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HARVARD STUDY FINDS THAT PARENTS GRADE THEIR LOCAL SCHOOLS ON BASIS OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, NOT RACIAL COMPOSITION OF SCHOOL

Analysis also debunks popular belief that low-income, minority and less-educated parents are not as informed about school quality

Cambridge, MA — A Harvard University study released today provides the first evidence from a nationally representative sample of Americans that the public, and especially parents, grade their local schools on the basis of student achievement and not on the percentage of students at the school who are African American or Hispanic. The findings, available at www.educationnext.org, also reveal that poor, minority and less educated citizens are just as informed about school quality as the public as a whole. However, both parents and the general public give lower grades to schools with a high percentage of students from poor families.

Harvard's Matthew Chingos, Michael Henderson and Martin West asked a nationally representative sample of American adults to identify their local elementary and middle schools and to grade them on the "A" to "F" scale traditionally used to evaluate students. The authors then linked the grades given to each school to the school's characteristics, including its size, the size of classes at the school, the racial and ethnic composition of the students, the percentage of students from poor families, and the percentage of students performing at proficient levels in reading and math on state tests.

The peer-reviewed study, which is featured in the Fall 2010 issue of *Education Next*, is the first to compare Americans' subjective ratings of local schools to actual data on student achievement at the same schools. The analysis reveals that citizen ratings of local schools reflect publicly available information on the level of student achievement in the schools.

"Parents care most about whether students at their local school are performing well. While they also rate schools with fewer poor students more highly, we found no signs that the grades parents gave their school is influenced by its racial or ethnic composition," observed Martin West, one of the study's authors.

The researchers found that citizens who are less educated, of lower income, or minority are no less able than better-educated, higher-income, or white citizens to evaluate the schools on the basis of student achievement. As Matthew Chingos explained, "We found no evidence that traditionally disadvantaged groups are less informed about student achievement when rating their local schools."

In light of the ongoing push to establish common academic standards across states, the authors examined data from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress to see whether citizen ratings of school quality are responsive to the level of student performance relative to the nation as a whole or only relative to other schools within the same state. They found no evidence that citizens or parents have information about school quality beyond the information provided by state testing systems. In other words, citizens appear to be evaluating schools based on local comparisons or on information provided by their state testing system without taking into account the relative rigor of state standards.

The study uses data from a 2009 survey of parents and other adults conducted by *Education Next* and the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University. The survey was administered to a nationally representative sample of 3,251 American adults in February and March of 2009. Of the elementary and middle schools the survey respondents rated, 14 percent received a grade of “A,” 41 percent received a “B” grade, while 36 percent received a “C.” Seven percent were given a “D” and 2 percent an “F.” These subjective ratings were compared with data on actual school quality as measured by the percentage of students in each school who achieved “proficiency” in math and reading on states’ accountability exams during the 2007-08 school year.

The authors employed geo-coding techniques to identify the closest five elementary and middle schools to a nationally representative sample of American adults. After first selecting the specific schools they considered to be their local elementary and middle school, survey respondents were asked to grade those schools. The study found that if a school had 25 percent more students performing at a proficient level in math and reading, the school was rated a half grade higher by parents.

The analysis also incorporates data from the National Center for Education Statistics on the racial/ethnic composition of each school, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (an indicator of family poverty), the average number of students in each grade (a measure of school size), and the school’s pupil-teacher ratio (an measure of class size) in the 2007-08 school year.

Matthew M. Chingos is a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University’s Program on Education Policy and Governance. Michael Henderson is a doctoral candidate in Harvard’s Department of Government. Martin R. West is assistant professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an executive editor of *Education Next*.

About Education Next

Education Next is a scholarly journal published by the Hoover Institution, and online by Harvard University, that is committed to looking at hard facts about school reform. Other sponsoring institutions are the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. The journal’s website is www.educationnext.org.