

EDUCATION

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## EFP Takeaways

Focused on the Gap: NCLB Waivers and Student Performance

### *Background*

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education implemented a process through which states could apply for exemptions from some of the core requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), provided they adopt other reforms, including those that target schools with large within-school achievement gaps between groups of students, or Focus Schools. A new study by Steven Hemelt at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Brian Jacob at the University of Michigan in vol. 15, issue 1 of *EFP* investigates the effects of Focus-school reforms in the state of Michigan on a range of educational outcomes.

### *The Study*

The authors used administrative data from the Michigan Department of Education to examine the effects of these school reforms on student and school outcomes. Standardized test scores by subject, grade, and year capture student performance. Measures of within-school achievement reflect differences in performance between the top 30 percent and bottom 30 percent of students in a school. The authors also used data on staffing and student demographics to explore effects of Focus reforms on such outcomes. The authors compare subsequent outcomes of schools barely eligible for Focus designation (starting in the 2012 academic year) to those that just missed the cutoff and are thus free from the associated reform requirements.

### *Findings*

Analysis revealed four key results:

- In Michigan, designation as a Focus school led to modest, short-lived reductions in within-school math achievement gaps.
- Estimates across the achievement distribution suggest that these reductions in within-school gaps were driven by declines in performance among higher-achieving students alongside steady performance of lower-achieving students.

- No effect of Focus status on measures of school composition or candidate mediators that were likely components of school improvement plans, such as teacher and principal replacement.
- Complementary qualitative evidence from interviews with school personnel and state officials suggests that uneven, weak implementation at the local level, mixed with strained capacity for oversight at the state level, had a hand in these null results.

### *Policy Implications*

State and local contexts stand to shape the manner in which federally catalyzed education reforms are implemented as well as downstream outcomes for schools and students. Results from Michigan's experience with NCLB waivers provide a cautionary tale regarding the capacity of similarly structured reforms in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to boost student outcomes.

As states continue to experiment with different forms of accountability pressure and metrics under ESSA, they should focus attention on the oversight structures that guide these reform efforts – such as the clarity of communication between the state and districts, support structures for developing and implementing local reform activities, and criteria for evaluation and removal from reform categories.

#### **For more details:**

- View the full issue.
- See the full article in Education Finance and Policy.
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- Summary of:  
Hemelt, S. W., & Jacob, B. A. (2020). How does an accountability program that targets achievement gaps affect student performance? *Education Finance and Policy*, 15(1).