COMMENTARY

Capital Investments That Relieve Overcrowding Can Boost Student Achievement

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Aiming to relieve the deleterious academic and social effects of overcrowding in its aging schools, theLos Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) recently invested nearly $20 billion in a massive new school construction project. The project, urged forward by civic activism and legal pressure and financed by voter-approved school bonds, built over 130 new facilities at all grade levels. These new facilities successfully relieved severe overcrowding in LAUSD schools and upgraded its infrastructure for the next several decades.

In New Schools, Overcrowding Relief, and Achievement Gains in Los Angeles – Strong Returns from a $19.5 Billion Investment authors William Welsh, Erin Coghlan, Bruce Fuller, and Luke Dauter investigate whether and how the new facilities also contributed to student achievement. Analyzing rich longitudinal data on each LAUSD pupil from 2002–03 to 2008–09, they focus on the students who switched from a preexisting school to a newly built facility during that time period. The methods control for all time-invariant background characteristics of each student, as well as the effect of teacher education and experience on test scores.

The authors find that elementary students learned at a faster pace after they had switched to a new facility than they would have had they not switched, correcting for the effects of time-invariant background characteristics and teacher education and experience. Elementary students who switched into a new facility saw their year-to-year growth in standardized test scores increase by between 0.1 and 0.25 standard deviations in language arts and up to 0.2 standard deviations in math. These results are consistent for all racial/ethnic categories as well as for students who do and do not receive reduced-price or free meals. However, the authors did not detect any "new facility benefit" for high school students.

Pushing further, the authors investigate which aspects of the new elementary facilities contributed most to boosting achievement. They find that the students who switched to a new facility from the most overcrowded preexisting schools experienced much larger benefits than students who switched from less overcrowded schools. Furthermore, students in preexisting facilities also saw achievement growth benefits after a new facility opened nearby, even though they did not switch schools. This evidence suggests that overcrowding relief was the chief cause of the achievement growth increases.

In contrast, the authors find no association between the construction cost of new elementary facilities and the magnitude of their achievement benefits, suggesting that above a certain minimum, physical amenities of a school do not contribute reliably to achievement. Variation in teacher credentials within the new facilities likewise showed little association with the new facility benefits. The study also includes a case study of LAUSD District 6, illustrating the complex migration set off by the new school construction and the diversification of school types.

The full study is available here: New Schools, Overcrowding Relief, and Achievement Gains in Los Angeles – Strong Returns from a $19.5 Billion Investment, PACE 2012.

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