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Do Poor Students Benefit from China's Merger Program? Transfer Path and Educational Performance

Journal Article

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Aiming to provide better education facilities and improve the educational attainment of poor rural students, China's government has been merging remote rural primary schools to centralized village, town, or county schools since the late 1990s. To accompany the policy, boarding facilities have been constructed that allow (mandate) primary school-aged children to live at school rather than at home. More generally, there also have been efforts to improve rural schools, especially those in counties and towns. Unfortunately, little empirical work has been available to evaluate the impact of the new merger and investment programs on the educational performance of students. Drawing on a unique dataset that records both the path by which students navigate their primary school years (i.e., which different types of schools did students attend) as well as math test scores in three poverty-stricken counties, we use descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis (both OLS and covariate matching) to analyze the relationship between different transfer paths and student educational performance. This allows us to examine the costs and benefits of the school merger and investment programs. The results of the analysis show that students who attend county schools perform systematically better than those attend village or town schools. However, completing primary school in town schools seems to have no effect on students' academic performance. Surprisingly, starting primary education in a teaching point does not hurt rural students; on the contrary, it increases their test scores in some cases. Finally, in terms of the boarding effect, the neutral estimate in OLS and the negative estimate in covariate matching results confirm that boarding at school does not help the students; in some cases it may even reduce their academic performance.

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