Revisiting Teacher Quality Gaps: Geographic Disparities in Access to Highly Effective Teachers Across Tennessee

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INTRODUCTION

A growing body of work indicates there are substantial inequities in teacher quality according to test-score "value-added" measures (VAMs) of teaching effectiveness (Goldhaber et al., 2015, 2018; Sass et al., 2010). Some recent studies, however, call into question this body of work and suggest the distribution of teacher quality may be more equitable than previously thought (Isenberg et al., 2016), but the findings from these studies are primarily derived from large, urban districts where the teacher labor markets may be substantially different than rural districts. The purpose of this study is to more thoroughly explore the presence of teacher quality gaps and assess whether similar distributional patterns exist across the broader teaching workforce and diverse geographical contexts.

RESULTS

Findings show teacher quality gaps (TQGs) similar in size to those found in previous studies of other state settings (Goldhaber et al., 2015, 2018). More specifically, we find:

- Under-represented minorities (URM) and economically disadvantaged students (EDS) are between 3 to 6 percentage points less likely to be exposed to a high-quality teacher in any given year. A little over half of these gaps are associated with differences in exposure occurring across rather than within districts.
- TQGs tend to be larger in urban and suburban areas and markedly smaller in rural settings (Figure 1). However, we find that the smaller gaps in teacher quality in rural areas reflect lower overall exposure to high quality teaching in those settings.

Figure 1. Exposure rate gaps to teachers with top-decile VAM estimate, by urbanicity

Note: VAM = value-added model; URM = under-represented minority (Black, Latinx, Native American); EDS = Economically disadvantaged student.

In addition, regression-based estimates suggest:

- Larger schools and schools serving a higher share of students of color are associated with more inequitable exposure to high quality teachers based on student racial/ethnic background and economic disadvantage.
- Schools in more resourced districts (higher average teacher salaries and per pupil expenditures) are associated with more equitable exposure to high quality teachers.
- Schools located in more costly neighborhoods (higher fair market 2-bedroom rates) are associated with more inequitable exposure to high quality teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

Similar to prior research, findings affirm the inequitable exposure to high quality teaching experienced by students of color and economically disadvantaged students. Further, teacher quality gaps differ based on notable school, district, and neighborhood attributes.

A number of implications for policy and practice arise from this study:

- Under-resourced districts and larger, more diverse schools should be particularly attentive to ensuring that teacher-student assignments result in equitable exposure to high quality teaching.
- Interventions to recruit and retain high-performing teachers should be targeted to these schools and districts, particularly if they are located in neighborhoods that are more costly to live and work.
- Finally, programs intended to enhance instruction in under-resourced schools and districts could serve as an equally viable method to mitigate teacher quality gaps experienced by students.

REFERENCES


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