TAKS-ing Students? Texas Exit Exam Effects on Human Capital Formation

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Abstract

High-stakes exit exams are pervasive in the American education system and have the ability to affect students far beyond their earned scores.¹ This paper considers how exit exams in Texas affect student motivational responses and classroom behavior before the end of high school. Employing a regression discontinuity framework, I examine the impact of failing the exam the first time it is administered. Considering behavioral responses to the administration of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), I study the impact on students’ courses taken, attendance, and disciplinary actions after the exam in the final year of high school. I find that, in line with a model of motivation with heterogeneous effects, some students who fail respond through an increase in the number of courses taken in their senior year, and find a smaller increase in disciplinary infractions.

Keywords: Educational Economics, Human Capital, Standardized Testing

JEL-Classification: I21, I24, J24

1. Introduction

The United States has a long history of using standardized testing to evaluate student knowledge. An example of this trend in educational assessment is the implementation of “exit exams,” which impose a standardized testing requirement in addition to completing traditional high school coursework in order to be awarded a high school diploma. Because these exams grant rewards for proficiency and impose penalties for sub-par achievement on both the school district and individual level, these are considered “high-stakes” exams. In 2012, 25 states had exit exams in place, placing 69 percent of students nationwide under some testing regime (Center on Education Policy (2012)). While exit exams are designed to only affect a student’s ability to obtain a high school diploma, they could conceivably affect

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