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Assessing the impact of a tuition relief program on poor rural students' performance in China

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The state of basic education in China

Like many other countries over the past 20 years, China has achieved universal education, with 9 years of compulsory schooling – including 6 grades at primary level (1-6) and 3 at junior (middle) high school level (7-9). In 2010, China's Ministry of Education set a goal of having all students achieve 12 years of schooling (including 3 years of senior high education) by 2020.

While progress has been made in parts of the country, a significant gap remains between rural and urban students in the rate of admission to senior high school in the country. One reason for this gap is likely to be the generally high levels of tuition fees in senior high schools. By reducing poor students expectations to be able to pursue their education, high tuition fees contribute to reduce their academic efforts at junior high school level.

Ningshan County Tuition Relief Program

At the end of July 2009, the local government of Ningshan County in Shaanxi province, China, promised to pay 1500 yuan (USD 230) in annual tuition fees for 3 years of attendance in senior high school, for the students who rated among the top 500 (90%) students in the entrance examination.

The PEP-supported evaluation project

In 2010, a team of Chinese researchers were granted PEP support to conduct a quasi-experimental evaluation in order to assess the impact of this Tuition Relief Program (TRP) on the performance of poor, rural students at junior high school level. In other words, the researchers sought to assess the effectiveness of such program in encouraging students with initially more limited prospects, to exert stronger efforts while preparing for senior high school.

The researchers surveyed a total of 3121 seventh graders (first year of junior high schools students) in 36 schools based in the county of Ningshan (treatment group), and two neighboring counties (control group) of Shaanxi province that share similar characteristics but had not implemented the TRP.

Then, they applied a series of estimation methods – as fostered through PEP impact evaluation research program – on the dataset to compare the students' scores before and after the program was implemented, between those who benefited and those who did not, as well as between the relatively poorer and richer students.

Key findings

When comparing the performance of TRP (treatment) students and non-TRP (control) students, the researchers found that:

- the improvement in test scores of the TRP students, from Ningshan County, is more important (≈ 3.1% higher in average) than the progress made by those in other counties

When comparing the performance between richer and poorer students, they found that:

- TRP students from the poorest quintile show higher increase in test scores than all categories of non-TRP students – i.e. students from financially constrained families benefit the most from the program
- In the same category (students from the poorest families), a relatively larger effect is observed on students with usually average scores (versus those who usually score higher or lower)

Policy recommendations

There has been increasing support within the Ministry of Education, in recent years, for greater investment into rural education. However, few have suggested that such investment should lead to the reduction of tuition fees in senior high schools.

Based on their results, the researchers suggest that China's education officials review their investment strategy, to consider the provision of tuition relief programs for senior high schools as a complementary measure to strengthen human capital in poor rural areas.

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