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Editor: Gabriel Heller Sahlgren

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Editor's Pick

The Effects of the New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms on Student Academic Outcomes

By: Douglas N. Harris and Matthew F. Larsen

Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (Tulane University)

[Free version](#)

In the past decades, politicians worldwide have embarked on reforms to increase market and government accountability in state-funded education sectors. The idea behind has been to increase incentives to improve pupil performance. The worldwide [evidence](#) in support of these reforms is mixed, although a majority of studies find mild positive effects.

However, as I've argued [elsewhere](#), it is also true that many of the reforms have been watered down due to political opposition – and most systems have consequently suffered from poor design. In most cases, in fact, incentives to improve performance have barely increased at all. And whereas opponents of market and government accountability have argued that the reforms don't work well, proponents have argued that policymakers simply have not gone far enough to make sure they work better.

This begs the question: what would truly transformative change toward market and government accountability produce? In this paper, economists Douglas Harris and Matthew Larsen provide evidence from New Orleans, which, after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, put in place the most radical market- and government-accountability system ever created in America – in what can be described as an experiment in 'education shock therapy'.

Prior to Katrina, New Orleans had a traditional neighbourhood-based education system, managed by local school districts, with teachers getting paid according to single salary pay scales decided by union contracts. After Katrina, however, this all changed. The state took control over the school system, eventually turning all schools into charter schools, while all educators were fired. Teacher union contracts were not renewed after they expired, and local control of schools essentially vanished entirely, apart from ensuring per-pupil funding and deciding which schools were to be opened and which ones were to be closed with help from scores in the government accountability system. Attendance zones were abolished, which increased opportunities for school choice considerably. Within just a couple of years, therefore, the system underwent a radical change – the devastation following Katrina simply made it impossible for political opposition to derail the reforms.

What, then, were the results of this shock therapy? Using several difference-in-difference strategies – and a matched comparison group that were subjected to Katrina but not the school reforms (allowing them to take into account disruption due to the hurricane) – the authors find strong positive effects of the reforms. In the beginning, effects were rather mild, but they grew stronger over time as the reforms took effect. Indeed, after seven years, the reforms had generated improvements equivalent to about 30-40 PISA points. These effects are apparent in both the most high-stakes subjects (mathematics and English) as well as in less high-stakes subjects (science and social studies). Also, pupils from different backgrounds all benefited from the reforms, although poor and African American pupils appear to have benefited slightly less than non-poor and white pupils in the first years following Katrina. It is difficult to know, however, whether this difference is due to effect heterogeneity or the fact that poor and African American pupils were hit the hardest by Katrina.

Overall, therefore, the reforms have clearly been instrumental for generating substantive improvements in pupil performance. Certainly, the pre-Katrina system was low performing, limiting the external validity to other poorly performing systems. Similarly, it is unclear whether similar reforms at the country (or state) level would be able to generate the same types of gains; it is always difficult to know whether or not successful reforms can be scaled up without losing some of their successfulness. For example, post-Katrina New Orleans received a lot of outside help from educators, many educated through Teach for America, supporting the reform efforts.

However, an important point is also that the post-Katrina system, unlike many other efforts to pursue government and market accountability, did fundamentally change the overall incentive framework in the education system. The tragedy and devastation of the hurricane meant that political opposition to the reforms were muted, which is normally not the case. The ‘shock therapy’ strategy of reform may be successful but is incredibly difficult to implement politically. So the question is: how could we ever introduce such radical reforms without the tragic devastation of a hurricane?

Effects of Policy and Practice – Developed World

Do Administrators Respond to Their Accountability Ratings? The Response of School Budgets to Accountability Grades

By: Steven C. Craig, Scott A. Imberman, and Adam Perdue

Economics of Education Review (December 2015)

[Published version](#)

[Working paper version \(free\)](#)

This paper examines how school administrators reallocate resources to schools in response to marginal changes in accountability ratings. The authors study this through an analysis of budgetary changes for schools on the margin of distinct rating boundaries. By determining how close each school is to an accountability grade change they are able to conduct a regression discontinuity analysis on schools that are on either side of the sharp line that separates school ratings. If administrators care about accountability ratings on the margin one would expect to see changes in budgetary allocations that reward higher performing, or punish lower performing, schools. Using data in Texas from 1994 to 2002, the authors find evidence suggesting that schools with higher ratings received more funds than others, and the differential funds were targeted toward administration/training, counselling and extra-curricular activities.

How Does Access to Health Care Affect Teen Fertility and High School Dropout Rates? Evidence from School-based Health Centers

By: Michael F. Lovenheim, Randall Reback, and Leigh Wedenoja

NBER Working Paper No. 22030

[Published version](#)

[Free version](#)

Children from low-income families face persistent barriers to accessing high-quality health care services. Previous research studies have examined the importance of expanding children's health insurance coverage, but there is little prior evidence concerning the impacts of directly expanding primary health care access to this population. The authors address this gap in the literature by exploring whether teenagers' access to primary health care influences their fertility and educational attainment. They study how the significant expansion of

school-based health centres (SBHCs) in the United States since the early 1990s has affected teen fertility and high school dropout rates. The authors' results indicate that school-based health centres have a negative effect on teen birth rates: adding services equivalent to the average SBHC reduces the 15-18 year old birth rate by 5%. The effects are largest among younger teens and among African Americans and Hispanics. However, primary care health services do not reduce high school dropout rates by very much despite the sizable reductions in teen birth rates.

Can States Take Over and Turn Around School Districts? Evidence from Lawrence, Massachusetts

By: Beth E. Schueler, Joshua Goodman, and David J. Deming

NBER Working Paper No. 21895

[Published version](#)

The US federal government has spent billions of dollars to support turnarounds of low-achieving schools, yet most evidence on the impact of such turnarounds comes from high-profile, exceptional settings and not from examples driven by state policy decisions at scale. In this paper, the authors study the impact of state takeover and district-level turnaround in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Takeover of the Lawrence Public School (LPS) district was driven by the state's accountability system, which increases state control in response to chronic underperformance. The authors find that the first two years of the LPS turnaround produced large achievement gains in math and modest gains in reading. Their preferred estimates compare LPS to other low-income school districts in a differences-in-differences framework, although the results are robust to a wide variety of specifications, including student fixed effects. While the LPS turnaround was a package of interventions that cannot be fully separated, they find evidence that intensive small-group instruction led to particularly large achievement gains for participating students.

Health and Education Expansions

By: Jonathan James

Economics of Education Review (December 2015)

[Published version](#)

[Working paper version \(free\)](#)

In this paper, the author exploits a reform that expanded UK post-compulsory education during the 1980s and 1990s to examine the effect of education on health. The expansion resulted in a rapid increase in education over the whole education distribution. He finds evidence that education had an effect in reducing body mass index, waist circumference and weight. For other health measures (self-reported general health, long term or limiting illnesses), blood pressure and health behaviours (smoking and drinking) there were small to no improvements. There is suggestive evidence that the mechanisms driving these results are improvements in labour market and social status.

Effects of Policy and Practice – Developing World

Bridging Education Gender Gaps in Developing Countries: The Role of Female Teachers

By: Karthik Muralidharan and Ketki Sheth

Journal of Human Resources (forthcoming)

[Published version](#)

[Working paper version \(free\)](#)

The authors study gender gaps in learning, and the effectiveness of female teachers in reducing them, using a large, representative, annual panel dataset from the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. They find a small but significant negative trend in girls' test-scores in both math and language. Using five years of panel data, they find that teachers are more effective at teaching students of their own gender. Female teachers are more effective at teaching girls than male teachers but no worse at teaching boys. Thus, hiring female teachers on the current margin may reduce gender gaps in test scores without hurting boys.

What works to improve the quality of student learning in developing countries?

By: Serena Masino and Miguel Niño-Zarazúa

International Journal of Educational Development (forthcoming)

[Published version](#)

[Working paper version \(free\)](#)

The authors conducted a systematic review to identify policy interventions that improve education quality and student learning in developing countries. Relying on a theory of change typology, they highlight three main drivers of change of education quality: (1) supply-side capability interventions that operate through the provision of physical and human resources, and learning materials; (2) policies that through incentives seek to influence behaviour and inter-temporal preferences of teachers, households, and students; (3) bottom-up and top-down participatory and community management interventions, which operate through decentralisation reforms, knowledge diffusion, and increased community participation in the management of education systems. Overall, the findings suggest that interventions are more effective at improving student performance

and learning when social norms and inter-temporal choices are factored in the design of education policies, and when two or more drivers of change are combined. Thus, supply-side interventions alone are less effective than when complemented by community participation or incentives that shift preferences and behaviours.

General Education

The Effect of High School Shootings on Schools and Student Performance

By: Louis-Philippe Beland and Dongwoo Kim

Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (March 2016)

[Published version](#)

[Working paper version \(free\)](#)

The authors analyse how fatal shootings in high schools affect schools and students using data from shooting databases, school report cards, and the Common Core of Data. They examine schools' test scores, enrolment, number of teachers, graduation, attendance, and suspension rates at schools that experienced a shooting, employing a difference-in-differences strategy that uses other high schools in the same district as the comparison group. The findings suggest that homicidal shootings significantly decrease the enrolment of students in Grade 9 and test scores in math and English standardized tests. Using student-level data from California, the authors confirm that shootings lower test results for students who remain enrolled.

Assessing teacher quality in India

By: Mehtabul Azam and Geeta Gandhi Kingdon

Journal of Development Economics (November 2015)

[Published version](#)

[Working paper version \(free\)](#)

Using administrative data from linked private schools from one Indian district that matches 8319 pupils to their subject specific teachers at the senior secondary level, the authors estimate the importance of individual teachers for student outcomes in the high-stake senior secondary exam (at the end of twelfth-grade) controlling for prior achievement at the secondary level (at the end of tenth-grade). In addition to controlling for prior achievement, they exploit the fact that students took exams in multiple subjects during their senior secondary exam to control for pupil fixed effects. The authors find a considerable variability in teacher effectiveness over a two-year course—a one standard deviation improvement in teacher quality adds 0.366 standard deviation points in students score. Furthermore, consistent with studies in the US, they find that although

teacher quality matters, the observed characteristics explain little of the variability in teacher quality.