PAM 2550: Waiting for Superman?
Perspectives on the “Crisis” in American K-12 Education
Spring 2012
T-Th 2:55-4:10pm
MVR G73

Professor: Jordan Matsudaira
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Office Hours: Monday 9:30-11am
              Tuesday 10–11:30am (& by appt.)

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Course Description
This course examines the widespread perception and the varied responses to the notion that the American K-12 education system is failing to adequately prepare its students. In this course we will examine the structure of the U.S. K-12 education system, the role of and rationale for different levels in government in school finance and oversight, and its recent performance in producing student achievement—overall, and for subgroups of the population—in historical and international context. With this as background, we will discuss the large array of school reforms currently being pursued to improve student outcomes, including increases in funding, teacher training and recruitment, school autonomy (charter schools), student and teacher accountability, and improving incentives for teacher and student performance.

Prerequisites
None. Courses in intermediate microeconomics and statistics are recommended. The latter part of the course will involve some reading of original research articles, requiring a modicum of literacy in statistical reasoning.

Grading
Your grade for the course will be based on your performance on 3 exams, and a short policy memo, with the following weights:

- Prelim 1: 20% March 1
- Prelim 2: 20% April 10
- Policy Memo: 20% due in class on May 3
- Quizzes: 10% 6 unannounced dates
- Final Exam: 30% scheduled date during Finals period

Exams will emphasize material covered since the last exam, but will be cumulative in the core concepts of the class. The policy memo, due on the last day of class, will
be capped at 1,000 words in length and will involve reacting to a current policy issue using knowledge from the course. Exams must be taken on schedule—make-ups will only be granted in exceptional circumstances in accordance with Cornell policies. There will be 6 pop quizzes over the course of the semester, based on readings covered since the last quiz; I will drop your two lowest quiz scores. Partial credit will be given, but no make-ups will be granted—please do not ask. Our cumulative final exam is scheduled for Thursday, May 10, 2:00-4:30pm.

Students agree that by taking this course all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. Use of Turnitin.com service is subject to the Usage Policy posted on the Turnitin.com site.

Readings
There are no required books or texts for this course. All materials will be provided in .pdf format via the Blackboard website. Readings will be available approximately 1 week before they are due.

Current Events
The policy landscape in K-12 education is changing rapidly. I highly recommend staying abreast of current developments through the news, and introducing such topics for discussion during the course. The ‘Education’ section of the New York Times, or websites such as ‘Education Week’ are popular sources.

Surveys and i>clicker
I will from time to time ask you to respond to brief web surveys about your educational experiences to gain information to provide more context for the course. Your participation is mandatory, but I will never divulge your private information. Please contact with me with any concerns you may have. Similarly, I may decide to require you to have an “i>clicker” to facilitate quizzes and in-class polling to make the class more interactive. I will announce such a decision at least a week in advance.

Academic Integrity
Absolute integrity is expected of every Cornell student. A Cornell student’s submission of work for academic credit indicates that the work is the student’s own. Any and all outside assistance must be acknowledged. For the specifics of this code of conduct, see http://www.theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/AcadInteg/code.html
Ignorance of its contents is not an acceptable excuse for any infractions.

Special Accommodations
Students with documented physical or learning disabilities or who anticipate needing accommodation should notify me at the beginning of the semester.
Detailed Outline
(Important: Subject to change! Updates to assigned readings will be posted on Blackboard as the course progresses)
(dates in parentheses refer to the Tuesday of the specified week)
Note that all readings will be available on Blackboard unless otherwise noted. In each section I list required readings but also list a few books or studies for further reading that provide what I consider (note that opinions differ!) to be “the best” research-based references for each topic. These references are sometimes quite technical, and are not required reading—I will often present a subset of their findings in lecture. I list them to give a guide for further reading for those feeling inspired to delve deeper.

PART I: Background and context for current reforms

Week 1 (1/24): Introduction to the Course and Overview of U.S. Education System. What are Returns to/Goals of Education?

Tuesday 1/24:
In the first meeting we will introduce the course and see how it relates to other education related course offerings on campus. We then present the components of the U.S. education system. We’ll briefly review some basic statistics to understand the context in which the K-12 education system operates.

Required Readings:

Thursday 1/26:
To assess whether our education system is failing or not, we first need to decide on the relevant measures of its performance. What are some traditional goals of our education system? What are the various ways in which education benefits individuals and society as a whole?

Required Readings:

**Week 2 (1/31): Why Should Government be Involved in Education? How is it involved: funding?**

**Tuesday 1/31:**
We briefly review some traditional arguments and evidence for government involvement in the education system.

**Required Readings:**

**References:**

**Thursday 2/2:**
We explore the myriad ways in which government influences K-12 education, starting with funding. We will examine the sources of revenues for public education in historical perspective, the basic structure of education finance in the U.S., and trends and issues in school finance reform.

Week 3 (2/7): Government’s Oversight Role in Education and Introduction to the “Crisis”

Tuesday 2/7

We discuss the changing regulatory role of government in education policy, and the various policy levers different levels of government can use to affect the content and structure of schooling.

Required Readings:


Thursday 2/9

What is the basis for the view that American K-12 education is in crisis? We review trends in academic achievement and school inputs and consider what they tell us about the performance and productivity of the education system.

Required Readings


**Week 4 (2/14): U.S. Education in International Comparative Context**

**Tuesday 2/14**
We review the evidence on the relative performance of the U.S. education system relative to other developed countries, and consider the significance of this evidence.

*Required Readings:*

**Thursday 2/16**
What might the U.S. learn from other countries? Can the secrets to their success be used to improve American education?

*Required Readings:*

**Week 5 (2/21): Inequality in student outcomes**

**Tuesday 2/21**
The performance of the U.S. education system differs markedly for different subgroups of the population. We examine trends in achievement and other
educational outcome gaps for different types of students, and explore the potential for school reforms to mitigate these gaps.

Required Readings:

Thursday 2/23
Recent evidence suggests that achievement gaps between rich and poor are large or larger than gaps based on race. We examine the levels and trends and some explanations for these gaps.

Required Readings:

Week 6 (2/28): Prelim 1 and History of School Reform Efforts

Tuesday 2/28
After a first midterm exam, we trace the modern history of school reforms to give context to modern debates.

Required Readings:

References:

Thursday 3/1: Prelim 1 in class
PART II: Modern Areas of School Reform—Assessing the Evidence
Week 7 (3/6): Overview of Causal Inference/Statistical Methodology and the Debate Over Money

Tuesday 3/6
To prepare for Part II of the course, we discuss statistical concepts that are important in evaluating the evidence from quantitative studies on the effectiveness of educational reforms.

Required Readings:

Thursday 3/8
One of the most contentious tenets of modern reform efforts is that more money does not lead to better education outcomes. We examine trends in spending on education, and review the evidence on what this spending has accomplished with particular attention given to the effects of class-size.

Required Readings:


Tuesday 3/13
School choice is one of the most active areas of education reform. We discuss the origins and logic of the school choice movement, and trace their development from school voucher programs to charter schools.

Required Readings:
- Loeb, Susanna et al. (2011) “Increasing Choice in the Market for Schools: Recent Reforms and their Effects on Student Achievement” National Tax Journal (64(1): 141-163

References:

Thursday 3/15
While still a quantitatively small part of the K-12 education system, charter schools occupy disproportionate space in discussions of the future of school reform. We will discuss the arguments about how such schools might be ‘better’ than traditional public schools, and review the most recent evidence on their performance. We consider both the impact of charter schools on their students, and also their neighboring public schools.

Required Readings:
• Executive summary of CREDO Study.
• Hoxby, C. and Sonya Murarka (2011) "New York City Charter Schools,” Education Next.

Week 9 (3/20): No Class – SPRING BREAK

Week 10 (3/27): School Choice, Competition, and Vouchers (Anna Choi)

Tuesday 3/27: Guest Speaker: Dr. Robert Connor. Head of Schools of Christina Seix Academy in Trenton, NJ – suppose you could design a school from scratch. What would you want it to look like?
**Thursday 3/29**

We continue our discussion of charter schools. What do the successful ones do to be so successful? Could traditional public schools adopt the same practices?

*Required Readings:*
- Fryer Jr., Roland (2012). “Injecting Successful Charter School Strategies into Traditional Public Schools: Early Results from an Experiment in Houston.” Harvard University mimeo.

**Week 11 (4/3): Teachers and Teacher Quality**

**Tuesday 4/3**

Motivated by recent research showing the importance of teacher quality, many current policies are aimed at improving the quality of teachers in the classroom. We begin by surveying the evidence on the effects of teacher quality on student outcomes, and discussing some policies that might affect the quality of teachers in schools.

*Required Readings:*

**Thursday 4/5**

We discuss some common ways that teacher quality is measured, and then explore some data-driven strategies to improve teacher quality including teacher pay for performance programs.

*Required Readings:*
Week 12 (4/10): Prelim 2 and Teachers Unions
Tuesday 4/10: Prelim 2 in class

Thursday 4/12: Guest speaker Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers

Required Readings:
- AFT Quality Agenda

References:

Week 13 (4/17): Teacher Unions, and Teacher Recruitment and Performance Evaluation

Tuesday 4/17: Dan Kinley, Director of Public Policy for NYS Union of Teachers

Thursday 4/19
We continue our discussion of teacher performance measurement, and focus on how evaluations can be made useful for teacher development.

Required Readings
- Kane et al. (2011) “Measuring Teacher Effectiveness,” Education Next.

Week 14 (4/24): School and Student Level Accountability

Tuesday 4/24: Guest Speaker: Dr. Luvelle Brown, Superintendent of Ithaca Schools

Thursday 4/26:
Increasingly, large urban school districts are experimenting with giving students financial and other incentives for their classroom performance? Do these incentives help to get kids to invest in their human capital, or do they undermine their intrinsic motivation to learn? We review the evidence from psychology labs and the field.

Required Readings:
• Allan and Fryer (2011) *The Power and Pitfalls of Education Incentives.*

**Week 15 (5/1): Teacher Training, Technology in the Classroom, and Wrapup**

**Tuesday 5/1**
Teacher training.

**Required Readings:**
• Rockoff et al. (2007) “Photo finish,” *Education Next.*

**Thursday 5/3**
Technology in the classroom.

**Required Readings:**
• Kronholz (2012) “Can the Khan Academy move the Bell Curve to the Right?” *Education Next.*
• Christensen and Horn (2008) “How do we Transform our Schools?” *Education Next.*