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Educational Aspirations and Postsecondary Access and Choice: Students in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools Compared

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Abstract

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (*NELS: 88*), this study examines educational aspirations and postsecondary access and choice by students in urban, suburban, and rural schools. In addition, this study raises issues with the methods in postsecondary educational research by using students in different grades (8th, 10th, and 12th grades) as baseline populations to compare educational outcomes. The results indicated that students in urban schools were comparatively disadvantaged in the early years in schooling in terms of postsecondary access but appeared to be enrolled in

postsecondary institutions at similar percentages as their suburban counterparts, if they made it to later years in K-12 schooling. For those students in urban schools who went to college, higher percentages were enrolled in private institutions and four-year colleges. Students in rural schools were consistently disadvantaged in postsecondary aspirations and enrollment, compared to students in other schools.

Introduction

Educational researchers and policy analysts have been interested in educational quality received by students in different types of schools for years. For instance, Anyon (1997) revealed how urban schools were failing students in her study on the Newark public school system in New Jersey. DeYoung (1987) reviewed research on American rural education and suggested the challenges rural schools were facing in educating school children. Researchers also suggested that students in different types of schools have different levels of academic achievement and educational attainment due to the disparity in family and school resources (McDonough, 1997; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001) and student learning opportunities (Adelman, 1999). However, very few studies examined how postsecondary opportunity was distributed among students in different types of schools as classified as urban, suburban, and rural schools, even though postsecondary readiness and participation are among the most important issues in the state and federal higher education policy arena (Heller, 2001; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2001). This is a troubling situation in light of the increasing calls for strengthening the connection between K-12 schools and higher education institutions (Maeroff, Callan, & Usdan, 2001; Stampen & Hansen, 1999). As researchers (Hannaway & Talbert, 1993; Shouse, 1998) have found that school context is important in identifying the effective practices in schools, school context would logically also be important in the efforts to bridge K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions (Maeroff, Callan, & Usdan, 2001).

Furthermore, when studying postsecondary access and choice, researchers need to carefully consider how to conceptualize the ideal of equal educational opportunity (Burbules, 1999; Howe, 1997), because there is large disparity in the dropout rates among students in urban, suburban, and rural schools (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). For example, using NELS data to examine enrollment decisions by 12th graders, Perna (2000) found that students in urban and rural schools actually were more likely to go to college than their suburban counterparts, controlling for student characteristics and a series of other factors. Student transition from the 12th grade to college is a research area of significant policy importance. However, it alone may not adequately address the disparity in postsecondary opportunity because some disadvantaged students dropped out of school before reaching the 12th grades (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Orfield, 1988).

Purpose

This study focuses on the critical transition points in student pathways to postsecondary education. Student pathways to college are considered as a multi-stage process including educational aspiration formation, academic preparation, and actual enrollment in college, a process could start as early as the 7th grades (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000;

Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Based upon previous research (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; St. John, Asker, & Hu, 2001; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001) and different conceptions of the ideal of equal educational opportunity (Burbules, 1999; Howe, 1997), this study examines student educational aspirations and access to postsecondary education by using 8th, 10th, and 12th graders as baseline populations. Further, for those enrolled in postsecondary education after two years out of higher school, this study contrasts their college destinations (four-year *vs.* two-year, public *vs.* private) with respect to their 12th grade school origin (urban, suburban, and rural schools).

Specifically, this study intends to answer the following questions using nationally representative samples:

1. How do educational aspirations measured in the 10th grade differ for students in urban, suburban, and rural schools with the 8th and 10th graders as the baseline population?
2. How does postsecondary access measured two year after high school differ for students in urban, suburban, and rural schools with the 8th, 10th, and 12th graders as the baseline population?
3. How does postsecondary choice for enrolled students differ with respect to their origins in urban, suburban, and rural 12th grade schools?

Method

Data

Data used for this study were from the National Educational Longitudinal Study 1988 (NELS: 88). NELS was sponsored by the US Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) to survey a cohort of students in the 8th grade (base year in1988), the 10th grade (first follow-up in 1990), the 12th grade (second follow-up in 1992), and two years after high school graduation (third follow-up in 1994). Recently, the NCES released the fourth follow-up survey of 2000. In order to make the sample representative for different baseline populations, different weights were used in this study (Huang, Salvucci, Peng, & Owings, 1996).

Variables and Analysis

To examine whether there are differences in student educational aspirations and postsecondary access and choice, three outcome variables are used in this study on the basis of their socioeconomic significance in individual mobility (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001).

The first outcome variable is student educational aspirations measured when students were in the 10th grade. F1 (the first follow-up, similar connotations for F2 and F3) panel weight (F1PNLWT) and F1 questionnaire weight (F1QWT) were used to project baseline population of the 8th and 10th graders respectively. Since “educational aspiration” as a construct has been tested as important in understanding individual college access and choice by the literature in sociology and education, and the survey items in NELS were accepted as valid measures on this construct, it was selected as one outcome variable in this study. In fact, Hearn (1992) argued that using educational aspiration as a construct

has been “near-paradigmatic” (p. 662) in postsecondary enrollment research, although he acknowledged some potential issues with this construct.

The second one is student postsecondary access measured two years after high school graduation. The final outcome variable is postsecondary institutional types chosen by enrolled students measured two years after high school graduation. F3 panel weight (F3PNLWT), F3F1 panel weight (F3F1PNWT), and F3F2 panel weight (F3F2PNWT) were used to project baseline population of the 8th, 10th, and 12th graders respectively for the latter two outcome variables. “Access” deals with whether students go to college or not and “choice” deals with where students go to college. Both have been considered as important outcome variables in postsecondary policy studies (McPherson & Schapiro, 1991).

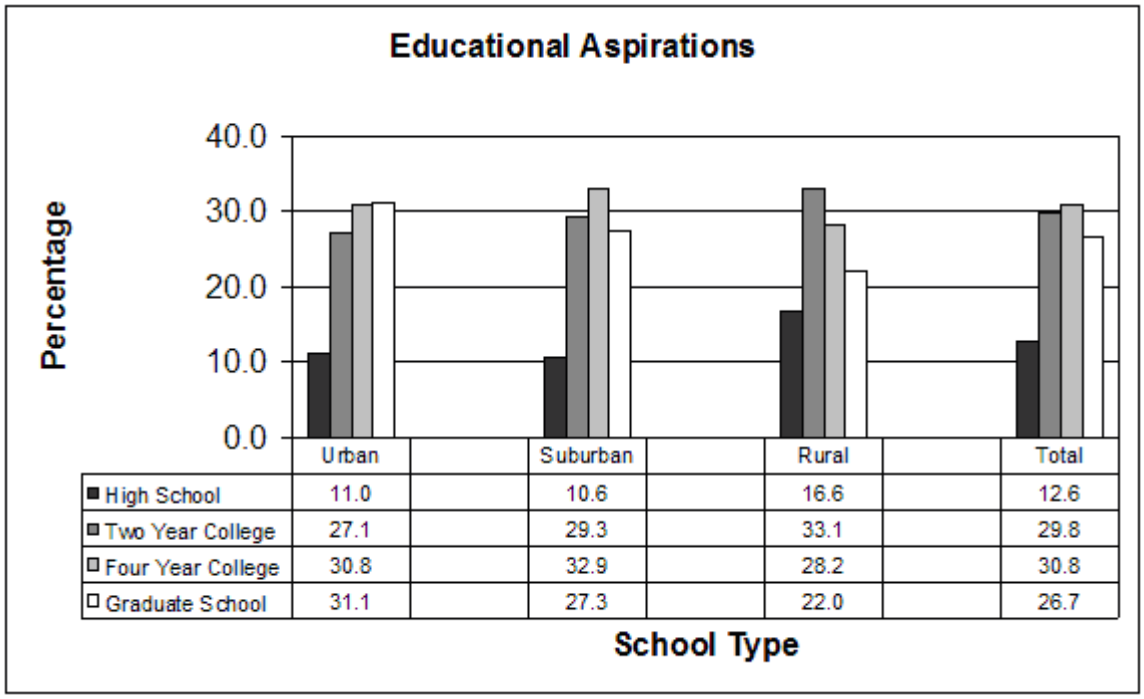
The independent variable in this study is school location (school urbanicity as in the NELS data set) as classified as urban, suburban, and rural to reflect the sample school’s metropolitan status. Urban represents central city, suburban represents areas surrounding a central city within a county constituting the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), and rural represents areas outside MSA. The composition of students in the samples during the 8th, 10th, and 12th grades was essentially as follows: slightly lower than 1/3 in urban schools, slightly higher than 1/3 in suburban schools, and about 1/3 in rural schools.

This study was a descriptive analysis of a national database to indicate the unequal postsecondary opportunity by students in urban, suburban, and rural schools in their postsecondary educational aspirations, access, and choice. Cross tabulations were used to illustrate the overall differences in outcome variables by school type with respect to different baseline populations.

Results

Aspirations

Because there were no substantial differences in educational aspirations by using the 8th and 10th graders as baseline populations, Figure 1 only presents student educational aspirations with respect to school location for 10th graders as baseline population. Differences in educational aspirations by students in urban, suburban, and rural schools were evident. Higher percentages of students in rural schools had aspirations for high school or below (16.6% for rural in contrast to 11.0% for urban and 10.6% for suburban schools) and two year college education (33.1% for rural in contrast to 27.1% for urban and 29.3% for suburban schools), and lower percentages of rural students had aspirations for four year college education (28.2% for rural in contrast to 30.8% for urban and 32.9% for suburban schools) and graduate education (22.0% for rural in contrast to 31.1% for urban and 27.3% for suburban schools). There were no substantial differences in educational aspirations for students in urban and suburban schools, although it appeared that slightly higher percentage of urban students had aspirations for graduate education.



	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Total
High School	11.0	10.6	16.6	12.6
Two Year College	27.1	29.3	33.1	29.8
Four Year College	30.8	32.9	28.2	30.8
Graduate School	31.1	27.3	22.0	26.7

FIGURE 1. Educational Aspirations in the 10th Grade by Students in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 - 1992.

Access

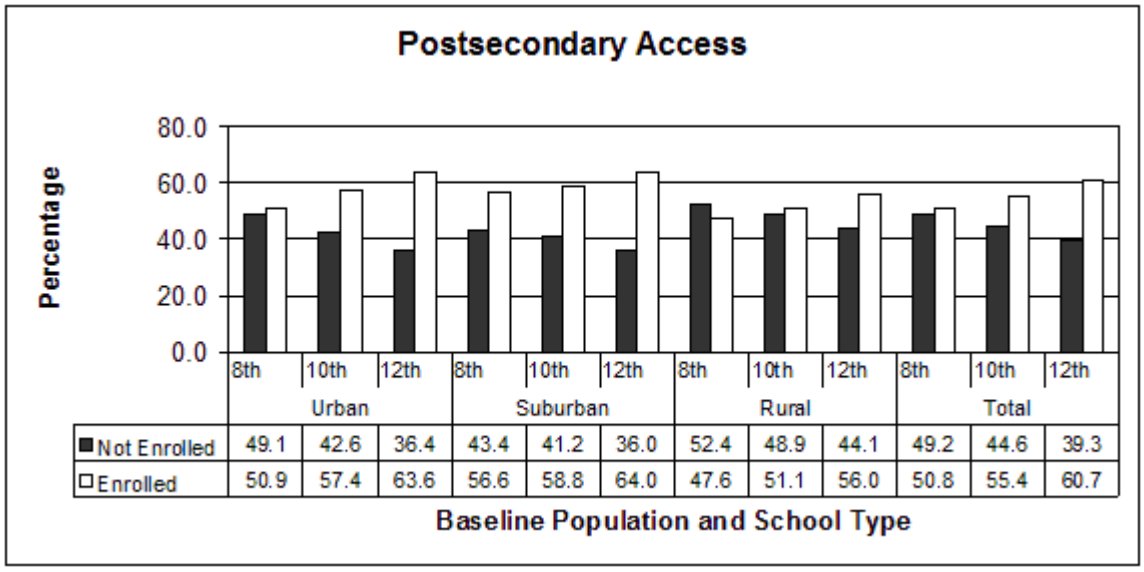
As presented in Figure 2, student access to college was analyzed by comparing students who went to college to those who did not go to college by October 1992, two years after high school graduation. Student enrollment status in college by school location was analyzed using the 8th, 10th, and 12th graders as the baseline populations.

First, the percentage of student enrollment in postsecondary education increased, when the 8th, 10th, and 12th graders were used as baseline populations respectively. For students in urban schools, the enrollment rates increased from 50.9% to 57.4% and 63.6%. For students in suburban schools, the enrollment rates increased from 56.6% to 58.8% and 64.0%. For students in rural schools, the enrollment rates increased from 47.62% to 51.1% and 56.0%. This is understandable because some students may drop out during the middle school and high school schooling process.

Second, smaller percentages of students in rural schools were enrolled in postsecondary institutions, no matter which baseline population was used. When the 8th graders were used as the baseline population, the enrollment percentage for students in rural schools was 47.6%, in contrast to 50.9% in urban schools and 56.6% in suburban schools. When the 10th graders were used as the baseline population, the enrollment percentage for students in rural schools was 51.1%, in contrast to 57.4% in urban schools and 58.8% in suburban schools. When the 12th graders were used as the baseline population, the enrollment percentage for students in rural schools was 56.0%, in contrast to 63.6% in urban schools and 64.0% in suburban schools.

Third, although smaller percentages of students in urban schools were enrolled in college

than their suburban counterparts when the 8th graders were the baseline population (50.9% *vs.* 56.6%), there were virtually no differences in the percentages of postsecondary enrollment by students in urban and suburban schools when the 12th graders were used as baseline population (63.6% *vs.* 64.0%).



	8th	10th	12th	8th	10th	12th	8th	10th	12th	8th	10th	12th
	Urban			Suburban			Rural			Total		
Not Enrolled	49.1	42.6	36.4	43.4	41.2	36.0	52.4	48.9	44.1	49.2	44.6	39.3
Enrolled	50.9	57.4	63.6	56.6	58.8	64.0	47.6	51.1	56.0	50.8	55.4	60.7

FIGURE 2. Postsecondary Access by October 1992 by Students in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools Using the 8th, 10th, and 12th Graders as Baseline Populations
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 Data Analysis System.

Choice

Figures 3 and 4 present results about postsecondary destinations for students who made it to the stage of postsecondary education. The population, therefore, was students who were enrolled in postsecondary institutions two years after high school graduation. The questions here were, for students who successfully reach the level of postsecondary education in different type of 12th grade schools (urban, suburban, and rural), what was their distribution in different types of postsecondary institutions?

Two major findings are worth reporting. First, for those who managed to go to college, relatively larger percentages of students in rural schools were enrolled in public institutions (78.5%), while relatively smaller percentages of students in urban schools were enrolled in public institutions (67.9%), and the percentages for students in suburban schools were in between (75.4%) (Figure 3). Second, relatively larger proportions of students in urban schools were enrolled in four-year college (60.8%), while there was no substantial difference between student in suburban (56.9%) and rural schools (56.4%) (Figure 4). Further analysis (not tabled) suggests relatively larger percentages of students in urban schools (24.4%) were enrolled in private not for profit four-year colleges than students in suburban (18.5%) and rural schools (16.3%).

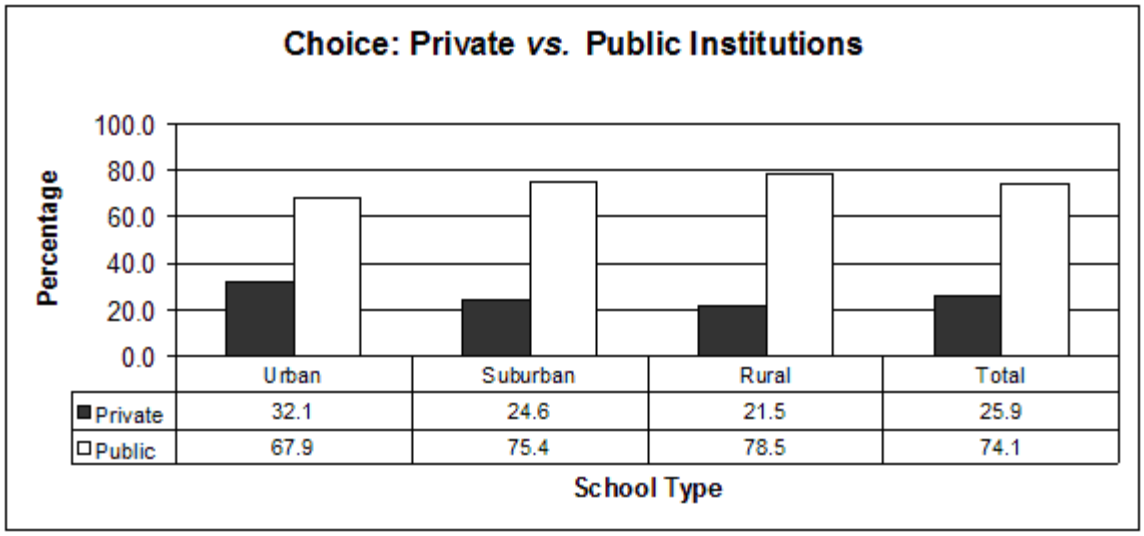


FIGURE 3. Choice of Private *vs.* Public Institutions by Students in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 Data Analysis System.

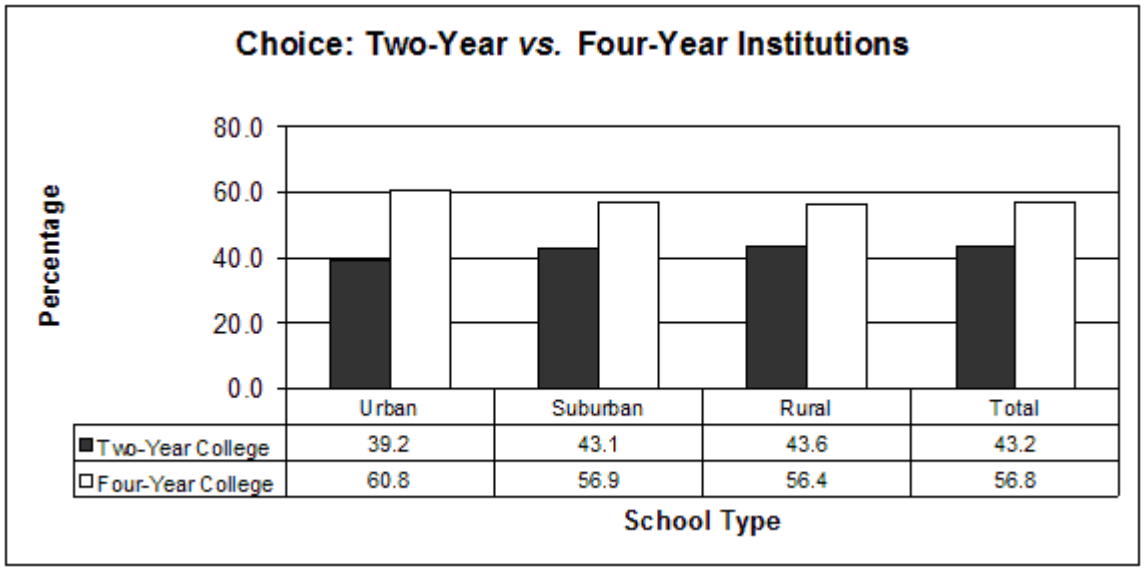


FIGURE 4. Choice of Two-Year *vs.* Four-Year Institutions by Students in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 Data Analysis System.

Discussion

The influential report *Measuring Up 2000* issued by National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2001) identified preparation for and participation in postsecondary education among the most important postsecondary policy issues. This study examines these important policy issues in analyzing student pathways to postsecondary education—student educational aspirations, access, and choice in postsecondary education. Keeping in mind that this study is descriptive in nature, it has important policy implications in the following aspects.

First, this study examines the condition of school-location related unequal postsecondary opportunity. Compared to what we already know about postsecondary opportunity by students of different background such as gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic background, we have little understanding and even some misunderstanding about how postsecondary opportunities were distributed among students in urban, suburban, and rural schools. This study offered an account on the condition of postsecondary opportunity among students in these three types of schools, using nationally representative samples. The results from this study suggest a potential new dimension of unequal educational opportunity—the location of the school. Specially, the consistent patterns of lower-level of educational aspiration, access, and choice by students in rural schools call for policy attentions. Policy makers need to consider policy interventions targeted toward to schools in different locations to promote postsecondary educational opportunity.

Secondly, this study raises questions about the conception of equal educational opportunity and related analytical methods. The results revealed that the unequal educational opportunity along the line of school location operates differently in different stages of student educational career. Although the 8th graders in urban schools are at smaller percentages of going to college than their suburban counterparts, 12th graders in urban schools, however, are at virtually equal percentages of being enrolled in postsecondary education, and even at higher percentages of going to private four-year colleges. This suggests that early interventions that can help student make to the later stage of K-12 schooling could be particularly effective strategies in promoting postsecondary educational opportunities for students in urban schools. Clearly it is important to examine the transition from the 12th grade to postsecondary education, but it alone may not be adequate to address policy concerns on equal postsecondary opportunity. It is important to track student progress through their educational career to promote equal educational opportunity.

Finally, this study provides important insights for future research. First, the combination of different conceptual and analytical frameworks will help researchers gain a full understanding about student postsecondary opportunity. Secondly, multivariate analyses that take into considerations of variables concerning student and school characteristics will help unravel the underlying process and factors related to the unequal educational opportunity for students in different types of schools. For instance, the school-location related inequality in educational opportunities might well be the consequences of the level of family poverty in different locales and the unequal offerings of learning opportunities (e.g., AP courses in high school) in different schools (Adelman, 1999; Hebel, 1999). Geography may also operate as a mediating mechanism by influencing the structure, decisions, and socialization opportunities in different communities and schools, which will then shape individual opportunities and educational choices (Coleman, 1988; Gamoran, 1987; McDonough, 1997; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995). Further exploration in these directions would be able to provide insights for more effective and implementable K-16 connection strategies.

Note

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), New Orleans, 2002. The author wants to

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