

Study: Kids in poor districts learn just as much

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Even though disadvantaged students in poorer school districts might earn lower test scores than those in wealthier districts, students in both settings are learning just as much, according to a new study from researchers at Ohio State University.

The research challenges the traditional notions that performance gaps between such districts are a product of the schools themselves, researchers said.

“What our results suggest is that that story is probably not accurate,” said Doug Downey, a sociology professor at Ohio State and lead author of the study.

Discrepancies in test scores between wealthy or poor districts speak more to what happens outside the classroom, he said.

“It’s probably more accurate to say, there are large gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged kids at the start of kindergarten, but once they get to school, those gaps largely stop growing,” Downey said.

The study used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, pulling from a subsample of about 3,000 students from around the country. Children in the cohort examined by researchers took reading tests at the beginning and end of kindergarten and near the end of first and second grade. Researchers calculated how much children learned during the three periods of school and compared that to what happened during summer breaks.

The results showed that children in schools that serve disadvantaged students on average saw their reading scores rise about as much during the school year as the scores in more advantaged schools.

Downey hopes the research can be helpful for policy makers thinking about how to evaluate schools, in determining whether schools labeled as failing truly are.

“If we’re interested in reducing achievement gaps among advantaged and disadvantaged kids, we’re going to need to think bigger than school reform,” he said.

Those conclusions are in line with the work of nonprofit group Communities in Schools, said Amy Gordon, its executive director and CEO. The group provides services in more than two dozen schools in central Ohio to address barriers outside of the classroom that can impact learning, such as hunger, unstable housing, lack of basic resources, and prevalence of violence, Gordon said.

“The issue is not at all the students or the schools’ capacity to teach or to learn,” she said. “There is no doubt about the fact that ability and capacity is there. It really does come down to the impact of the non-academic barriers that kids are facing.”

Some said the research underscores the good work of educators in high-poverty districts.

“The more education research we have the better, especially when it comes to student learning and student outcomes,” said Jessica Poiner, education policy analyst at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education think tank. “...This research and other research show that there are high-poverty schools that are doing really excellent work.”

“It confirms the fact that we’ve got a lot of really good teachers who are doing really good in our high-poverty schools,” said Scott DiMauro, president of the Ohio Education Association. “We believe that every single student, no matter where they live, deserves a caring, qualified, committed educator. And the impact that they have on student learning is immense.”

Yet the findings also reinforce the need to fix a “broken” state report card system, DiMauro said, echoing criticism of the grades released earlier this month.

“The way the accountability system is set up, it’s set up to punish high-poverty districts,” he said.

Downey’s research has received some scholarly attention, but he’s surprised that the latest research and previous studies haven’t gotten more consideration from education researchers.

“It really fundamentally undermines a strong assumption about how inequality and achievement gaps emerge in the United States,” he said.

Gordon said the idea that obstacles outside of school impacts student learning are beginning to gain more attention from public officials. She and Poiner of the Fordham Institute both praised the \$675 million in Gov. Mike DeWine’s state budget for schools earmarked to address social and emotional needs of students.

“I think the awareness is really growing, that we can’t keep doing the same things in education,” Gordon said. “We can’t keep looking at blaming teachers and the schools and blaming the districts. We’ve got to look at what our kids are facing that are outside of those controls.”

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