
20	Kosciusko	120	-55	1	Charter		
21	Soulard	111	7	2	Both	0.0	*
22	Benton Park	167	48	0	Neither		
23	McKinley Heights	98	51	1	SLPS	14.9	
24	Fox Park	160	-61	1	Charter		12.7
25	Tower Grove East	271	-33	2	Both	0.0	38.2
26	Compton Heights	97	-4	0	Neither		
27	Shaw	315	-93	1	SLPS	15.6	
28	Botanical Heights	77	-58	2	Charter		48.0
29	Tiffany	50	17	0	Neither		
30	Benton Park West	307	56	0	Neither		
31	The Gate District	206	-12	1	SLPS	10.9	
32	Lafayette Square	115	23	1	Charter		41.5
33	Peabody Darst Webbe	68	7	2	Both	0.0	26.1
34	LaSalle Park	49	-21	0	Neither		
35	Downtown	152	-21	0	Neither		
36	Downtown West	290	-46	1	Charter		39.3
37	Midtown	60	-96	1	Charter		
38	Central West End	167	51	2	Both	*	0.0
39	Forest Park South East	34	-63	1	SLPS	13.2	
40	Kings Oak	12	11	0	Neither		

Elementary Age Population Decline, School Closures, and Access to Elementary School Options in St. Louis City

#	Neighborhood Name	5-9 Year Olds 2015-19 ACS	Change from 2010-14 ACS	Schools	Types	Avg. MAPSLPS	Avg. MAPCharter
41	Cheltenham	23	23	0	Neither		
42	Clayton-Tamm	25	-13	0	Neither		
43	Franz Park	55	19	1	SLPS		
44	Hi-Pointe	21	-47	1	SLPS	19.3	
45	Wydown Skinker	19	-5	0	Neither		
46	Skinker DeBaliviere	79	-87	1	SLPS	13.9	
47	DeBaliviere Place	67	12	0	Neither		
48	West End	347	-197	2	Charter		27.2
49	Visitation Park	19	-70	0	Neither		
50	Wells Goodfellow	364	-118	1	SLPS	0.0	
51	Academy	88	-111	0	Neither		
52	Kingsway West	183	4	1	SLPS	21.8	
53	Fountain Park	69	-51	1	SLPS	0.0	
54	Lewis Place	71	-34	0	Neither		
55	Kingsway East	201	8	1	Charter		48.8
56	Greater Ville	247	-73	1	SLPS	0.0	
57	The Ville	128	59	0	Neither		
58	Vandeventer	96	23	1	SLPS	4.7	
59	Jeff Vanderlou	386	-97	1	SLPS	0.0	
60	St. Louis Place	113	-113	0	Neither		
61	Carr Square	163	-87	3	Both	18.3	19.5
62	Columbus Square	135	-15	1	SLPS	0.0	
63	Old North St. Louis	63	-46	2	Both	14.1	9.5
64	Near North Riverfront	340	-115	0	Neither		
65	Hyde Park	88	-54	1	Charter		0.0
66	College Hill	48	-15	1	SLPS	0.0	
67	Fairground	17	-69	0	Neither		
68	O'Fallon	222	-20	0	Neither		
69	Penrose	117	-95	1	SLPS	0.0	
70	Mark Twain I-70 Industrial	164	66	0	Neither		
71	Mark Twain	172	28	0	Neither		
72	Walnut Park East	143	-245	2	Both	0.0	4.8
73	North Pointe	230	59	2	SLPS	2.5	
74	Baden	355	139	0	Neither		
75	Riverview	43	35	0	Neither		
76	Walnut Park West	223	-7	0	Neither		
77	Covenant Blu-Grand Center	100	-53	2	Both	2.6	34.7
78	Hamilton Heights	77	-72	0	Neither		
79	North Riverfront	171	-37	0	Neither		

*Charter opened after 2018-19 or SLPS school that does not serve tested grades.

Note: Neighborhoods highlighted gray are in north city.

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Meg Gorton is a senior Spanish major and education minor at Saint Louis University and an undergraduate research assistant with the SLU PRiME Center.

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