

The Long Run Effects of Attending a Preferred Secondary School: Evidence from an English Cohort

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Extended abstract

Schools vary in quality, and demand for places at good schools exceeds supply. Therefore, not all families are able to attend their preferred school. Attending a preferred school may have potentially important consequences for long term outcomes, if parents choose schools based on test score improvements or other school attributes important for child outcomes. In addition to academic outcomes, parents may rationally value wider factors provided by schools, for example non-cognitive skill development, peer groups and pupil well-being, which can have important consequences for longer term outcomes and success in life. In this paper, we study the long-term consequences of missing out on a place in a preferred secondary school in England. We examine a range of outcomes: high-stakes examination scores, mental health and risky behaviours, university and labour market outcomes.

Evidence to date has revealed mixed findings on whether parents choose schools based on a causal improvement in test scores, rather than peer mix, pedagogy or other school attributes. The effects of attending a preferred school are also mixed, with the majority of studies documenting little effect of attending a preferred school on short-run test scores. These studies are typically based on data from specific cities (for example, Boston or New York), and specific settings, such as attendance at academically “elite” schools. In England, who gets into their preferred secondary school is a well-publicised issue by the media and dissatisfied parents, with about 16% of families missing out on a place at their first-choice school each year. Yet to date there is no nationally representative evidence on the effects of missing out on a preferred school. Our paper contributes new evidence by combining powerful administrative data and detailed cohort data that follows pupils from secondary school to age 25 years, to study the long-term consequences of attending a preferred school

To apply for a place at a state school in England, parents submit a ranking of their preferred schools. They can list between 3 and 6 places depending on their local area. Places are allocated based on these parental preferences by Local Authority, subject to school capacities. For oversubscribed schools, allocation of scarce places is prioritised based on a set of observable criteria, typically including whether the child has special education needs, whether the child has older siblings at the school, and finally the distance from the school. In some cases, faith may also be considered. If a pupil cannot be allocated to any of their listed preferred schools, they are assigned to a school with spare capacity (which is typically of lower quality). The nature of this oversubscription criteria creates variation in

school allocation which we exploit to generate estimates of the effects of not attending a first-choice school.

We employ the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), a nationally representative birth cohort study which tracks the lives of a cohort of around 15,000 young people in England who were born in 1989/90. The study begins when the children are in Year 9, the second year of secondary school, and follows them until they are aged 25 years. The LSYPE contains detailed information on school choice – including whether the child attends their preferred school - family background, experiences in school and crucially labour market and university outcomes. This data is confidentially linked to the National Pupil Database (NPD), a database of administrative school records, containing test scores and school attributes. From this data we can track the achievement of the LSYPE pupils in high-stakes examinations, e.g., GCSE and A-levels. The NPD also provides information on school attributes.

Our empirical strategy relies on a selection-on-observed variables assumption. We use regression and matching to compare the outcomes of families who had similar chances of being accepted to their preferred school but did or not gain a place. From the linked LSYPE data, we have information on admission priorities: the approximate distance from home to potential schools, presence of older siblings, special educational needs, religion and ethnicity. We also control for a rich set of family background and socio-economic information, such as family income and prior test scores.

Initial results show that parents of pupils who miss out on their first-choice school are less satisfied with the school across a range of domains, including overall school quality and satisfaction with the pupil's academic progress. Preferred schools tend to be more effective schools, in terms of value-added, and are more affluent and less ethnically diverse. Pupils who miss out on preferred schools are less likely to stay on at school past the age of compulsory schooling (16 years), and more likely to engage in risky behaviours, such as playing truant and trying drugs. However, there are no significant differences in short-run test scores, or university attendance. At age 25 years, pupils who miss out are more likely to have poor mental health and lower wages. These results are consistent with the idea that traditional measures such as test scores may fail to capture important components of school quality important for long-term outcomes.