



SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

Poverty and Performance on Standardized Tests in Rhode Island and Massachusetts: Implications for Policy Reform

Emily Rauscher, Brown University

Executive Summary

Schools and school districts should be held accountable for academic progress of their students and how they utilize public resources. At the same time, academic progress must be interpreted in light of the extent to which school performance depends on social background because students enter school with a vast array of social experience and competency. This study examined the relationship between academic performance and level of poverty in all public-school districts in Rhode Island and Massachusetts on the common assessment system for the 2018-19 school year. Rhode Island had a lower share of students who were proficient in English (38% vs. 52%) and Math (29% vs. 49%) but a higher rate of poverty (47.4% vs. 31.2%). Poverty was strongly associated with performance in each state. Performance gaps between Rhode Island and Massachusetts were wide in low poverty school districts and narrowed in high poverty schools. This suggests that overall performance advantages in Massachusetts reflect a lower share of low poverty districts coupled with somewhat higher performance in these districts.

Based on these findings, the study suggests policy changes regarding how we measure school effectiveness and the need to develop programs and practices that mitigate the effects of poverty.