

Lam D. Pham

Motivation and Context

Evidence suggests that school turnaround can be effective, but *why* are some models successful, while others fall short? This paper tests whether changes in particular schoolwide practices help explain the effect of turnaround reforms on student outcomes. I study these mechanisms using the Innovation Zone (iZone) model of reform in Shelby County Schools district (serving Memphis, TN) because previous research suggests that the Memphis iZone reforms increased student achievement. Specifically, I examined four mechanisms that potentially explain the positive iZone effects: (1) the recruitment of effective teachers, (2) increased opportunities for teacher collaboration, (3) a more positive learning environment, and (4) increased opportunities for teacher professional development.

Methods

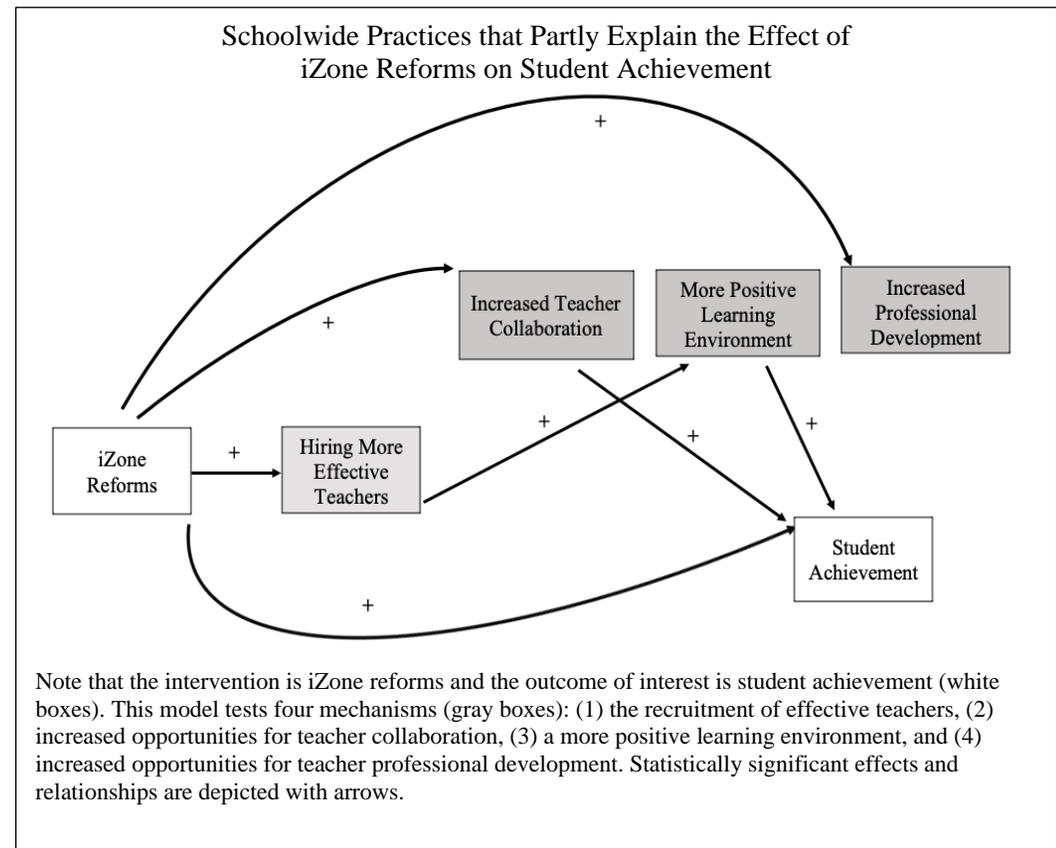
Using administrative and survey data, I compare before-after reform differences in student achievement for iZone schools with the same before-after difference for a set of similarly low-performing but non-iZone schools. Then, I examine whether at least part of the iZone effect can be explained by the schoolwide practices of interest.

Results

As illustrated in the figure, I find that iZone reforms helped these low-performing schools to recruit more effective teachers which in turn helped build a more positive learning environment and increased student achievement. Second, iZone reforms increased teacher collaboration, which was positively associated with student achievement. Finally, iZone schools increased professional development for teachers, but the professional development offered was not associated with improved student achievement.

Implications

The findings support the importance of improving human capital in low-performing schools. They also emphasize a need for school leaders to think about how they can improve school climate and processes after they successfully recruit effective teachers. Overall, the results suggest that future reform efforts should invest in supporting school leaders to leverage teacher talent within their building.



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