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4-2016

### New York State's Missing Data

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#### Recommended Citation

J. Yinger, 2016. "New York State's Missing Data," *It's Elementary*, April.

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# *It's Elementary*

A Monthly Column by EFAP Director John Yinger  
April 2016

## **New York State's Missing Data**

In May 2015, the high-quality professional journal, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (EEPA)*, published a special issue on “Research Using Longitudinal Student Data Systems: Findings, Lessons, and Prospects.” This special issue reveals, unintentionally, that New York is far behind the nation in education policy research.

The *EEPA* special issue summarizes the state of affairs after two striking developments. The first development was the recognition first by a few states and then by the federal government in the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that student test scores could be a valuable component of a system to keep track of educational progress. To receive the funds provided by NCLB, all states were soon collecting student-level data. The second development was a burst of new methods and scholarly interest in program evaluation. These two developments naturally complemented each other, and research-based partnerships between state education departments and education scholars began to arise.

As indicated in the introduction to the *EEPA* special issue, “The early leaders in opening their data to outside researchers included Chicago, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas. Articles in this special issue explore data from state systems in Arizona, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Carolina, and Ohio, as well as school districts in Houston, Texas, and Wake County, North Carolina.”<sup>1</sup> New York State is not on these lists, nor on any subsequent list in the article. Indeed, student-level data from New York State are still not available to scholars.

It would be difficult to overstate the value of student-level data for identifying the education policies that are most successful. Indeed, student-level data sets have been used to study dozens of important issues in K-12 education policy. The *EEPA* special issue alone contains valuable articles on:

How the gaps in test scores, graduation rates, and college attendance between students from high-income and low-income families have changed over time in Massachusetts.

The success of new policies in Wake County, North Carolina, to increase the share of students on track for algebra in eighth grade, a key indicator of college readiness.

The uneven performance of charter schools in Arizona, which has the largest share of charter school students in the nation.

The impact of primary school size on student achievement in North Carolina.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Dynarski and Mark Berends, “Introduction to Special Issue,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 37 (May 2015): 3S-5S

Additional information on the nature of student-level data sets, on the types of policy questions they can help to answer, and on the widespread use of these data sets in other states can be found at the web site of the National Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, powerful evidence about the value of student-level data comes from New York City, where the Education Department has provided student-level data to several scholarly teams. These teams, which include several scholars affiliated with the Education Finance and Accountability Program, have used the student-level data from the New York City to study a wide range of important issues in K-12 education. These issues include the impact on student achievement of (1) re-organization into small high schools, (2) community violence, (3) universal free school breakfast, (4) the way grades are combined in elementary and middle schools, (5) immigrant composition of schools, (6) city-subsidized owner-occupied housing, and (7) whole school reform programs. Table 1 provides examples of studies on each of these topics.

The most common arrangement for providing access to student-level data is a university-based research consortium, which selects the projects and provides the data. As one of the articles in the *EEPA* special issue explains, however, the interests of scholars and policy makers are not identical, and state education departments need to have expertise of their own to help identify important, policy-relevant issues that can be studied with student-level data and, in some cases, to initiate educational experiments or to conduct research of their own.<sup>3</sup>

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) has a “Fiscal Analysis and Research Unit.”<sup>4</sup> However, this unit, FARU, conducts analysis at the school district level, not at the level of individual students. None of the “scholarly papers” posted on the FARU web page, or, so far as I can tell, on any other page accessible through the NYSED web site, make use of student-level data.

It is time for educational data and research in New York State to join the twenty-first century. I call on elected officials in the state to fund an expanded research department in NYSED and for NYSED to support a university-based research consortium for analyzing issues in educational policy using student-level data.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.caldercenter.org/> .

<sup>3</sup> Carrie Conaway, Venessa Keesler, and Nathaniel Schwartz. “What Research Do State Education Agencies Really Need? The Promise and Limitations of State Longitudinal Data Systems.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 37 (1S) (May 2015): 16S-28S.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oms.nysed.gov/faru/> .

**Table 1. Selected Studies Based on Student-level Data from New York City**

1. Re-organization into Small High Schools  
Leanna Stiefel, Matthew Wiswall, and **Amy Ellen Schwartz** (2015). “Does Small High School Reform Lift Urban Districts? Evidence from NYC.” *Educational Researcher*. Available at: <http://edr.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/03/30/0013189X15579187.full.pdf+html> .  
**Robert Bifulco**, Rebecca Unterman, and Howard S. Bloom (2014). “The Relative Costs of New York City’s New Small Public High Schools of Choice.” Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, October. Available at: [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Relative\\_Costs\\_SSC\\_WP.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Relative_Costs_SSC_WP.pdf)  
**Amy Ellen Schwartz**, Leanna Stiefel, and Matthew Wiswall (2013). “Do Small Schools Improve Performance in Large, Urban Districts? Causal Evidence from New York City.” *Journal of Urban Economics*, 77: 27-40.
2. Community Violence  
Patrick Sharkey, Ingrid Gould Ellen, Johanna Lacoë, and **Amy Ellen Schwartz** (2014). “High Stakes in the Classroom, High Stakes on the Street: The Effects of Community Violence on Students’ Standardized Test Performance.” *Sociological Science*, 1: 199-220.
3. Universal Free School Breakfast  
Jacob Leos-Urbel, **Amy Ellen Schwartz**, Meryle Weinstein, and Sean Corcoran (2013). “Not Just for Poor Kids: The Impact of Universal Free School Breakfast on Meal Participation and Student Outcomes.” *Economics of Education Review*, 36: 88-107.
4. The Way Grades Are Combined in Elementary Schools and Middle Schools  
**Amy Ellen Schwartz**, Leanna Stiefel, **Ross Rubenstein**, and Jeffrey Zabel (2011). “The Path Not Taken: How Does School Organization Affect 8th Grade Achievement?” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33 (3): 293-317.
5. Immigrant Composition of Schools  
Dylan Conger, Amy Ellen **Schwartz**, and Leanna Stiefel (2011). “The Effect of Immigrant Communities on Foreign-Born Student Achievement.” *International Migration Review*, 45 (3): 675-701.  
Ryan Yeung (2011). “The Effect of Immigrant Composition on Student Achievement: Evidence from New York City.” Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Public Administration, Syracuse University.
6. City-subsidized Owner-Occupied Housing  
Colin C. Chellman, Ingrid Gould Ellen, Brian J. McCabe, **Amy Ellen Schwartz**, and Leanna Stiefel (2011). “Does City-Subsidized Owner-Occupied Housing Improve School Quality?” *Journal of American Planning Association*, 77 (2): 127-141.
7. Whole School Reform Programs  
**Robert Bifulco**, **William D. Duncombe**, and **John Yinger**. 2005. “Does Whole-School Reform Boost Student Performance: The Case of New York City.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 24 (1): 47-72.

Note: The authors in bold are or were associated with the Education Finance and Accountability Program. Amy Ellen and Robert Bifulco are senior research associates at EFAP. Ross Rubenstein, who now is on the faculty of Georgia State University, was an EFAP senior research associated when he co-authored the above article. Ryan Yeung was an EFAP graduate assistant when he wrote his dissertation; he will be on the faculty of Hunter College starting this fall. William Duncombe was an EFAP senior research associate before his untimely death in 2013. In addition, Leanna Stiefel, who is on the faculty at New York University, gave the Jerry Miner Lecture at EFAP in 2005, and Howard S. Bloom, who works at the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, gave the Miner lecture in 2001.