



The publication of school rankings: A step toward increased accountability?



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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the discussion of the effects of the publication of school rankings based on students' scores on national exams. We study the effectiveness of this (low-stakes) accountability mechanism. Our results suggest that the publication of rankings has clear effects upon families and schools in Portugal. After the rankings publication, fewer students enroll in schools that are rated poorly and the probability of closure of these schools increases. These effects are stronger for private schools.

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1. Introduction

During the last decade many countries and U.S. states have introduced some form of accountability in schools in an attempt to increase their performance. This movement was at least partly generated by the frustration felt by many countries with the poor results shown by their students on internationally comparable exams, like PISA and TIMSS.

Accountability policies vary considerably, from the so-called low-stakes policies (disclosing information regarding the performance of schools) to high-stakes or consequential systems, whereby the financing conditions of the schools and/or the payments to teachers are adjusted according to the performance of students. The effectiveness of these accountability systems on the learning conditions of students has been studied extensively in the literature.

Using different data sets and methodological tools, several authors have shown that accountability policies, even low-stakes ones, such as the one considered in this paper,

have considerable effects on students' behavior. Figlio and Lucas (2004) showed that low-stakes accountability policies have strong effects on parents' choices and are reflected in changes in housing prices. Using data from Florida, where a high-stakes policy was launched, Figlio and Rouse (2006) concluded that the improvements of poorly performing schools were, in fact, very large; Chakrabarti (2008) examined the impact of different incentive schemes and showed that the 1999 Florida accountability program unambiguously improved schools' performance. Chiang (2009) also found persistent gains in performance due to Florida's high-stakes accountability policy; Hanushek and Raymond, (2005) reported increased scores for all students following the introduction of accountability policies in the US, although they found a much weaker impact of low-stakes policies relative to the effects of consequential or high-stakes measures. Using data from PISA 2003 for 27 OECD countries, Schutz, West, and Wobmann (2007) also found a positive relationship between accountability and academic outcomes.¹

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¹ Positive effects of several accountability systems have been found for several other geographical and institutional settings (see, for instance,

In this paper we analyze the impacts of the public disclosure of school rankings, a low-stakes accountability policy. We consider the case of Portugal, where since 2001 several newspapers have published rankings of every high school (public and private) based on the average scores obtained by students on national exams.²

We study the effect of the publication of the rankings in terms of the ability of schools to attract students and of the increased probability of closing for schools that are rated poorly. To identify the effect of the public disclosure of school results, we compare the effects of the rankings before and after their publication. We distinguish between private and public schools, as we expect that there is more flexibility and freedom of choice in the subset of private schools, allowing for a stronger effect of the rankings on these schools.

Our results suggest that the publication of rankings has clear effects upon families and schools. After the rankings publication, fewer students enroll in schools that are rated poorly and the probability of closure of these schools increases. These effects are stronger for private schools.

Our paper also contributes to the growing literature on information and consumer choice; specifically we study the effect of information on school choice. [Hastings and Weinstein \(2008\)](#) analyze two experiments in which parents of students of low performing schools are allowed to choose alternative schools for their children and are given information about the quality of these schools, and find that the provision of information affects parents' choices. [Koning and van der Wiel \(2013\)](#) analyze the effect on school choices of school rankings published by a newspaper in the Netherlands and find that a positive school-quality score increases the number of students choosing a school. Unlike [Koning and van der Wiel \(2013\)](#), we are able to compare school choices before and after the publication of the rankings in the newspaper. It is expected that before publication, at least some parents already had some information on school quality. However, after the publication of school rankings in the newspaper this information becomes available to all parents. Moreover this information is presented in a way that makes it easy to compare different schools. Thus, the fact that we are able to compare the effects of the same school results on school choices for the periods before and after publication allows us to isolate the role of this type of information disclosure on school choices.

The organization of the paper is the following: [Section 2](#) briefly describes the institutional setting of the educational system in Portugal for the period under analysis. [Section 3](#) describes the data. In [Section 4](#) we present our methodology and our results for the effect of rankings publication on students' reallocations. In this section we also study the impact of the published ranking on the probability of school closure. These analyses contribute to a better understanding of the impact and the vehicle through which the publication of rankings affects schools. [Section 5](#) discusses the results and concludes.

[Koning and van der Wiel \(2012\)](#) for the Netherlands, [Anghel et al. \(2012\)](#) for Spain, [Rockoff and Turner \(2010\)](#) for New York City).

² Individual students' scores were always disclosed in paper form on the school premises. However, this information was not used to disclose information organized at the school level until 2001.

2. The institutional setting in the period under analysis

The Portuguese educational system did not undergo significant changes from 1998 to 2005. Mandatory schooling starts at the age of six and lasts 9 years.³ These 9 years are divided into three cycles with durations of 4, 2, and 3 years, respectively. Tracking in general starts at the end of mandatory schooling⁴, with the choice between 3 additional years of academic studies aimed at the pursuit of studies at the university level, and vocation-oriented studies. Vocational study tracks can consist of either 2 or 3 years, and transition to academic tracks or to the university is possible. The net rate of enrollment in secondary education was around 60% in the period analyzed. In the discussion below we describe only academic studies, as these are the subject of this paper.⁵

To finish academic secondary school, students must take exams at the national level. Final scores per subject are computed as a weighted average of the school grade and the score obtained at the national exam (with weights of 70% and 30% respectively). The final score of secondary studies is the simple average of all the final scores per subject.

These national exams perform two roles in the educational system. Besides being a requirement for graduation from secondary school, they also determine the conditions for admission to universities. Portuguese public universities have a fixed number of slots for each field of study set by the Ministry of Education, that fall short of demand for places in the most prestigious universities. Candidates to each university are placed (centrally, by the government) according to their candidacy grade. This grade is a weighted average of the final score of secondary studies, calculated as described in the previous paragraph, and again the score obtained in one of the national exams.⁶ These rules, which have remained stable since 1998, therefore place a strong weight on the scores obtained in national exams.

Public and private schools co-exist in the Portuguese educational system. The level of autonomy of Portuguese schools is very limited, with teaching contents and learning methods being decided by the government. They are also subject to a set of rules concerning premises, number of students allowed per class, and so forth. Public schools are tightly restricted in their educational supply, and neither choose nor influence the choice of teachers.⁷ Private schools have more flexibility

³ After our period of analysis, some changes occurred, namely the extension of mandatory schooling by 3 years. The first cohort of students affected by this measure entered secondary schools only in 2010.

⁴ There are some vocation-oriented paths initiated at the age of 14, but these tracks remained exceptional, accounting for only 4–5% of the schooling population.

⁵ Between 1998 and 2005 the population aged 15–19 years old decreased from 718,000 to 584,000. The net rate of enrollment in secondary education ran from 59.1% in 1998 to 59.8% in 2005. Out of these, the percentage of students in academic studies steadily decreased during the period, from 65% in 1998 to 55% in 2005.

⁶ The choice of this national exam is left to each university department. On the candidacy grade, the weight of the national exam score is chosen by each university department subject to the constraint that it must lie between 35% and 50%. Some university departments require two national exams instead of one. In this case the constraint on the weights applies to the simple average of the two scores.

⁷ The allocation of teachers to public schools is centrally determined by the Ministry of Education.

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