

Is Small Really Better? Testing Some Assumptions about High School Size

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Small schools have been promoted as a reform initiative that could improve educational achievement and postsecondary aspirations and enrollment for students in large urban high schools. Many past research studies that advocate small schools as a mechanism for increasing educational attainment and achievement of low-income minority students are based on correlational research methods. These methods generally are not appropriate for establishing the causal effect of treatment when selection effects are present in the data. This is usually the case with research on small schools because the characteristics of students enrolled in small schools often differ from those of students enrolled in larger schools. Using data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS: 2002), we investigated the impact of small schools on student mathematics achievement, postsecondary expectations, college attendance after high school, the number of schools students applied to, and the type of college to which students applied, employing both conventional hierarchical linear models and propensity score matching techniques that specifically attempt to account for selection effects. An important finding is that small schools did not show consistently positive effects whether we used hierarchical linear modeling or propensity score matching techniques that attempt to account for the selection effects present in the data. Implications of this finding and suggestions for future research are given.