

District Changes in Student Achievement and Local Practice under Georgia's District and School Flexibility Policy

In 2017 Georgia instituted a flexibility policy through which school districts enter into performance contracts with the state that grant districts waivers from state rules and allow schools and districts greater autonomy. In exchange, schools and districts must meet academic performance targets. The performance contracts are intended to incentivize innovations that increase student achievement. Between 2008/09 and 2016/17, 178 of Georgia's 180 districts entered into a performance contract. The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) wants to learn about districts' experiences with the flexibility policy, including how districts are using waivers to implement innovations, the relationship between waivers and student achievement, and whether that relationship varies by district characteristics.

The study examined how student achievement changed after districts adopted a performance contract, compared with changes in the same years for districts that did not adopt one. The study used GaDOE administrative data from 2008/09 through 2017/18, publicly available data from the U.S. Department of Education, and data that GaDOE collected from surveys and interviews of district leaders. Methods used include descriptive statistics, longitudinal regression analysis, and qualitative analysis of interview data.

Key findings

- **Districts prioritized innovations related to college and career readiness, teacher certification requirements, and instructional spending over other academic, human resources, and financial innovations.** Districts' most frequently prioritized academic innovations focused on college and career readiness for all students. These included college and career academies in 29 percent of districts, dual enrollment in 26 percent of districts, and alternate career pathways or certifications in 17 percent of districts. The most frequently prioritized human resources innovation was teacher certification (71 percent of districts). The most frequently prioritized financial innovation was instructional spending (67 percent of districts).
- **Changes in student achievement after districts adopted a performance contract were small and not consistently positive or negative, but variation in change was statistically significant and meaningful.** Across grades and subjects, the average change in achievement after performance contract adoption was .01 standard deviation. The only statistically significant change was in grade 3–8 math (an improvement of .03 standard deviation, or about 3 weeks of learning). Although average changes in achievement were small, the probability that districts improved performance by a meaningful amount (at least .05 standard deviation, or about 5–6 weeks of learning) was about 35 percent in grade 3–8 English language arts, 40 percent in grade 3–8 math, 20 percent in grade 9 English, and 27 percent in grade 9–12 Algebra 1. However, changes in student achievement were largely unrelated to urbanicity, performance contract adoption cohort group, district type, or priority innovations.
- **Additional research is needed to understand the longer-term relationship between adopting a performance contract and changes in student achievement.** Because most districts have had their performance contracts in place for only one or two years, the subsequent innovations implemented within districts may not yet have reached their full maturity. Ongoing progress monitoring of district- and school-level innovations will be necessary to more fully understand how student achievement is changing under performance contracts.