

Improving educational outcomes for poor children

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The problem

- Large disparities in schooling outcomes:
 - Between rich and poor children
 - Between minority and white children
 - Disparities open up very early
- Concentration of disadvantaged children in high-poverty urban areas
 - Minorities more likely to live in such areas even after controlling for family income
- How can we improve schooling outcomes?

Potential remedies

- Increased schooling “inputs”
 - Early childhood interventions
 - Class size reduction
- Increased efficiency (“output” reform)
 - Whole school reforms
 - Accountability reforms
 - School choice
 - Changing teacher labor markets

Early childhood education

- Cumulative body of evidence from:
 - Model programs (Perry, Abecedarian)
 - Head Start (Janet Currie studies, Ludwig & Miller 2007, recent randomized experiment)
 - Head Start likely to pass benefit-cost test
- Head Start reaches 2/3 of eligible children
- Targeted expansions (and perhaps improvements) in high-poverty areas?

Class size reduction

- Tennessee STAR experiment:
 - Class sizes from 22 to 15 in grades K-3
 - Larger gains for minority than white children
 - Seems to pass a benefit-cost test
- Going-to-scale concerns, CA case study:
 - Reductions in teacher quality (Jepsen-Rivkin)
- Targeted class size reductions?

Whole school reforms

- Success for All
 - Develops reading skills in early grades
 - Ability rather than age grouping for reading
 - Frequent assessments, remedial tutoring
- Passes benefit-cost test
 - Costs close to per pupil Title 1 spending
- Importance of school buy-in?

Accountability reforms

- Change incentives facing teachers
 - Student test score levels or gains
- “You get what you measure”
 - Usually larger gains on high-stakes than on low-stakes tests
 - Unintended consequences (cheating, gaming, even changing lunch menus on test days!)
- Need to get design issues right

Teacher labor markets

- Teacher quality varies greatly
 - But weakly correlated with most observable teacher characteristics
- Low-income minority children on average have lower-quality teachers than others
- How can we fix that?
 - Alternatives to certification (including TFA)
 - Bonuses for teaching in disadv. Schools
 - Improved urban school HR policies
 - Changing tenure procedures & standards

School choice

- Controversial interventions
- Jury is still out
 - Limited effects on test scores from winning public school choice lotteries
 - Parents care about more than test scores?
 - Very modest effects of private school experiments on those who switch schools
 - Large scale impacts unknown

School finance reform

- Also very politically controversial
 - Ongoing finance equalization litigation
- Limited evidence of much impact on student outcomes
 - Not clear schools allocate new resources to most educationally productive uses

Bottom line

- There is some good news here:
 - Some input- and output-based interventions have been shown to make a difference
 - Most even seem to pass benefit-cost test
- But will require political will and in some cases additional resources
- Tempered optimism:
 - Even successful interventions will only narrow, not eliminate, disparities in outcomes