

ARE 'FAILING' SCHOOLS REALLY FAILING? USING SEASONAL COMPARISONS TO  
SEPARATE SCHOOL FROM NON-SCHOOL EFFECTS ON LEARNING

Douglas Downey  
Paul von Hippel  
Melanie M. Hughes

Department of Sociology  
The Ohio State University

ABSTRACT

To many it is obvious which schools are failing—those whose students perform poorly on achievement tests. But achievement-based methods of evaluating schools mix the effect of school factors (e.g., good teachers) with the effect of non-school factors (e.g., homes and neighborhoods) in unknown ways. As a result, achievement-based accountability measures likely underestimate the effectiveness of schools serving disadvantaged populations. We discuss school-evaluation methods that more effectively separate school effects from non-school effects. Specifically, we consider evaluating schools using 12-month (calendar-year) learning rates, 9-month (school-year) learning rates, and a provocative new measure, “impact,” which is the difference between the school-year learning rate and the summer learning rate. The advantage of the “impact” measure is that it employs both sociological insights and innovative methodological tools for separating school and non-school effects. Using data from the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of 1998-98*, we show that conclusions about which schools are failing change substantially when we move toward evaluation approaches that more persuasively isolate school from non-school effects.