

## Columbia Study Finds Students in Standalone Middle Schools Lag Behind K-8 Peers

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A new study that analyzes a decade of achievement data from New York City public schools reveals that the trajectories of math and English performance among students at standalone middle schools are significantly lower than students attending kindergarten-to-eighth grade (K-8) schools. The study, authored by researchers at Columbia University, was published in the journal *Education Next* and is also forthcoming in the *Journal of Public Economics*.

[Jonah Rockoff](#), the Sidney Taurel Associate Professor of Business at the [Columbia Graduate School of Business](#), and his co-author, Benjamin Lockwood, analyzed data on students who entered third grade between the fall of 1998 and the fall of 2002 and remained in New York public schools for six years, until most had completed the eighth grade. They compared test scores, attendance rates and parent evaluations as well as socioeconomic data for all of the students in different types of schools.

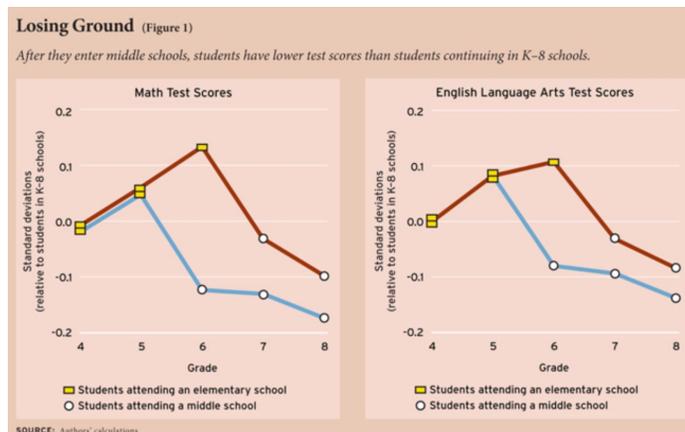
According to the study, when students enter a middle school, there is a steep drop-off in academic achievement that cannot be explained by differences in per-pupil spending or individual class size, which are actually similar for both middle and K-8 schools. Instead, the researchers believe that part of the explanation is cohort size, or the total number of students in a given grade, which tends to be much larger in standalone middle schools. They also found that student absences increase in these schools—around two more days per year than their counterparts—which may also be a factor in the achievement gap.

“There are lots of different hypotheses as to why performance drops in middle schools,” said Rockoff, the study’s principal investigator. “There isn’t one single reason why students do poorly; however, our evidence shows clearly that middle schools are currently not the best way to educate students in New York City.”

The study also shows that these students continue to fall substantially behind through the middle school years as compared to their K-8 peers. Declines in achievement over time are even worse for students at the lower end of the performance spectrum. The researchers argue that this continued decline may set students up for unnecessary long-term disadvantages.

“What we found,” said Rockoff, “underscores the need for middle-school reform.” The researchers hope that the study will lead to further investigations into the performance of middle schools and lead to necessary changes.

Rockoff is an economist who works on issues in local public finance and the economics of education. His co-author, Benjamin Lockwood, was a research assistant at Columbia’s Business School at the time of the study.



**Rockoff's study shows that after they enter middle school, students have lower test scores than students continuing in K-8 schools. (Click image to enlarge.)**  
Image credit: Authors' calculations

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