



Transforming the High School Experience: Early Lessons from the New York City Small Schools Initiative

Alliance for Excellent Education

October 15, 2010

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The Challenge of High School Reform

- Large, failing, factory-style urban high schools
- District response: comprehensive restructuring, closing large schools, opening small schools including charters
- Mixed evidence about effectiveness of these strategies
 - Limited study reliability
 - Small or rarefied samples
 - Overly reliant on a test score
- **Raising the bar: NYC study unusual in scale, rigor, measures, and results**

NYC High School Transformation

Three interrelated reforms:

- Close 23 lowest-performing schools, located primarily in poorest NYC neighborhoods
- Open 123 small, unscreened schools
- Choice for all 80,000 entering 9th graders

Small Schools of Choice: Key Features

- Accessible to all students of all academic abilities
- Small in size and function with thematic focus
- Academic rigor, personalization, community partnership
- Demanding “bottom up” proposal process
- Partnership of unions, principals, intermediaries, district
- Infusion of outside resources
- Policy protections during start-up period
- Predominantly located in disadvantaged communities where neighborhood high schools were closed

What Question Do We Answer and How?

Question:

What difference does enrolling in a “Small School of Choice” make on students’ transition into high school, progress towards graduation, and diploma attainment?

An algorithm matches student choices to schools; when an SSC is oversubscribed, a lottery-like process breaks ties

We used this process to identify:

- 297 lotteries, involving 4 cohorts of incoming 9th graders (2005-2008), affecting 105 schools, 21,085 students

What Did We Find?

- SSC enrollees made a more successful 9th grade transition into high school
- Pattern of positive results continues through the 2nd and 3rd years of high school
- Enrollees are more likely to graduate in 4 years

Estimated Effects of SSC Enrollment: Years 1 to 3

Outcome	Target SSC Enrollees	Control Group Counterparts	Estimated Difference
<u>Year 1 of high school (cohorts 1 to 4)</u>			
9th-grade on-track indicator (%)	58.5	48.5	10.0 ^{**}
Earned 10 or more credits	73.1	62.3	10.8 ^{**}
Failed more than 1 semester of a core subject	39.0	46.8	-7.8 ^{**}
Total credits earned toward graduation	11.3	10.4	0.9 ^{**}
<u>Year 2 of high school (cohorts 1 to 3)</u>			
Earned 20 or more credits (%)	69.4	58.3	11.1 ^{**}
Total credits earned toward graduation	22.3	19.8	2.6 ^{**}
<u>Year 3 of high school (cohorts 1 and 2)</u>			
Earned 30 or more credits (%)	69.5	62.4	7.1 ^{**}
Total credits earned toward graduation	32.2	29.7	2.4 ^{**}

All Students Benefit

SSC enrollment, as measured by the 9th grade on-track indicator, benefited:

- Black and Hispanic males
- Black and Hispanic females
- Low-income students eligible for reduced-price lunch
- Students well below grade level in math and reading skills

Effects of SSC Enrollment: Graduation & College Readiness

Outcomes	Target SSC Enrollees	Control Group Counterparts	Estimated Difference
<u>Graduation</u>			
Graduated from high school (%)	68.7	61.9	6.8*
Local diploma granted (%)	24.6	21.9	2.8
Regents diploma granted (%)	39.5	34.6	4.9
Advanced Regents diploma granted (%)	4.4	5.5	-1.1
<u>College Readiness</u>			
Math A Regents exam passed with 75 or above (%)	22.2	22.8	-0.6
English Regents exam passed with 75 or above (%)	34.1	28.8	5.3*
Sample size (total observations = 5,363)			

Conclusion: Reform at Scale is Possible

- Replacing large failing high schools with small, themed schools of choice is a viable reform strategy
- As implemented in NYC, small schools significantly improved students' academic outcomes
- SSCs were effective in very poor communities, for all types of students, throughout all 4 years of HS
- Results may understate true effects

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