Assessing School District Decision-Making Evidence from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic drew new attention to the role of school boards in the U.S. In this paper, we examine school districts’ choices of learning modality—whether and when to offer in-person, virtual, or hybrid instruction—over the course of the 2020-21 pandemic school year. The analysis takes advantage of granular weekly data on learning mode and COVID-19 cases for Ohio school districts. We show that districts respond on the margin to health risks: all else equal, a marginal increase in new cases reduces the probability that a district offers in-person instruction the next week. Moreover, this negative response is magnified when the district was in-person the prior week and attenuates in magnitude over the school year. These findings are consistent with districts learning from experience about the effect of in-person learning on disease transmission in schools. We also find evidence that districts are influenced by the decisions of their peers.

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