Children’s Scholarship Fund – Newark

Fall, 2003

Scholarship Recipient Test Score Study
Introduction
Signed by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act has brought increased attention to testing in American schools. The federal law requires every state to assess public school students in grades 3rd through 8th each year and at least once during high school in reading and mathematics. The NCLB Act was passed during a period of increased attention in the educational community to the subject of accountability, or holding schools, districts, educators, and students responsible for results. For better or worse, those concerned with education are operating in an environment increasingly concerned with assessment and accountability. In light of this national focus, the Children’s Scholarship Fund-Newark has conducted a study of student test scores, as a means of assessing how well our scholarship recipients are faring academically.

Methods
Schools were sent a letter introducing the study and explaining its purpose. Schools with less than seven CSF recipients were sent a list of students and were asked to send copies of those students’ standardized test score reports from 2001, 2002, and 2003. These schools were given the option to call the CSF-Newark office if they would prefer to have a member of our staff visit the school to collect the data. Schools with more than seven CSF recipients were informed in the introductory letter that a member of the CSF staff would contact them by phone to arrange an appointment to visit the school to collect test score data. Introductory letters were sent to 63 schools, and we were able to collect test score data from 51 schools. Five schools informed CSF-Newark that they do not administer any standardized tests to their students. Therefore, this constitutes a response rate of 89 percent. Importantly, those schools that did not respond all had less than five students receiving a grant from CSF-Newark.

Because the majority of CSF-Newark recipients are attending Catholic schools, and because Catholic schools in the area administer the CTBS Terra Nova examination each year, schools were specifically asked to submit CTBS-Terra Nova scores for the 2001, 2002 and 2003 spring exams. However, because a number of schools administer different tests, if schools did not administer the CTBS-Terra Nova exam, they were asked to submit results from whichever test their students take. Therefore, in addition to Terra Nova scores, we also received results from the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition, as well as the Educational Record Bureau’s Comprehensive Testing Program.

In total, we received test score information for 456 students. Because some schools do not keep records for students who have graduated, and because some schools do not test kindergarten students, it is difficult to report the exact percentage of CSF-Newark recipients on whom we were able to collect data. However, CSF-Newark is scheduled to assist 477 students during the 2003-2004 academic year. Of those students, 15 are in kindergarten and, therefore, there would be no test score data on these children. Furthermore, 66 of those students are in the 1st grade, and therefore, a number of them were not tested last spring because they were in kindergarten. Furthermore, 72 CSF-Newark recipients graduated from 8th grade in June 2003. While we did receive test scores for some of these students, there were some schools that no longer had those
students’ records on file. Please see Appendix A for a breakdown of the grade distribution of students whose scores are reported here.

Of the 456 students for whom we were able to collect test scores, 378 took the Terra Nova exam, 62 took the Stanford Achievement Test (Stanford-9), and 16 took the Educational Records Bureau’s Comprehensive Testing Program. Because of the small number of students who took the CTP exam, results from that test are not reported here. For students who took the Terra Nova, 102 were identified as classified, or in need of some kind of special education. Because classified students usually receive some kind of accommodation during testing, such as extra time to complete the test, these students’ scores were omitted from results reported here. We were not able to identify special education students from Stanford-9 and CTP scores submitted by schools for this study.

Description of Exams

The Terra Nova and Stanford-9 tests are norm-referenced, meaning they compare students’ performance with that of other students, rather than determine mastery of a specific curriculum. They are designed so that approximately half of test-takers will respond correctly to most items (Kohn, 2000). Therefore, score reports indicate national percentile rankings, which allow us to compare students’ performance with other students in the nation. The national percentile represents the percentage of students in the national norm group whose scores fall below a given student’s score.

According to the CTB-McGraw Hill website (www.ctb.com), the Terra Nova CTBS Battery edition provides “precise norm-referenced achievement scores and a full complement of objective-mastery scores.” This edition involves multiple-choice questions in reading, mathematics, language, science, and social studies. Some students take the Terra Nova CTBS Multiple Assessments edition, which combines multiple-choice and constructed-response items in reading, mathematics, language, science, and social studies. CSF-Newark recipients took both editions, depending on which grade they were in at the time of testing.

The Stanford Achievement Test Series, Ninth Edition (Stanford 9) is published by Harcourt, Inc. The exam involves both multiple-choice and open-ended questions in reading, mathematics, language, science, and social science. According to the Harcourt Educational Measurement website (www.hemweb.com), the Stanford-9 yields “a full range of norm-references scores.”

Results

Median national percentile rankings for CSF-Newark recipients on the Terra Nova and Stanford-9 are reported in graphs in Appendix B. The median represents the value that divides the distribution exactly in half. In other words, half of all students had national percentile rankings below the median reported in Appendix B, and half had national percentile rankings above the reported median. Median national percentile rankings are reported here instead of the mean because the median is commonly used when there are extreme scores in a distribution and when some values are unknown. For this study, some students had extremely high national percentile ranks, and some had extremely low ranks. These extreme scores make calculating the mean unrepresentative of our scholarship recipients. Also, because we do not have three years’ worth
of scores for every student in the distribution, there are some unknown values, which makes the median the appropriate value to use (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2002). This is due to attrition, graduation, and students being absent on test-day.

With the exception of Terra Nova Mathematics Composite scores from 2002 and Stanford-9 Language scores from 2003, CSF-Newark recipients had a median national percentile ranking of at least 50 in all subjects reported for 2001, 2002 and 2003. According to Terra Nova score reports, the average range is between the 30th and 70th percentile. Thus, all median national percentiles for CSF-Newark scores on the Terra Nova and the Stanford-9 tests fall in the average range. Appendix B contains graphs illustrating median national percentile rankings for CSF-Newark recipients in reading, language, mathematics, and total scores for the CTBS-Terra Nova and Stanford-9 exams for 2001, 2002 and 2003. For both exams, total scores consist of a combination of reading, mathematics, and language scores.

Implications
Because different states require different standardized exams, and because New Jersey public school students do not generally take the Terra Nova or Stanford-9 exams, there is no easy way to compare our recipients’ performance with that of their low-income public school counterparts. However, examination of New Jersey public school students’ performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) gives some indication of how low-income students generally do on standardized tests. Indeed, the National Center for Educational Statistics’ website breaks down each states’ NAEP scores by various factors, including eligibility for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program.

Looking specifically at New Jersey, 2003 NAEP scores indicate that of 4th grade New Jersey students eligible for the National School Lunch Program, only 15% scored “at or above proficient” in reading and only 15% were “at or above proficient” in mathematics. In contrast, of New Jersey 4th graders not eligible for the National School Lunch Program, 48% were “at or above proficient” in reading and 49% were “at or above proficient” in mathematics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). In other words, wealthier New Jersey 4th graders were much more likely to be proficient in both mathematics and reading.

This report lends credence to the Council on American Private Education’s 2001 finding that the achievement gap between low-income and middle/upper-income students is much narrower in private schools than it is in public schools (CAPE, 2001). Indeed, CAPE reports that for NAEP scores from the year 2000, “the difference between the scale scores of low-income students and their more affluent counterparts is significantly less in private schools than for the nation at large” (CAPE, 2001, p. 2). While 47 percent of low-income (defined as eligible for the National School Lunch Program) 4th graders in private schools scored at or above the proficient level in reading, only 32 percent of low-income students in all schools nationwide scored at this level.

While test scores can arguably tell a lot about a student’s academic progress, it is important to note that they are only one indicator of achievement. Indeed, some children, who may be strong students, do not test well, and reports from a child’s teacher can often tell more about what a child has learned. Furthermore, academic excellence is not the only reason parents cite for choosing private schools. A 2003 survey conducted by the Children’s Scholarship Fund-Newark
office sheds some light on various factors parents take into account in choosing private schools for their children. This earlier study demonstrated that parents in the CSF-Newark program were pleased that the private schools their children are attending provide not only excellent academics, but also safe and disciplined environments in which values and/or religion are taught.

That being said, the current study indicates that CSF-Newark recipients are doing well academically. CAPE (2001) suggests that the better performance of minority and low-income students on NAEP might be explained by the fact that private schools often set higher standards for their students. The earlier parent-satisfaction study conducted by the Children’s Scholarship Fund-Newark indicates that parents who had been receiving the grant for four years were extremely pleased with the academic programs offered by their children’s private schools and believed that their children were being challenged in the classroom. One parent, whose son had previously been enrolled in a Newark public school’s Gifted and Talented Program, said, “During this time I was advised by his teacher to pull him out of public school and place him in a private school. This teacher advised me of this because my son was not being challenged academically.” Of the Children’s Scholarship Fund, another parent noted, “The program has been most effective and efficient in helping my son’s academics. His achievement has improved along with discipline.” After noting that her local public school district is “rated poorly”, another parent stated, “My children are progressing well and are on grade level in reading, writing, and math.” Yet another parent noted that her child is in an environment she believes to be conducive to learning. She said, “This school has provided an excellent education and positive experiences for her. It also gives a safe and comfortable environment, which every child needs in order to learn. When I am at work, I know that [she] is getting the very best.”

The current study of CSF-Newark recipients’ test scores, therefore, provides objective, quantitative evidence of parents’ beliefs that their children are being offered high quality academics in the private schools they have chosen. Indeed, this study indicates that our CSF-Newark students are performing better than about half of their peers, and, overall, are in the average range on standardized tests, which is remarkable considering their difficult socio-economic backgrounds.
References


References


Appendix A

Breakdown of students for whom test scores were collected by grade

A.) Terra Nova Scores Submitted (excluding classified students)
Total Number of Students: 276

Kindergarten: 6.9%
1st grade: 6.2%
2nd grade: 7.2%
3rd grade: 13.0%
4th grade: 14.9%
5th grade: 17.4%
6th grade: 15.2%
7th grade: 15.2%
8th grade: 4.0%

Including classified students: 378 students

Kindergarten: 8.2%
1st grade: 5.6%
2nd grade: 6.1%
3rd grade: 16.7%
4th grade: 16.1%
5th grade: 15.3%
6th grade: 14.3%
7th grade: 14.0%
8th grade: 3.7%

B.)
Stanford-9 Scores Submitted: 62 students

Kindergarten: 11.3%
1st Grade: 3.2%
2nd Grade: 12.9%
3rd Grade: 14.5%
4th Grade: 12.9%
5th Grade: 9.7%
6th Grade: 22.6%
7th Grade: 8.1%
8th Grade: 4.8%
CSF - Newark
Terra Nova Total Scores

Year

2001 2002 2003

Scores:

- 2001: 54
- 2002: 50
- 2003: 54