

DISSERTATION DEFENSE

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“Three Essays on Economic Access to Public K-12 Education”

Tuesday, March 26, 2019

10:00 am

Hamburg Hall 1202

85% of children in the U.S. attend public schools for their primary and secondary education. Variation in student educational and labor market outcomes across schools is substantial, and access to high-quality public schools depends largely on where children live. Yet parents and caregivers also impact their children’s access to public education, through enrollment choices and the resources and effort they provide in support of their children’s schooling. Finally, government actors – from teachers and caseworkers to superintendents and state-level policymakers – influence children’s access to education through the policies they implement.

This dissertation offers three essays on topics relating to children’s access to public education. In the first essay, “Persistent and Wide-Ranging Differences in the Income and Racial Segregation of Children,” I document the income and racial segregation experienced by children in neighborhoods and schools throughout the U.S. Comparing segregation estimates across commuting zones, I show that racial and income segregation exhibit distinct geographical patterns. Racial segregation operates across school district boundaries, while income segregation persists within school districts. These nuances are relevant to policies that may impact sorting and segregation, whether directly or through spillover effects. Since *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), school systems cannot pursue efforts to reduce de facto segregation across school district boundaries, but school districts may be able to alter income segregation within their boundaries.

Adverse home and family circumstances impact children’s access to public education, but typical administrative data cannot identify these disadvantages beyond a simple household income proxy (e.g., free or reduced lunch eligibility). In the second essay, “Disadvantage Beyond Poverty: Adverse Childhood Experiences, School Choice, and Educational Outcomes,” I leverage human services data to identify more severely disadvantaged children: those linked to child welfare investigations prior to kindergarten (one-in-eight children in the city under study). Regardless of which elementary school they attend, these children miss 25% more school days than non-disadvantaged children and have suspension odds that are 57% higher. These gaps are significantly larger than those for low-income children not linked to investigations. Moreover, children linked to child welfare investigations are systematically less likely to enroll in charter or magnet schools over traditional public schools, in contrast to other low-income children who are nearly as likely as their counterparts to enroll in charter or magnet schools. Thus, in aggregate at the school level, a handful of traditional public schools disproportionately enroll the most disadvantaged students. By carefully controlling for these sorting patterns and leveraging measures of early childhood disadvantage determined prior to school entry, I recover causal peer effect estimates, which show

that having more disadvantaged peers significantly increases students' own suspension probabilities.

The third essay, "An Intervention to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism," offers a quasi-experimental evaluation of a truancy prevention program that was piloted in two urban K-8 schools during the 2013-14 school year. Using a triple-differences specification, I find that the program was successful in reducing chronic absenteeism rates among persistently low-income students, but the treatment effect is only marginally significant. These results suggest that providing resources, information, and support to low-income caregivers may improve student's educational access through reducing absenteeism.