The Attraction of Magnet Schools: Evidence from Embedded Lotteries in School Assignment

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Abstract:

Magnet schools provide innovative curricula to attract students from other schools within the school district.  Measuring the impact of attending a magnet school is challenging because the students chose to apply and schools have priorities over types of students.  Moreover, magnet schools may influence non-cognitive skill formation that is not well-reflected in test scores.  This study estimates the causal impact of attending a magnet school on student outcomes by leveraging exogenous variation arising from tie breakers embedded in a centralized school assignment mechanism.  The data include a rich set of outcomes over three years.  Attending a magnet school led to higher performance in mathematics for elementary and high school students, but we fail to find significant effects for middle school students. Elementary school students had lower rates of absenteeism, and on-time progress rates increased for high school students.  Together, these results provide robust evidence that magnet schools improve student learning and increase student engagement.