Making Sense of K-12 Testing Data: Accountability in Action

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CGR Profile

“A nonprofit center for objective policy analysis and pragmatic change”

- Research to drive informed decisions
- Expertise to create effective solutions

- Founded by George Eastman in 1915
- Statewide practice with offices in Rochester, Albany & White Plains
- Gleason Center for State Policy targets education reform & economic competitiveness
- Independent and nonpartisan

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Education Reform Practice

- Staff to numerous education reform initiatives in Rochester for past 20 yrs
- Presently coordinate Rochester Charter Schools Committee
- Outcomes research: WIN Voucher Program & Rochester Charter Schools Evaluation
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“Accountability”—Nice principle, but how do you apply it?

- But how will we know?
- What does it mean to be “left behind?”
- And who makes the call?
A Tale of Two Evaluations

- **Wegman Inner City Voucher Program (WIN)**
  - Privately funded
  - Vouchers restricted to selected inner city Catholic schools
  - 1,200 students participate

- **Rochester Charter Schools**
  - Charters are PUBLIC schools
  - Students selected by lottery
  - 4 schools with about 1,500 students
Wegmans WIN Voucher Program

- **Program Purpose**
  - Provide educational alternatives for inner city youth, primarily minority
  - Support faltering inner city Catholic elementary schools

- Qualifying students receive VOUCHER from Wegmans’ fund that dramatically reduces (but doesn’t eliminate) tuition

- Voucher may only be used at SIX designated schools

- One of the largest private voucher program in the United States
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About the WIN Schools & Students (1999)

- 98% of students receive WIN voucher
- 84% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch v. 68% in Rochester City School District (RCSD)
- Per pupil costs roughly half of RCSD
- WIN schools enroll SIX PERCENT of eligible student population
- 66% minority; 57% non-Catholic

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Query: Is the Program Effective?

What does that mean?
- Promote Christian values among students and families
- Maintain financial integrity of selected schools
- Improve student academic achievement

Three phases of analysis
- Gather data about WIN program & describe characteristics of WIN students v. students in public school
- Conduct interviews of WIN families, documenting nonacademic impact of WIN
- Assess three year impact of WIN program on student achievement
What Would Be the BEST Research Design?

- Begin with students who are identical in all respects—use only “lab kids” bred for research
- OK—gather data on all significant determinants of student achievement to enable you to control for factors outside of study
- What is the list?
What Drives Learning?

- Personal Characteristics
- Environmental Influences
- School Effects

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What is Program Impact on Families?

- WIN schools are popular with families (they PAY & endorse)
- WIN families believe the “whole package” better than RCSD for their children
- WIN Schools add stability to participating families
- 87% intend to keep student enrolled through 6th grade
- Is “customer satisfaction” a reasonable goal?
What Do We Know?

- **Personal Characteristics**
  - “Baseline:” Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)
  - Gender
  - Age

- **Environmental Influences**
  - Race
  - Free/reduced price lunch eligibility
  - Mother’s education
  - Do parents care about education?

- **School Effects**
  - Poverty concentration
  - Catholic v. RCSD school
What Comparisons Can We Draw?

1. Use school averages to compare WIN schools to RCSD schools with similar poverty concentrations
2. Compare WIN students against national norms
3. Use “case control” approach to compare WIN students against matched RCSD students
First: WIN School Average Achievement v. Comparable RCSD Schools

- What is the dependent variable?
  - 4th grade English language arts (ELA)
  - 4th grade math

- Selected three comparable RCSD schools for each of six WIN schools

- Findings: WIN ELA scores fell 5.7% v. 1.6% gain for RCSD schools

- Reliability: Oh, ppleaseeeze!

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Second: ITBS Comparison Against National Norms

- Convert ITBS scores to normal curve equivalents (NCEs)
- Use NCEs to compare each child to himself or herself one year before
- Finding: WIN students NCE scores roughly constant from year to year; WIN students keep up with national peers
- Reliability: Much better—by comparing child against him or herself, control for shifting student population
Third: Create Control Group Using Matched Students from Public School

- Created a control group by matching WIN students to RCSD students by grade, age, race, mother’s education
- RCSD students selected from RCSD “choice” schools, attempting to control for parental motivation & school environment
- Dependent variable: 4th grade math & ELA—only common assessment instruments between two groups
- Finding: WIN students achievement comparable to control group from choice schools
- Reliability: Difference in poverty concentration (WIN schools poorer); student poverty match based on F/RP lunch eligibility; controls for environmental factors crude; no “baseline” for students in study (couldn’t crosswalk SAT9 & ITBS)
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Conclusions: Ambiguous?

- WIN Schools Provide Choice for Families Unable to “Vote With Feet” for Better Schools
- WIN Students Achieve At Levels Comparable to National Norms, Despite High Poverty Concentration
- WIN Students Achieve At Levels Comparable to RCSD Choice Schools, Despite High Poverty Concentration

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Charter Schools in NYS

- Charter schools are PUBLIC schools
- Freed from oversight of local school board; chartered either by SUNY Charter Schools Institute or NYS Board of Regents
- 23 in NYS educating 6,000 children
- 5 year charter must be renewed; presumption is that renewal is driven by proven accomplishment
- Funded at per student average spending by student’s resident district; Both state and local tax dollars flow to charter school from local school board (about $7,500 in Rochester; $8,400 in Pittsford; $7,000 in NYC)
- Students selected by LOTTERY
Our Evaluation

- Superintendent & Bd of Education authorized sharing of baseline data
- Control group: Students in LOTTERY but remaining in RCSD schools
- Common instrument: Harcourt Brace Stanford 9
- Value-added assessment: Growth in individual achievement from year to year is benchmark
Charter Evaluation: Status

- Confidential report on first year just completed
- We entered into an agreement with the charter schools that we wouldn’t release data until they had to begin applying for charter renewal.
- Just received second year of SAT 9 data from Charter School of Science & Technology
- Allowing Rochester Leadership Academy Charter to use MAT on alternate years—Working with National Heritage Academies to secure MATs in electronic form
- RCSD data not expected for several months
- New superintendent & conflict among the board raises concerns