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Research Insight

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Does Moving for a Good School Actually Pay Off?

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LONGITUDINAL EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS: REDUCING INEQUALITIES

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Some families move houses to access better-reputed schools for their children. This study finds that university-educated families are more likely to do so but finds no evidence that doing so additionally improves children's educational outcomes.

The social contexts children encounter outside the household, most notably neighborhoods and schools, can shape their education, other long-term socio-economic outcomes, and broader development and well-being (for reviews, see Nieuwenhuis & Hooimeijer, 2016; Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Van Ewijk & Sleegers, 2010). Where a family lives largely determines what this context outside of the household looks like, namely by determining which schools children can realistically attend. Even in countries like the Netherlands, where there are no formal catchment areas and school choice is largely free, residential location shapes which schools children can realistically attend. Some parents move house specifically to be near a school they consider desirable, others choose a school based on where they already live.

Most research has treated this entanglement between residence and school choice as a problem of statistical identification, rather than as something worth studying in its own right. This study instead asks a more substantive question: does it actually improve children's academic performance when their parents choose where to live with the local school supply in mind?

To find out, the study uses longitudinal register data from Statistics Netherlands from over 20,000 students who entered primary school in 2010 or 2011. The dataset encompasses the four largest Dutch urban regions, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht. The outcome of interest is the formal track recommendation students receive at the end of primary school, which determines placement in secondary education. Because this transition marks the onset of ability tracking, it is a critical juncture for understanding how socioeconomic inequalities in education are (re)produced. Unlike many other countries, the Netherlands has no formal catchment areas, meaning families are not automatically assigned to a school based on where they live.

The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, it models which families move to which neighborhoods, based on standard neighborhood characteristics – housing, demographics, and local amenities – alongside features of nearby schools. These models are used to quantify the extent to which the local school supply contributed to a family's residential choice. Second, it tested whether such school-motivated residential mobility translates into higher track recommendations for children.

The results show that university-educated families are somewhat more likely than other families to move to neighborhoods with higher-reputation schools, even after accounting for other neighborhood characteristics and demographic controls. Income and ethnic minority status do not significantly predict this kind of residential sorting once other factors are controlled for.

However, despite this sorting behavior, the study finds no evidence that children's educational outcomes at the end of primary school depend on whether parents factored in the school supply when choosing where to live. In other words, school-motivated residential mobility does not translate into a measurable additional academic advantage. Contextual effects do exist: students in more advantaged neighborhoods and school environments tend to receive higher track recommendations, net of family socioeconomic status and minority background. But these contextual advantages operate independently of residential sorting motivations related to educational supply. It is where children end up that matters, not whether their parents chose that location with schools in mind.

Why do strategic residential moves not pay off? Possible explanations are that parents rely on imperfect information on school quality, that free school choice allows families to access schools without moving, and that families able to consider the school supply are already relatively advantaged, limiting the potential gains from such moves. Taken together, what determines children's track recommendations is who they are and where they end up, not whether their parents moved with schools in mind.

These findings have implications for how we think about school segregation by socioeconomic status. Sorting still matters for children's educational outcomes, since it shapes which school environment they are exposed to. But if school-motivated residential mobility does not deliver an additional academic payoff, the sorting itself appears to be a response to perceived rather than demonstrated differences in school quality. Its primary consequence is therefore not educational gain but residential and school segregation along socioeconomic lines, driven by reputation rather than by real differences in school quality.

When it comes to policy, the findings suggest that improving school quality in less advantaged neighborhoods is a more effective lever for reducing inequality than policies that facilitate or encourage residential mobility toward higher-reputation schools. The policy priority should be to reduce the quality differences between schools that make reputation-driven sorting rational in the first place.

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