Patterns, Determinants, and Consequences of Ability Tracking Evidence from Texas Public Schools

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Schools often track students to classes based on ability. Proponents of tracking argue it is a low-cost tool to improve learning since instruction is more effective when students are more homogeneous, while opponents argue it exacerbates initial differences in opportunities without strong evidence of efficacy. In fact, little is known about the pervasiveness or determinants of ability tracking in the US. To fill this gap, we use detailed administrative data from Texas to estimate the extent of tracking within schools for grades 4 through 8 over the years 2011-2019. We find substantial tracking; tracking within schools overwhelms any sorting by ability that takes place across schools. The most important determinant of tracking is heterogeneity in student ability, and schools operationalize tracking through the classification of students into categories such as gifted and disabled and curricular differentiation. When we examine how tracking changes in response to educational policies, we see that schools decrease tracking in response to accountability pressures. Finally, when we explore how exposure to tracking correlates with student mobility in the achievement distribution, we find positive effects on high-achieving students with no negative effects on low-achieving students, suggesting that tracking may increase inequality by raising the ceiling.