Improving educational outcomes for poor children

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The problem

• Large disparities in schooling outcomes:
  – Between rich and poor children
  – Between minority and white children
  – Disparities open up very early

• Concentration of disadvantaged children in high-poverty urban areas
  – Minorities more likely to live in such areas even after controlling for family income

• How can we improve schooling outcomes?
Potential remedies

• Increased schooling “inputs”
  – Early childhood interventions
  – Class size reduction

• Increased efficiency (“output” reform)
  – Whole school reforms
  – Accountability reforms
  – School choice
  – Changing teacher labor markets
Early childhood education

- Cumulative body of evidence from:
  - Model programs (Perry, Abecedarian)
  - Head Start (Janet Currie studies, Ludwig & Miller 2007, recent randomized experiment)
  - Head Start likely to pass benefit-cost test

- Head Start reaches 2/3 of eligible children

- Targeted expansions (and perhaps improvements) in high-poverty areas?
Class size reduction

• Tennessee STAR experiment:
  – Class sizes from 22 to 15 in grades K-3
  – Larger gains for minority than white children
  – Seems to pass a benefit-cost test

• Going-to-scale concerns, CA case study:
  – Reductions in teacher quality (Jepsen-Rivkin)

• Targeted class size reductions?
Whole school reforms

• Success for All
  – Develops reading skills in early grades
  – Ability rather than age grouping for reading
  – Frequent assessments, remedial tutoring

• Passes benefit-cost test
  – Costs close to per pupil Title 1 spending

• Importance of school buy-in?
Accountability reforms

• Change incentives facing teachers
  – Student test score levels or gains

• “You get what you measure”
  – Usually larger gains on high-stakes than on low-stakes tests
  – Unintended consequences (cheating, gaming, even changing lunch menus on test days!)

• Need to get design issues right
Teacher labor markets

- Teacher quality varies greatly
  - But weakly correlated with most observable teacher characteristics

- Low-income minority children on average have lower-quality teachers than others

- How can we fix that?
  - Alternatives to certification (including TFA)
  - Bonuses for teaching in disadv. Schools
  - Improved urban school HR policies
  - Changing tenure procedures & standards
School choice

• Controversial interventions

• Jury is still out
  – Limited effects on test scores from winning public school choice lotteries
    • Parents care about more than test scores?
  – Very modest effects of private school experiments on those who switch schools
  – Large scale impacts unknown
School finance reform

• Also very politically controversial
  – Ongoing finance equalization litigation

• Limited evidence of much impact on student outcomes
  – Not clear schools allocate new resources to most educationally productive uses
Bottom line

• There is some good news here:
  – Some input- and output-based interventions have been shown to make a difference
  – Most even seem to pass benefit-cost test

• But will require political will and in some cases additional resources

• Tempered optimism:
  – Even successful interventions will only narrow, not eliminate, disparities in outcomes