



Current Issues in Education

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Volume 14, Number 1

ISSN 1099-839X

Accountability Ratings of Elementary Schools: Student Demographics Matter

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Citation

Martinez-Garcia, C., LaPrairie, K. N. & Slate, J. R. (2011). Accountability Ratings of Elementary Schools: Student Demographics Matter. *Current Issues in Education*, 14(1). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/>

Abstract

The researchers examined the most recent year of data (i.e., 2008-2009) from the Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System regarding accountability ratings and student characteristics (i.e., ethnicity, programmatic enrollment, mobility) in elementary schools ($n = 4,110$). Accountability ratings (i.e., Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable, and Academically Unacceptable) are assigned primarily based upon school performance on state-mandated tests by student subgroups. Exemplary elementary school campuses had statistically significantly lower percentages of Black students, Hispanic students, at-risk students,

economically disadvantaged students, students with Limited English Proficient, and mobility percent (i.e., being at the school less than 83% of the school year) whereas Academically Unacceptable had the highest percentages in all these areas. As such, accountability ratings in Texas elementary schools were clearly related to student characteristics and not just test scores. Implications of these findings and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Keywords: elementary schools, student demographics, accountability ratings

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Accountability Ratings of Elementary Schools: Student Demographics Matter

Andreas Schleicher, senior education official at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (O.E.C.D.) and leading expert on comparing school systems, recently revealed findings to the United States Senate education committee that show many other countries surpassing the United States in high school completion rates and achievement test scores (Dillion, 2010). Though unsettling and cause for concern (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008), these revelations are not new ones (Secretary Arne Duncan, 2010). Results such as these reports have undoubtedly prompted the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative and proposal for overhauling the No Child Left Behind Act, the core law outlining federal education policies on public schooling (Obama, 2009, July 24; 2009, July 23). As the United States Department of Education Office of Educational Technology (2010) pointed out in the National Educational Technology Plan:

Under the Obama administration, education has become an urgent priority driven by two clear goals. By 2020,

We will raise the proportion of college graduates from where it now stands [39%] so that 60% of our population holds a 2-year or 4-year degree.

We will close the achievement gap so that all students - regardless of race, income, or neighborhood - graduate from high school ready to succeed in college and careers. (p. 3)

These goals are lofty ones in view of the fact that, despite the focus of the No Child Left Behind Act on closing the achievement gap between White and minority students, the gap has not narrowed under previous administrations (Dillion, 2009). In fact, "... a disproportionate

number of the schools being labeled as persistent failures and facing sanctions under this program are segregated minority schools” (Orfield & Lee, 2005, p. 4).

At the 2010 centennial convention of the National Urban League, President Obama responded to concerns that were raised on the competition for education funds with the Race to the Top reforms during a time of recession (Christian Science Monitor, 2010). He affirmed, “Let me tell you, what’s not working for Black kids and Hispanic kids and Native American kids across this country is the status quo...” (Education Week, 2010, para. 3). President Obama expressed that, “We have an obligation to lift up every child in every school in this country, especially those who are starting out furthest behind” (www.msnbc.com, 2010, para. 2). He also declared that Race to the Top is “the single most ambitious, meaningful education reform effort we’ve attempted in this country in generations” (Christian Science Monitor, 2010, para. 5).

We believe it is imperative that the academic achievement level among all students be increased, regardless of race, language, or socioeconomic status, to ensure the economic growth and prosperity of the United States and to guarantee the ability of American youth to compete in a global economy. In President Obama’s remarks on Race to the Top (2009, July 24), he emphasized this priority.

America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters... In an economy where knowledge is the most valuable commodity a person and a country have to offer, the best jobs will go to the best educated -- whether they live in the United States or India or China. In a world where countries that out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow, the future belongs to the nation that best educates its people...

But what does it take to transform American education? As stakeholders, the population of students served in today's schools need to be understood. Currently, approximately 18% of children in the U.S. live below the federal poverty level and an additional 8% are considered low income, with a family income less than twice the federal poverty threshold (Bowling & Cummings, 2009).

During the mid-1950s and early 1960s, Black student enrollment was much higher than Latino student enrollment and Asian student enrollment was considered insignificant in our nation; however, immigration during the past four decades has changed American schools. Orfield and Lee (2005) stated that Latino and Asian student enrollment has increased exponentially; Black student enrollment has increased steadily; whereas White student enrollment has decreased. National enrollment statistics show that Black students make up approximately 17% of the total student population, whereas 18% is represented by a rapidly growing Latino student enrollment and White student enrollment continues to decline as a proportion of the total (Orfield & Lee, 2005). In the South, where minority populations are more concentrated and students have less opportunity to attend multiracial schools, Black students represent 27% of the total enrollment and Latino students account for at least 19% of total student enrollment. These statistics are important to note because minority students are disproportionately represented in special education (Frankson & White-Lindsey, 2007; Patterway, Kritsonis, & Herrington, 2006) and nationally, minority students have the highest drop-out rates. For example, Hispanics students had almost four times higher drop-out rates (i.e., 16 through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school or have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent education certificate such as the General Educational Development [GED] certificate) and Black students had around two times higher drop-out rates than White students

(i.e., 22%, 11%, and 6% respectively) in 2006 (Planty et al., 2008). Orfield and Lee (2005) noted that as many as half of the country's Black and Hispanic students drop out of school, with the most severe problems in segregated high poverty schools.

Though much more attention has been devoted in recent years to test scores, dropping out is, of course, the ultimate failure for a student in the post-industrial economy—a failure that usually causes deep and irreversible life-long damage to a student and his future family. (Orfield & Lee, 2005, p. 37)

Factors other than mental capacity must be associated with racial performance disparities and the gap in minority student achievement (Gould, 1981). One such factor may actually be a design flaw in curriculum and assessments used to measure academic achievement (Frankson & White-Lindsey, 2007; Petterway et al., 2006). Specifically overlooked in the design of academic expectations are the distinct cultural needs of minority students. For instance, in a review of the literature, Frankson and White-Lindsey (2007) reported that “African Americans display the academic behaviors that do not emulate their non-minority peers; African Americans are more expressive, verbal, field dependent (in that they require contextual instruction), relational, and affectively oriented” (p. 18). Consequently, when these students are instructed and evaluated through traditional means they are automatically at a disadvantage compared to their non-minority peers. Petterway et al. (2006) also pointed out that schools with a large number of English Language Learners (ELLs) “... risk being ranked as underperforming because the measure used to evaluate its performance is blind to this important demographic fact” (p. 3).

Beyond being culturally irresponsible to minority students, the education system fails to provide minority and economically disadvantaged students with high-quality teachers (Allen, Palaich, & Anthes, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Ingersoll, 1999, 2002; Martinez-Garcia &

Slate, 2010a, 2010b; Nieto, 2003; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Rowland & Coble, 2005). On average, students in high-minority and the highest-poverty schools are twice as likely to be assigned to a beginning teacher as students in schools with low-poverty and few minority students (Education Trust, 2008; Jepsen & Rivkin, 2002; Peske & Haycock, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). In a multi-year statewide study of Texas, Martinez-Garcia and Slate (2010a) noted that elementary schools with the highest percentage of beginning teachers had higher percentages of minority student enrollment and also had higher percentages of economically disadvantaged student enrollment. This situation is of concern because numerous researchers have documented that teachers are considerably more effective at contributing to student learning and preparing students to meet state standards after completing at least two years of teaching experience (Education Trust, 2008; Peske & Haycock, 2006). Furthermore, given that a growing body of research underscores the impact of the quality of the teacher and instruction on student achievement gains despite other background factors, this situation is particularly concerning (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Obama, 2005; Rice, 2003; Rowland & Coble, 2005; Whitehurst, 2003).

The education system, however, cannot shoulder all of the blame for educational inequality. In fact, according to sociologist James Coleman's 1966 Equality of Educational Opportunity research, "... everything schools did accounted for only 5 to 35 percent of the variation in students' academic performances, though he did find the figures for disadvantaged students were on the high end of the scale" (Traub, 2000, p. 53). Numerous researchers support this finding and have proposed that the achievement gap is largely environmental (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Orfield & Lee, 2005). Specifically, factors such as

community conditions, including housing inadequacy and decay, weak and failing infrastructure, and critical lack of mentors and shortage of jobs (Orfield & Lee, 2005); family-background characteristics, including the education level of people in the home (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002), family income, number of siblings, and the number of books in the home (Peterson, 2010); peer influence (Orfield & Lee, 2005); and availability of health care and proper nutrition (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Orfield & Lee, 2005) have been documented to have a substantial impact on student success in school.

As Orfield and Lee (2005) noted, “schools tend to reflect and intensify the racial stratification of society” (p. 15). Therefore, to establish effective school environments leaders in education need to understand the interrelationship between demographic characteristics and achievement. Of particular interest to these researchers are the student demographic characteristics that might be reflected in the accountability ratings assigned to elementary schools.

Significance of the Study

To date, the means for measuring school accountability has focused mainly on student achievement on state-mandated tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Though important, such a focus is limited. Test scores by themselves are not a complete picture of student learning and performance. In this study, the characteristics of students who were enrolled at elementary schools that differed in their accountability rating were investigated. Accountability rating, assigned primarily on the basis of state-mandated assessments, may also reflect student demographic characteristics. No published research studies with such an emphasis were located, even after an extensive search of academic databases occurred. As such, more detailed

information than is currently available on the characteristics of students enrolled at elementary schools differing in their accountability rating may be provided in this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose in conducting this study was to determine the extent to which elementary school campus accountability rating was related with student demographic characteristics. That is, for accountability ratings that are assigned based primarily on student academic performance, the extent to which student characteristics were related to the assigning of accountability ratings was the primary focus of this study.

Research Questions

The following research question was addressed in this study: What is the difference among elementary school campus accountability ratings in their percent of Black students, Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, at-risk students, students designated as Limited English Proficient, mobility, and the total student enrollment?

Method

Participants

Data from all elementary public school campuses ($n = 4,110$) in Texas for the 2008-2009 school year were utilized in this study. Because of their uniqueness and major differences from public elementary schools, charter schools and their data were removed from analysis in this study. The public elementary schools whose student data were analyzed in this study were separated into four groups: Exemplary ($n = 1,791$), Recognized ($n = 1,750$), Academically Acceptable ($n = 544$), and Academically Unacceptable ($n = 25$).

The State of Texas rates school success through its state-mandated accountability system. This accountability system provides ratings both for individual school campuses and for school

districts. At the highest rating, *Exemplary*, the following criteria must be met: no more than a 0.2% dropout rate, at least 90% of students passing the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), as well as subgroups, and 95% of the completion standard met (Texas Education Agency, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008). The next highest rating, *Academically Recognized*, is assigned when these criteria are met: no greater than a 0.7% dropout rate, at least 75% of students passing the TAKS, as well as subgroups, and 85% of the completion standard (Texas Education Agency, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008). A label of *Academically Acceptable* is assigned when: no greater than a 1.0% dropout rate, at least 65% of students pass the English/Language Arts, Writing, and Social Studies sections of the TAKS, as well as subgroups, at least 45% of students pass the TAKS Math, including subgroups, at least 40% of students pass the TAKS Science measure, including subgroups, and 75% of the completion standard met (Texas Education Agency, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008). Readers are referred to the TEA website, specifically the AEIS Glossary in which the definitions for dropout rate and completion standard, among others, are present (<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2010/glossary.pdf>)

Instrumentation and Procedure

Archival data were acquired on all public elementary school campuses in the State of Texas for the 2008-2009 school year. Through accessing and downloading files from the Academic Excellence Indicator System (<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/>), data that were reported by each elementary school campus were gathered. Specifically, data on the accountability rating, the percent of Black students, the percent of Hispanic students, the percent of students designated as Limited English Proficient, the percent of economically disadvantaged students, the percent of at-risk students, and the number of students enrolled at each elementary school campus were obtained.

Results

Prior to conducting statistical analyses, checks for normality of data and for the assumptions underlying parametric statistical procedures were made. Though a few of the skewness and kurtosis values were outside the range of normality, the majority of the assumptions underlying parametric statistical procedures were met. Therefore, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine whether the (a) percent of Black students, (b) percent of Hispanic students, (c) percent of economically disadvantaged students, (d) percent of at-risk students, (e) percent of students with LEP, (f) mobility percent, and (g) the total student enrollment differed as a function of campus accountability rating for the 2008-2009 school year. This analysis yielded a statistically significant result, $\Lambda = .78, p < .001, n^2 = .08$, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). This overall result revealed a difference among the four accountability ratings as a function of student demographic characteristic.

Univariate follow-up analysis of variance procedures revealed statistically significant differences for the percent of Black students, $F(3, 4012) = 48.36, p < .001, n^2 = .04$, small effect size; for the percent of Hispanic students, $F(3, 4012) = 121.47, p < .001, n^2 = .21$, large effect size; for the percent of economically disadvantaged students, $F(3, 4012) = 327.43, p < .001, n^2 = .44$, very large effect size; for the percent of at-risk students, $F(3, 4012) = 222.45, p < .001, n^2 = .41$, very large effect size; for the percent of students designated as LEP, $F(3, 4012) = 87.05, p < .001, n^2 = .06$, moderate effect size; and for the mobility percent, $F(3, 4012) = 141.43, p < .001, n^2 = .10$, moderate effect size. No statistically significant difference was yielded for the total number of students enrolled in school, $F(3, 4012) = 0.84, p = .47$. Thus, with the exception of school size, student demographic characteristics were different by elementary school accountability rating.

Scheffe` post hoc tests revealed that the percent of Black students was statistically significantly different among the four campus accountability ratings. As the accountability rating decreased from Exemplary to Academically Unacceptable, the percent of Black students increased (i.e., from 10.44% to 34.36%). Concerning Hispanic students, Exemplary schools had lower percentages of Hispanic students (i.e., 38.33%) than did the other three accountability ratings (i.e., in the mid-50% range) which did not differ among themselves. Differences were also present for the percent of economically disadvantaged students. With the exception of Academically Acceptable and Academically Unacceptable elementary schools which did not differ, as the accountability rating decreased, the percent of economically disadvantaged students increased (i.e., from 49.04% to 91.19%). Similar results were present for the percent of at-risk students (i.e., from 39.28% to 67.62%). That is, as the school ranking became poorer, the percent of at-risk students dramatically increased. Concerning students with a label of Limited English Proficient, Exemplary schools had lower percentages (i.e., 17.02%) than did the other three school accountability ratings which did not differ among themselves (i.e., mid-20s to low-30%*s*). All four accountability ratings differed for the mobility percent. As the accountability rating went from Exemplary to Academically Unacceptable, the mobility percent increased (i.e., from 15.45% to 26.46%). Readers are referred to Tables 1 - 3 for the descriptive statistics for the percentages of the dependent variables by campus accountability rating.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Student Characteristics by Elementary School Accountability Rating for the 2008-2009

School Year

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Percent of Black Students			
Exemplary	1791	10.44	14.49
Recognized	1750	13.74	17.98
Acceptable	544	19.16	21.16
Unacceptable	25	34.36	28.67
Percent of Hispanic Students			
Exemplary	1791	38.33	30.32
Recognized	1750	56.26	30.70
Acceptable	544	58.59	29.22
Unacceptable	25	56.08	29.03
Percent of Minority Students			
Exemplary	1791	48.77	31.24
Recognized	1750	69.99	27.68
Acceptable	544	77.76	24.40
Unacceptable	25	90.44	12.55

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Student Characteristics by Elementary School Accountability Rating for the 2008-2009**School Year*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Percent of At-Risk Students			
Exemplary	1791	39.28	20.44
Recognized	1750	53.82	19.47
Acceptable	544	58.82	18.01
Unacceptable	25	67.62	17.90
Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students			
Exemplary	1791	49.04	28.91
Recognized	1750	70.67	21.19
Acceptable	544	78.32	16.49
Unacceptable	25	91.19	8.81
Percent of Students with LEP			
Exemplary	1791	17.02	18.80
Recognized	1750	26.86	22.24
Acceptable	544	29.91	23.15
Unacceptable	25	33.84	26.75

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for Student Characteristics by Elementary School Accountability Rating for the 2008-2009**School Year*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Percent of Student Mobility			
Exemplary	1743	15.45	6.99
Recognized	1719	19.40	6.86
Acceptable	530	20.77	7.09
Unacceptable	24	26.46	8.07
Total Number of Students Enrolled			
Exemplary	1791	552.91	214.84
Recognized	1750	553.96	216.79
Acceptable	544	540.32	210.36
Unacceptable	25	514.72	195.26

Discussion

In this study, student characteristics of Texas elementary public schools were analyzed by their accountability rating for the 2008-2009 school year. With the exception of school size, elementary schools differed in their student characteristics by the school accountability rating. Exemplary elementary schools had the lowest percentages of Black students, Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, at-risk students, students with LEP, and mobility percent whereas Academically Unacceptable schools had the highest percentages. Effect sizes, or the practical importance of these analyses, ranged from moderate to very large (Cohen, 1988). What

these analyses revealed was that differences were clearly present in the students who were enrolled at Texas elementary schools with different accountability ratings.

Based on the findings of this study, Texas elementary schools with higher percentages of Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, at-risk, LEP, and mobile students face unique challenges. Documented in the existing research literature is that these students, largely minority and low-income, tend to have varied cultural needs (Frankson & White-Lindsey, 2007; Patterway et al., 2006) and are susceptible to environmental risk factors (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Orfield & Lee, 2005) that require special attention to ensure academic achievement. The current system of education and assessment appears to continue to fall short of properly serving these children (Allen et al., 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Education Trust, 2008; Ingersoll, 1999, 2002; Jepsen & Rivkin, 2002; Nieto, 2003; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Rowland & Coble, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

If appropriate and effective educational programs are ever to be designed for minority and economically disadvantaged students, educational leaders must recognize and understand the interrelationship between student demographic characteristics and achievement. Currently, the amount of learning that takes place in schools is measured primarily based on students' scores on standardized assessments (Patterway et al., 2006). However, Black and Hispanic students are at a disadvantage compared to non-minority peers on achievement tests (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002). Therefore, they are often unable to demonstrate what they have actually learned. Researchers have reported that these students need, "to be exposed to high quality, well-designed assessments that take into consideration the risk factors associated with certain racial groups" (Frankson & White-Lindsey, 2007, p. 21). Frankson and White-Lindsey (2007) suggested that

appropriately teaching and assessing minority students requires the following measures be taken to build on students' strengths and meet their individual needs: implantation of culturally responsive practices, including teacher dialogue offering social support and encouragement, activities honoring ancestral culture, and parental involvement; designing instructional practices in which goals, objectives, and parental input and involvement are aligned with the diversity of students' cultures and learning styles; and infusion of authentic assessments, such as oral retellings or tactile physical activities, that involve relatable content-rich pedagogy. Without this understanding of the particular needs of minority students, the achievement gap between these students and their non-minority counterparts is not likely to be bridged, and school rankings will continue to be unintended indicators of the demographic characteristics to which schools cater (Petterway et al., 2006).

To raise the achievement of all students in the nation and eliminate the achievement gap seen among students by race, ethnicity, poverty, and English proficiency, the education community must also recruit, train, and retain highly qualified teachers who are prepared to work in diverse environments (Bowling & Cummings, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). According to the Education Trust (2008), "By assigning poor and minority students to stronger teachers, Texas schools could produce much better results, regardless of the outside-of-school factors that affect students success" (p. 2). Peske and Haycock (2006) recommended a range of actions to aid education leaders in ending the unfair distribution of teacher quality, which include: overhauling hiring practices to allow schools that serve low-income, high-minority, and low-performing students the first pick of teacher talent; paying effective teachers more in high-need schools; balancing the challenges of working in high-poverty schools by giving teachers reduced student loads; reserving tenure for those teachers who demonstrate effectiveness at

producing student learning; setting staff budgets at the school level and ensuring that they are proportionate with student needs; building better data systems that link individual teachers to the academic achievement of their students over time in order to identify the most effective teachers; and targeting funding to high poverty schools.

Closing the achievement gap will not be an effortless task, neither will it be immediate or cheap. As Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) observed,

Closing the achievement gap will require new approaches to understanding demographics, diversity, and accountability. It will also require more commitment on the part of society to find ways of ensuring that those who start school possess enough advantages to be advantaged by education and not so many disadvantages that make the efforts of even the best educators ineffective. (p. 434)

As with other studies in which archival data are utilized, this study is a causal-comparative study which limits the extent to which any cause-and-effect statements can be made. Additionally, only data from one state were analyzed. Finally, numerous variables that are related to student success were not analyzed herein. Therefore, readers are encouraged to be cautious in the extent to which they make generalizations from this study. Researchers are encouraged to extend this study by investigating other schooling conditions and student demographic characteristics related to school accountability ratings. In particular, accountability ratings and characteristics of students enrolled at other school levels (i.e., middle schools, high schools) and in additional states need to be addressed. Until such time as these findings are extended and replicated, these results should be viewed as tentative in nature.

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Current Issues in Education



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Volume 14, Number 1

ISSN 1099-839X

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