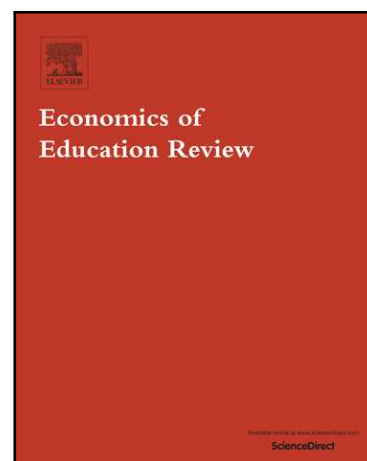


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TAKS-ing Students? Texas Exit Exam Effects on Human Capital Formation

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Abstract

High-stakes exit exams are pervasive in the American education system and have the ability to affect students far beyond their earned scores.¹ This paper considers how exit exams in Texas affect student motivational responses and classroom behavior before the end of high school. Employing a regression discontinuity framework, I examine the impact of failing the exam the first time it is administered. Considering behavioral responses to the administration of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), I study the impact on students' courses taken, attendance, and disciplinary actions after the exam in the final year of high school. I find that, in line with a model of motivation with heterogeneous effects, some students who fail respond through an increase in the number of courses taken in their senior year, and find a smaller increase in disciplinary infractions.

Keywords: Educational Economics, Human Capital, Standardized Testing

JEL-Classification: I21, I24, J24

1. Introduction

The United States has a long history of using standardized testing to evaluate student knowledge. An example of this trend in educational assessment is the implementation of “exit exams,” which impose a standardized testing requirement in addition to completing traditional high school coursework in order to be awarded a high school diploma. Because these exams grant rewards for proficiency and impose penalties for sub-par achievement on both the school district and individual level, these are considered “high-stakes” exams. In 2012, 25 states had exit exams in place, placing 69 percent of students nationwide under some testing regime (Center on Education Policy (2012)). While exit exams are designed to only affect a student’s ability to obtain a high school diploma, they could conceivably affect

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¹The research presented here uses confidential data from the State of Texas supplied by the Texas Education Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin. The author gratefully acknowledges the use of these data. The conclusions of this research do not necessarily reflect the opinion or official position of the Texas Education Research Center, the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Texas Workforce Commission, or the State of Texas. Any errors are mine. I would like to thank Sandra E. Black, Jeffrey T. Denning, Matt Farber, Peter Hinrichs, Brendan Kline, Leigh Linden, Qian Lu, Steve Trejo, and Emily Weisburst, insightful comments from anonymous referees, editorial comments from Frank Solomon, and participants at The University of Texas at Austin research seminar for their helpful comments on this research.

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