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EFP Takeaways

Effects of School Reforms from NCLB Waivers – Focus Schools in Kentucky

Background

During the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Education began issuing waivers from No Child Left Behind's (NCLB's) requirements to states implementing a new version of differentiated school accountability. A key feature of these reforms required states to implement targeted reforms in schools contributing to a state's achievement gaps. However, states were given considerable flexibility in how they supported these "Focus Schools." Kentucky articulated a comprehensive school planning process that included a suggested menu of prescriptive whole-school reforms (e.g., extended learning time, teacher collaboration, professional development, data-driven instructional practices, and computer-aided instruction for low-performing students).

Understanding the effects of such differentiated accountability plans is important due to their continuation under the recent reauthorization of NCLB as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Sade Bonilla and Thomas Dee of UMass Amherst and Stanford University, respectively, examined the effects of these reforms in the state of Kentucky.

The Study

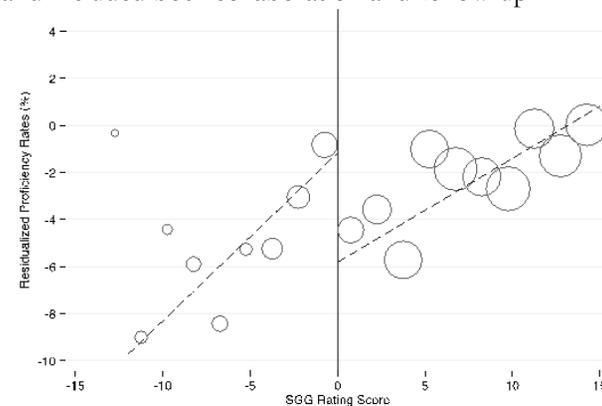
Kentucky designated Focus Schools based on the performance of a large umbrella group of underserved students for which schools would be held responsible. The use of this "[super subgroup](#)" approach may have been crucial in catalyzing broader school-wide reforms and avoiding incentives for narrowly targeted reform efforts.

Using administrative data from the Kentucky Department of Education, the authors examined just over 900 elementary and middle schools that were eligible for Focus Schools status. The measures of school performance included math and reading proficiency rates. Their analysis effectively compared the schools just below and above the threshold for Focus School designation.

Findings

Overall, results show the reforms implemented in the state of Kentucky led to considerable improvements in school performance. In particular, math proficiency rates increased by 17% and reading proficiency rates increased by 9%. The figure below shows the shift in reading scores after the implementation of the Focus School reforms.

Evidence from teacher surveys indicated that teachers in the treatment schools received higher quality professional development, which may explain performance gains. For instance, Focus School teachers reported that their professional development was well-aligned with student needs and included both collaboration and follow-up.



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- Summary of:
Bonilla, S., & Dee, T. S. (2020). The effects of school reform under NCLB waivers: Evidence from focus schools in Kentucky. *Education Finance and Policy*, 15(1).