PROGRAM ON EDUCATION POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

A joint program of the Taubman Center for State and Local Government, Kennedy School of Government, and Center for American Political Studies, Department of Government, Harvard University

Photo by Ericka McConnell

1998-99 Annual Report

Inside

Test Scores Higher for Students in New York City Voucher Program

First Rigorous Evidence on School Choice Shows Largest Gains for Older Students

Low-income New York City students in grades two through five who received privately funded vouchers to attend private schools scored higher in math and reading tests than a control group of students after one year, according to a new study conducted by the Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG).

Overall, differences in test scores between the two groups were modest—around two percentile points in each subject. Larger differences, however, were observed for fourth and fifth graders—four percentile points in reading and six points in math.

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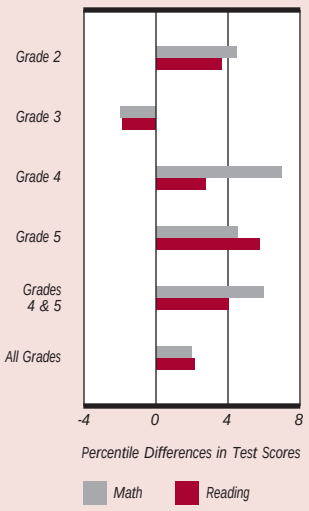
Effects of School Choice on Test Scores



The need for serious research on educational governance is as urgent as it has ever been.

Just a few decades ago, U.S. elementary and high schools led those of the rest of the world in just about every way that could be counted—graduation rates, per-pupil expenditures, teacher-pupil ratios, and so on. But in recent decades, other countries have caught up and even surpassed the United States, despite its status as the only remaining superpower. High-school graduation rates, unsurpassed in the 1950s, have now fallen behind those of Germany, France, Canada, and others.

The problems in American schools accelerate as students "progress" through school. At age nine, U.S. children are better skilled in reading and math than they were a couple of decades ago. But beginning in the middle years of elementary school, their performance slips. To all appearances, the slide is even steeper during high-school years.

Since its founding in 1996, the Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) has striven to better understand these trends so that they may be reversed. This report summarizes how we are pursuing our mission and describes how to obtain PEPG-related books, papers, and reports.

We are particularly proud that PEPG-related activities have culminated in six books on subjects that include school-choice programs, tracking, the black-white test-score gap and urban school reform.

PEPG is also issuing evaluations on school-voucher experiments under

By Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips

In a country as racially polarized as the United States, no single change taken in isolation could possibly eliminate the entire legacy of slavery and Jim Crow or usher in an era of full racial equality. But if racial equality is America's goal, reducing the black-white test-score gap probably would do more to promote this goal than any other politically plausible strategy.

African-Americans score lower than Eur

Test-Score Gap

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The United States should be conducting large-scale experiments to discover how to reduce the gap further—tests to find out exactly what are the effects of schools' racial mix, class size, teachers' test scores, ability grouping, and many other education strategies. We do such experiments to determine the effects of different medical treatments, different job training programs, and other social interventions.

But the U.S. Department of Education has shown almost no interest in this approach. The most important piece of educational research in the past generation, the Tennessee class size experiment, showed that small classes in the early grades made a big difference, especially for blacks—yet it was funded by the Tennessee legislature, not the U.S. Department of Education. Experimental assessments of other educational policies have been almost nonexistent.

We do not have a blueprint for reducing the black-white test-score gap. No one does. This is partly because researchers have devoted far less attention to the test-score gap over the past quarter century than its political and social consequences warranted. Most social scientists have chosen safer topics and hoped the problem would go away. It didn't.

We can do better.

Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips co-edited The Black-White Test Score Gap, *a collection of essays that is available from the Brookings Institution Press.*

Do Teacher Unions Aid Education Reform?

In September 1998, the Program on Education Policy and Governance sponsored a national conference titled, "Teacher Unions and Educational Reform." The following article on the conference appeared in Education Week.

By Jeff Archer

Teachers unions are a popular topic for debate in political circles, but they rarely are subjected to scrutiny by academics. So when a group of researchers met at Harvard University to take a scholarly look at the role teacher organizations play in school reform, many felt they were entering virgin territory.

"Everyone has an opinion on teachers organizations, but we really don't know very much about them," said [PEPG's] Tom Loveless who, along with Paul Peterson, led the conference. "There's very little empirical evidence as to what their impact on education really is," Loveless added.

Joining some two dozen university professors from across the country were representatives of the two national teachers unions and district administrators. The discussion showed that even academics have trouble reaching a consensus about teachers unions.

Differing Views

In an analysis of teacher contracts in 11 districts throughout the country, Susan Moore Johnson, a professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, offered a relatively optimistic perspective. Six of the agreements could either be considered "reform contracts" or reflected some willingness by teachers to work collaboratively with administrators and share responsibility for improving student

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By Tom Loveless

Would low-income and minority students be helped if schools eliminated tracking—the policy of grouping students with other students of similar ability?

Prominent researchers and prestigious organizations—including the Carnegie Corporation and the NAACP—have made this claim, arguing that minority and low-income students are disproportionately assigned to lower tracks, where they learn less than they would have learned in untracked classes. Several states—including California, Massachusetts, and Nevada—have encouraged middle and high schools to end tracking and to group students of varying abilities in the same academic classes.

Yet surveys also show solid support for tracking among teachers, students, and parents (including African-American parents). And across the country when local school districts have moved to reduce or eliminate the use of tracking, they often turn otherwise placid communities into hotbeds of controversyBuntr7 -1 TD

Since 1970, 32 states have passed laws designed to equalize per-pupil school spending in poor and rich school districts. In a new working paper, Caroline M. Hoxby notes that such programs often produce negative unintended consequences.

The programs—which were sometimes or

The Charter School Challenge

Because they appear to sidestep both political stalemate and the practical difficulty of implementing widespread change—the traditional barriers to improvement in American public education—charter schools hold great promise as an educational reform. Consequently, they have become a national phenomenon—with laws allowing their establishment now on the books in more than 30 states.

Despite widespread praise for charter schools, established groups—such as teacher unions, state education officials, and local school boards—generally have resisted passage of laws allowing charter schools; when unable to stop those laws entirely, these groups have moved to water them down. In some states, for example, local school boards must approve new charter-school applications—a policy

PEPG director Paul Peterson, one of the study's principal investigators, pointed out that the effects on children in grades four and five were "comparable to the effects observed when class size is sharply reduced." He added that although the first-year effects are "promising," it remains to be seen whether "they are sustained and enlarged in subsequent years." He noted, for example, that if student test scores continue to rise at the first-year rate, then within five years minority students in the program would close the test-score gap with white students from similar economic backgrounds, a long-standing and elusive policy goal.

The study is one of the first school-choice evaluations to use a randomized field trial such as those regularly used in medical research. In New York, 1,200 low-income students received a $1,400 per-year scholarship for three years from the privately funded School Choice Scholarships Foundation. Since more than 20,000 public-school students applied for the scholarships, PEPG researchers—working with Mathematica Policy Research, a well-known evaluation firm—were able to randomly assign applicants to a test group (those who received a scholarship) and a control group (those who applied but did not receive a scholarship). PEPG then tested students before the program began and again after one year of the program.

In addition to the New York City program, PEPG is evaluating privately funded school-choice programs in Washington, DC and Dayton, Ohio.

In both Washington, DC and Dayton, where privately funded school-choice programs began in 1998, PEPG researchers compared applicants who already were attending private schools with those who were attending public schools. The private-school students generally felt safer at school and were more likely to say that their teachers cared about students and that the teaching in their schools was "good." In contrast, public-school students were more likely to report that there was a lot of cheating and gang activity at their schools. Parents tended to confirm these student reports.

Scholarship applicants from private schools also scored significantly higher on math and reading tests than applicants from public schools (even after numerous family background characteristics were taken into account). The differences in scores were larger for older students, a result consistent with findings from New York City.

In addition, PEPG has been asked to evaluate an important school-choice program in San Antonio, Texas, where a private business foundation is offering vouchers to any interested low-income student in the 14,000-student Edgewood district. Because this program is potentially large, it offers a unique opportunity to assess the impact of school choice on public schools.

For more detailed findings, see "Initial Findings from an Evaluation of School-Choice Programs in Washington, DC and Dayton, Ohio," a PEPG working paper that is available at

Other findings from the study were as follows:

- Parents of scholarship users were much more satisfied with their children's education. Nearly half gave their school an "A"; only one-eighth of the control group did. Similarly, 58 percent of the scholarship parents expressed the highest satisfaction with "what's taught in school" compared with 18 percent of the control-group parents.

- Receiving a scholarship reduced the racial isolation of minority students. Eighteen percent of scholarship parents said less of the038 per

Randomized Experiments and Education: Can We Learn from Medical Research?

Photo by PhotoDisc

PEPG is hosting a universitywide faculty seminar comparing the role of evaluation in medical and educational practice and innovation. The seminar is being coordinated with a conference to be held in the spring at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In the following essay, which is extracted from a longer article that appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education, *PEPG Director Paul Peterson reviews some of the issues discussed in the seminar.*

Few doubt that inner-city education desperately needs improvement. Yet there is little consensus on what to do. Phonics, better prepared teachers, instruction solely in English, single-sex schools, or the elimination of tracking students according to ability levels have all been peddled as answers.

If such reforms were new drugs, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) would reject every one of them because they have not been tested in a well-designed, large-scale, scientifically conducted experiment. In the physical sciences, such experiments generally require the researcher to alter one condition or factor while keeping all others constant. When humans are involved, such experiments are harder to perform—both because ethical considerations preclude research that might harm the subjects and because it is virtually impossible to hold all but one human factor constant.

The solution is the randomized field trial (RFT), which has become the staple of medical research. In an RFT, a reasonably large number of individuals are randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group is then exposed to the factor under investigation (say, a new drug), while the other, the control group, is not. If we have enough subjects, we can assume that the two groups, on average, are similar except that one is exposed to the factor under investigation. Thus, we can attribute significant differences in average outcomes between the two groups to exposure to the factor under investigation.

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Today, it is impossible to market a new medical product without demonstrating, by means of an RFT, that the product both is effective and does not cause side effects that would make the cure worse than the disease. To be sure, such trials do not ensure that every medical product is safe for everyone. But few of us would want to return to the days before RFTs when doctors routinely used treatments that did not work or did more harm than good.

Unfortunately, few educational reforms have been tested in an RFT. Notable exceptions include PEPG's evaluations of school vouchers in New York City and Tennessee's experiment on the effects of reducing class size.

Admittedly, randomized experiments in education are not always possible, and not all RFTs produce clear results. While we cannot ignore these issues, the answer is not to forgo randomized experiments. Instead, as in medicine, we need to conduct more of them in different places with varying kinds of students.

This brings up the matter of cost. In medical

Books

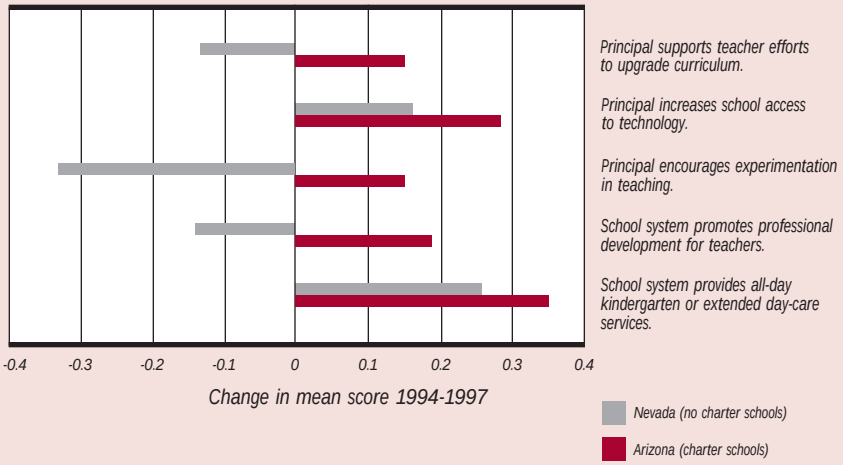
How Do Public Schools Respond to Charter Schools?

For the foreseeable future, the vast majority of students will attend traditional, district-based public schools rather than charter or private schools. Accordingly, charter schools could have their greatest impact not by providing education alternatives for those who attend them, but by stimulating innovation in traditional public schools.

To see if this is the case, Frederick Hess, Robert Maranto, and Scott Millman have been studying the public-school impact of charter schools in Arizona, which currently has more than 200 charter schools, more than any other state.

The researchers asked teachers in districts with a large number of charters and those in districts with few or no charters to comment on changes in schooling between 1994 and 1997. They found that teachers in districts with higher rates of charter competition were much more likely to have made significant and apparently positive changes during that time.

Impact of Charter Schools on Public Schools



The study made a similar comparison of Arizona and Nevada, where there are few charter schools. On eight of ten items studied, the Arizona teachers reported greater improvement between 1994 and 1997 than did their counterparts in Nevada. Indeed, on six of these items, Nevada teachers reported that their schools had deteriorated; Arizona teachers reported no deterioration.

Finally, the researchers interviewed approximately 30 Arizona educators—including charter-school operators, state and local education officials, and leaders of the state's education union. They found that public schools have reacted to competition in several ways. Facing rapidly growing enrollments, some districts have done nothing, especially when charter schools served "at-risk" students. Other districts, however, have altered their programs by, for example, offering all-day kindergartens, opening magnet schools, or increasing the use of phonics in reading instruction. Finally, charter-school operators claim that some districts tried to squash competition through practices such as refusing to accept transfer credits from charter schools or pressuring local zoning officials to prevent use of a building for a new charter school.

Taken together, the researchers claim, the survey data and the interviews suggest that charter schools have caused significant behavioral changes in Arizona's traditional public schools.

For more information, see "Coping with Competition: How School Systems Respond to School Choice," a PEPG working paper that is available on request.

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