Some further simple analytics of school quality—and a proposal

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In the United States, as in many other countries, a number of measures have been proposed for raising student achievement. In this talk, I will discuss two of the most commonly recommended proposals—expanding school choice and improving teacher quality through selective recruitment and teacher incentives. I will show that, as currently implemented, such measures are likely to have at best a small impact on student achievement.

First, while expanding school choice may be desirable for many reasons, the differences between schools in the academic progress made by their students is small, so even if parents consistently choose more effective schools, the overall impact on student achievement will, for the foreseeable future, be small.

Second, while there is now increasing agreement that teacher quality is, in most education systems, both highly consequential and highly variable, efforts to improve teacher quality by (a) making entry into the profession more selective, (b) by removing less effective teachers, and (c) by using incentives to retain more effective teachers, have had limited impact, not least because estimates of teacher quality are so unreliable as to be almost useless at the individual teacher level. It would appear, therefore, that the only scalable approach to improving educational achievement is by improving the effectiveness of currently employed teachers, through continuing professional development.

Given the lack of success of previous attempts at improving the effectiveness of serving teachers at scale this might seem like a gloomy prognosis. However, recently, a number of studies of teacher professional development focused on making teachers more responsive to their students’ needs have shown considerable promise. Most notably, a recent cluster-randomized control trial involving over 100 schools resulted in a 25% increase in the rate of learning of high-school students at a cost of less than $2 per student per year. I conclude that continuing professional development for all teachers focused on making their teaching more responsive to their students’ needs likely represents the most cost-effective approach to raising student achievement in the United States at scale.

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