ROACH MOTEL: RESEARCH, POLICY, AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES OF THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT IN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS


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Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) schools must meet “adequate yearly progress” goals for students’ performance. Schools that fail to meet these goals are identified as “in need of improvement” and are required to undergo a series of increasingly punitive sanctions intended to improve under-performing schools. In California, this process is called Program Improvement (PI). I used publically available data from the California Department of Education to trace the histories of about 6,400 traditional public schools over nearly a decade since NCLB’s implementation to determine the extent to which schools encounter the punitive sanctions of PI, to explore the reasons for these outcomes, and to understand how NCLB affects whether schools can show they are adequately educating their students. Several key findings emerged. First, over time schools have increasingly entered PI. Second, once in PI schools were unlikely to exit, with the chance of improving enough to exit decreasing as schools advanced to more punitive PI stages. Third, schools with different levels of SES and diversity had notably different probabilities of moving into, through, and out of PI. More advantaged schools experienced better PI outcomes than more disadvantaged schools. Yet despite these differences the overall pattern of PI transition probabilities—wherein schools that entered PI were more likely to advance to higher stages rather than remain in the same stage over time or exit the process entirely—persisted. Fourth, differences in SES, as opposed to differences in diversity, accounted for a larger part of the differences in PI transitions across schools. Fifth, if NCLB had imposed more flexible requirements for schools to have shown progress in students’ learning, then schools’ PI transition probabilities would have been different. Specifically, if the law had required students to either meet performance targets or make improvement from year to year California schools would have been less likely to enter PI, less likely to advance to more punitive stages of PI, and more likely to exit PI from any stage. Moreover, changing the rules would have reduced inequalities in PI transitions between the most advantaged and most disadvantaged schools.