Comments on "Does selective high school improve student achievement?" by Anderson et al.

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Summary of the paper

- Examines whether college-entrance exam scores are higher among students who attend selective high schools, controlling for high-school-entrance exam scores

- Uses RDD and RKD techniques; LATE estimates, as clearly acknowledged

- Most results indicate school attended has no effect; some differences by sex and parental SES

Meta comments

- Fascinating school system
- Great application of RDD & RKD techniques
- Results fit with mixed findings in previous literature on effect of elite schools, peer effects
- Is the audience applied econometrics, development, or education?

Specific comments

- Terminology can be confusing at times: exam schools, model schools and regular schools
  - Are there also non-exam schools?
  - Elite exam schools, non-elite exam schools might be clearer
- Are the 11 schools the complete set of all schools students in Daxin District can choose from?
  - Any evidence parents move across districts (or get false address) for kids to attend better schools?
- Paper states that test scores are correlated with student ability—true?
  - Do test scores just reflect parental resources?
  - If so, not surprising that little effect of school or peer group

Specific comments

- What info do parents have about previous cutoffs?
  - If known, somehow incorporate this?
- Role of cram schools?
- Throw out students with scores below the cutoff?
- Does choice of track affect admission?
  - Only clear in the appendix that track is set after one year, not upon admission
- Would like to see results somewhere without controlling for SEEH
  - Does school matter if don't control for high school test score?

Specific comments

- What is Chinese system regarding advanced degrees for teachers?
  - Compensated for any higher degree, or only in discipline?
- Teacher age may be non-linearly related to "quality"
  - Experience probably matters more, but also non-linearly
- Why are almost half of the parents "farmers" in Beijing?
  - If known, somehow incorporate this?
- The paper sets up big fish-small pond as reason for peer effects
  - But peer effects could be positive as well—better study group, teachers cover harder material, etc., if peers have higher ability

Nitty gritty for the authors

- In going from eq 5 to eq 6, why is the order of j and t' reversed in the subscripts, and H_{ij} becomes just H_i while paper discusses H_j?
- Is figure 1 for model schools or for all schools?
- Bins based on number of students (or % of sample) might be better than bins of 5 points—the tails appear to get very thin while the clumping in the middle is substantial
- I had a hard time thinking about what figure 7 would look like if everyone attended the highest school for which they were eligible. Would there be a spike right above 0 in the figure? Also, should it be SEEH, not SEEC, in the note to figure 7? Also, we'd expect that eligibility wouldn't increase the possibility of enrollment for most schools (page 20), since if a student is eligible for a higher school, they are presumably more likely to have enrolled there; as school "quality" decreases, odds of eligible students enrolling should go down.
- Page 21: wouldn't we expect the % of cautious students to be highest in the model schools if the best kids go there? This doesn't seem like caution—it seems like the positive selection that should occur

Nitty gritty for the authors

- Perhaps note somewhere that distance may matter more for girls than for boys (assuming parents are more concerned about daughters' safety, which may or may not be true)

- Are the spikes at about -30 points in figure 8 problematic?

- Page 33: I'd argue that the differences in advanced degree and teacher age (figure 10) are bigger than the peer gap (figure 8); the paper argues the opposite

- Why the high student-teacher ratio in the right tail in figure 9? Also, is student-teacher ratio, advanced degree and experienced teachers at the classroom level or at the school level? (If at the school level, how can they vary so much given that there are only 2 model schools?)

- The notes for figures 8-10 don't seem very applicable—they appear to just be copied from figure 7.

Nitty gritty for the authors

- The standard error vs. p-value notation in table 9 was confusing to me. Page 36 says that some effects are significantly different from zero, but it's not clear this is the case if the () are std errors and the [] are p-values
- It would be nice to have a column of "baseline" results in table 10 for comparison. Switching to now having p-values in () in tables 10 and 11 after having SE's in () earlier threw me for a loop.
- Explanation for the negative effect of model schools for girls on the science track in model schools?
- The end of the conclusion mentions parents standing outside the exams waiting for their kids—set this up in the intro in first few sentences