

Measuring School Effectiveness

Are “Failing” Schools Really Failing?

Isolating school from nonschool effects

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Are schools whose students perform poorly on achievement tests really failing? Not necessarily, according to Dr. Douglas B. Downey, professor in the Department of Sociology at The Ohio State University. “Most current methods of evaluation as mandated by the No Child Left Behind legislation assume that schools are the only influence on students’ learning, but that is not accurate,” says Downey. “On the very first day of kindergarten, schools can be ranked based on the test scores of the kindergartners who could not yet have received much, if any, influence from the school,” Downey explains. “Even after children begin formal schooling, nonschool influences continue to affect their academic performance during the school year and in the summer,” he says.

Impact: The School’s Contribution to Learning

In order to address this issue, Downey introduces a new measure, “impact,” that is designed to measure the school’s contribution to the learning of students. This measure is based on the degree to which schools increase their students’ rates of learning when school is in session versus when it is not. According to Downey, the government needs a more accurate way of measuring schools if they are rewarding or punishing schools based on such measurements.

In his research, Downey compares what he calls “achievement,” which is the current method of

evaluating schools, to “learning” and “impact,” two alternative measures designed to account for students’ varying nonschool environments. “The main problem with assessing schools based on achievement is that it does not adequately separate school and nonschool effects on children’s learning,” Downey says. “Schools’ tests scores are likely a combination of both school practices such as good teachers and efficient administration, as well as nonschool characteristics like involved parents and quality neighborhoods,” he adds. The challenge, Downey says, is to measure the value that schools add independently from the widely varying nonschool factors that influence children’s learning. “While some schools serving disadvantaged students may actually be poor-quality schools, this evaluation cannot be made with confidence without separating the effects of the school and nonschool environments,” he states.

Downey says that measuring “learning” would begin to address school effectiveness by looking at how much schools’ students improve, rather than where they end up on an achievement scale. He suggests that schools with high-achieving students would be challenged to raise their performance even higher, while schools with lower achieving students could be deemed “effective” if the students made significant progress throughout the year. “Yearly gains,” Downey states, “while a more accurate indication of schools’ effectiveness than the current method, still are not completely accurate measures of school effectiveness, since students spend the vast majority of their time outside of school.”

A student who misses no school at all spends only 25% of his or her time in school over the course of the calendar year, according to Downey. That means that 75% of the time the

Impact =

the degree to which schools increase their students’ rates of learning when school is in session versus when it is not.

student is not in school is being influenced and affected by other factors. Although measuring school effectiveness through learning represents a substantial improvement over the current achievement approach, Downey says that there is an assumption that the nonschool influences are similar for students during the measurement period, and that simply is not possible. “Schools whose students have parents who value learning, homes with books and computers, and supportive communities will more easily register learning gains than schools serving students with poor nonschool environments,” Downey explains. “Students who live in environments where their physical needs are not being met or who feel unsafe are at a significant disadvantage compared to students whose homes are safe and stocked with books, computers, and other resources helpful to fostering learning,” he adds.



Conclusions about which schools are failing are altered when school and nonschool effects are looked at separately.

Summer Learning Counts

Downey says that measuring schools' "impact" represents an attempt to isolate school effects more completely by considering how students' learning rates change when they are in school compared to when they are not in school. The concept of measuring "impact" involves focusing on summer learning, which attempts to measure the degree to which children learn outside school, he continues. "Gaps in cognitive skill levels among socioeconomic levels primarily grow over the summer and are likely reduced during the school year," states Downey. "Knowing how quickly children learn when exposed to their nonschool environment is helpful in isolating the effects of the school," he explains.

Downey points out that there are a few assumptions that must be made in order to implement the "impact" model. "Summer learning is probably impacted at some level by the effects of the school, but exactly how much of an impact that would be has not yet been measured," he says. Through his research, Downey says that he sees that the distinctions between the school year and summer are arguably strong enough to represent an important step toward isolating school

from nonschool influences on learning. "Another assumption of the 'impact' model is that it assumes that the rate of learning during the nonschool summer continues at the same rate during the school year. That may or may not be true, even with adjustments made to compensate for the number of hours of possible influence by nonschool factors adjusted to accommodate the hours spent in school," states Downey.



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Changing the Way Schools Are Evaluated

One challenge to Downey's plan is that in order to produce seasonal reports that are accurate, testing would have to occur twice in the same school year, an option that would be unattractive to most policymakers, school personnel, and parents. The financial and scheduling aspects of that challenge could be overcome if, instead of testing every year, the same number of assessments would be maintained, but the timing would be altered. For example, high-quality information could be obtained through testing at two points in time, such as fall and spring of the same school year, rather than gathering less reliable information about school quality at six points in time, or 6 years in a row.

"Another argument against this plan," says Downey, "may be that higher achieving schools could have scores that show less impact simply because there is less room for them to achieve; they bump up against a developmental ceiling." That thought is merely speculation, however, and leads to the alternate thought that schools serving advantaged children might not be challenging their students to take the next leap. If parents of economically advantaged children really want their children to

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receive a good education, Downey continues, they should be challenging their school to teach their children more than what they would learn if they were not in school. Downey's research showed that 17 percent of schools with high reading achievement test scores scored poorly on the "impact" measure. Schools should not relax their efforts when educating students of any background.

Downey's research shows that, although schools might not all provide equal opportunities for all children, they are markedly more equal than the students' nonschool environments. Schools are more a part of the solution than part of the problem of inequality. That is evident in the fact that students arrive at kindergarten with substantial inequalities in reading and math skills before schools can even matter, and during the summers, inequality increases at a faster rate than it does during the school year. Advantaged and disadvantaged students tend to learn at close to the same rate during the school year. From that, Downey concludes that even though schools may not provide equal opportunities for all children, they are more equal than

nonschool environments and are thus more a part of the solution than the problem of inequality. That reality is the basis for Downey's recommendation for a new way of assessing schools that is based on the summer learning pace versus the school-year learning pace.

Colleges are also affected by the same sort of factors when looking at achievement, according to Downey. "Teachers are not the only influence on college students' lives. The degree to which a college student achieves can be affected by troubles with roommates, significant others, the need to work many hours at a job, health concerns, and many other factors," Downey states. "Developing an accountability system that actually isolates the effect of the college on the student is extremely challenging. Downey suggests that adding 20 to 30 days to the school year would help increase the nation's test scores. That would help to reduce inequality in disadvantaged students versus advantaged students and would raise our skills compared to other countries. As Downey says, "School is great! I like schools—I am a big advocate of schools." ■