

# Impacts of School Reforms in Washington, DC on Student Achievement

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In 2007, the District of Columbia (DC) began a process of school reform designed to push beyond what had been accomplished by the No Child Left Behind reforms of 2002. These reforms included implementation of a more rigorous staff evaluation system in 2009, steady growth of the charter school sector, and the introduction of a unified enrollment system by 2014. We estimate the cumulative impacts of these reforms by analyzing how changes in achievement levels of DC schools compare to changes observed for similar students in similar geographic areas without such reforms. Our analysis improves on prior efforts to study these reforms in several ways. We use nearly a quarter-century of data (from the early 1990s to 2017), which enables us to cover more cohorts of students than previous studies—including grade 4 and 8 achievement for five cohorts of DC students before 2007 and three cohorts after. We also take advantage of recent advances in constructing counterfactual outcomes in situations where one or very few units are treated. We find that the reforms in DC were associated with larger than expected growth in grade 4 math and reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. We also find similar gains in grade 8 math, especially for cohorts with more exposure to the reforms, but not in grade 8 reading. These results suggest that the reforms improved math education in grades K-4 with impacts lasting through to grade 8. The results are less clear in reading or after grade 8 in math.