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**EARLY IMPACTS OF THE EL DORADO PROMISE ON ENROLLMENT
AND ACHIEVEMENT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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What is the El Dorado Promise?

The “Promise” strategy gained prominence with the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise program in Michigan in November 2005. The program, known as a universal, place-based scholarship initiative, offers full college tuition to any Kalamazoo Public Schools graduate attending a public college in Michigan. In January 2007, El Dorado, Arkansas announced the El Dorado Promise: a new program that guaranteed that high school graduates from the area can afford college thanks to a \$50 million gift from the Murphy Oil Corporation. The El Dorado Promise is modeled after the Kalamazoo program; scholarships are not based on students’ grades in high school or financial need. Through the Promise, Murphy Oil will pay tuition and mandatory fees for up to five years for recipients. To receive the Promise, a student must enroll in a community college or a four-year university – public or private, in Arkansas or out-of-state – and maintain a 2.0 college grade-point average in college.

To be eligible for the program, students must have attended schools in the El Dorado School District for at least four years. The maximum amount payable is up to the highest annual resident tuition and mandatory fees at an Arkansas public university, which is currently \$7,818 per year. When combined with the Arkansas Challenge Lottery Scholarship or other scholarships, it may be used for other college expenses, such as room and board.

There are a variety of outcomes that proponents of Promise programs anticipate, from very broad to very specific outcomes. Indeed, program staff at the El Dorado Promise envision that the program will lead to a revitalized community and school system in general. Since 2010, the Office for Education Policy has worked with the El Dorado School District in completing a comprehensive evaluation of the Promise. This is the first report stemming from this partnership. In this report, we examine two outcomes to determine whether the Promise has had the hypothesized impact on El Dorado schools: district enrollment and student achievement.

Effects on School District Enrollment

As to the question of the impact on student enrollment, it seems clear that the El Dorado Promise had a positive impact on district enrollment patterns. Prior to the announcement of the Promise, the district had experienced a decline of nearly 14% in overall enrollment from the 1990-91 school year through the 2006-2007 school year. Since that time, not only has the steady decline been stopped, but enrollment actually grew by about 3% from that point through the 2011-12 school year. Moreover, the fraction of low-income students in El Dorado has held steady, while it has grown in other districts. This may be a function of increased economic vitality in the El Dorado community, an enhanced desire of middle-class residents to remain in El Dorado, or an influx of middle-class families to El Dorado. It is likely that a combination of these factors have contributed to the relative economic stability of El Dorado; in any event, this appears to be another positive impact of the Promise.

Effects on Student Achievement

Methodology

Perhaps more importantly, we also investigated whether the district's students in grades three through eight have experienced improved academic achievement in the years following the announcement of the Promise. We employ a relatively rigorous analytic strategy in which we create individual **student-level** matches for each student exposed to the El Dorado Promise program. In this way, we can ensure that the comparison students are demographically similar to the El Dorado students and, more importantly, have the same "pre-Promise" level of academic achievement. Therefore, if we find that the El Dorado students outperform their "matched twins" in the years following the 2007 announcement, we can view these differences as estimates of the impact of the El Dorado Promise program.

Overall, the majority of the El Dorado students and their matched twins were from low-income households (58% of the math sample and 57% of the literacy sample were eligible for free or reduced price lunches in 2005-06) and just over half of the students (53%) were African-American. Most importantly, the students from El Dorado and their matched twins performed essentially identically on the state exams in the pre-Promise year. In fact, both groups of students performed just above the state average level in math and just below the state average level in literacy during the Spring 2006 testing administration.

Results

Our first set of results considered more than 2,000 students who attended El Dorado schools in the first Promise school year (2006-07) and for at least one year beyond that point. There are a total of five cohorts: the oldest of these cohorts includes students in grade eight in 2006-07 while the cohort with the greatest level of "exposure" to the Promise were in grade four when the program was announced and spent the next four school years in EL Dorado post-promise. While the results did differ by cohort in mostly predictable ways, the overall findings show that El Dorado Promise students outscored their matched peers by roughly 14% of a standard deviation better in math and by 17% of a standard deviation in literacy. These effects are the equivalent of six to seven percentile points for students starting near the midpoint of the scoring distribution (as our student sample did).

While the overall results are interesting, it is also worth investigating whether the impacts differ by student race, student wealth, or student academic ability. In our interviews with teachers and school leaders, we learned that, after the announcement of the Promise, El Dorado educators redoubled their efforts to ensure that they held high expectations for all students, in light of the fact that all El Dorado students now had the financial means to further their education beyond the boundaries of El Dorado, Arkansas. As a result of the Promise, conversations about college and trips to college campuses became commonplace for all students in the district, regardless of race or class. Given that background, it is certainly possible that the Promise program might have a more pronounced effect on economically-disadvantaged students or African-American students. Moreover, because the program focused to such a large extent on college, it is also possible that the program might have gained more traction for students who viewed themselves (or who were viewed by others) as "college material" in terms of academic ability.

To investigate these possible differential effects, we disaggregated our data by race, wealth, and pre-Promise academic ability. It is possible that the students most affected by this time of intervention would be students of relatively high academic ability (those for whom college is desirable) who might not have viewed college as affordable or attainable due to a relatively disadvantaged background (perhaps either low-income or racial minority students). Here, the results are striking.

On the math exam, African-American and low-income students in the upper half of the ability distribution boasted scores that were significantly and meaningfully greater than the scores of their matched peers. For each group, the effect was in the neighborhood of one-quarter of a standard deviation; in terms of percentile points, the Promise students scored 10 points higher than their matched peers. The results on literacy were even larger: the high-ability African-American students boasted an effect size of nearly one-third of a standard deviation, and the low-income students boasted an effect of 0.26. Table *i* below summarizes the results for both the overall sample and for significant subgroups.

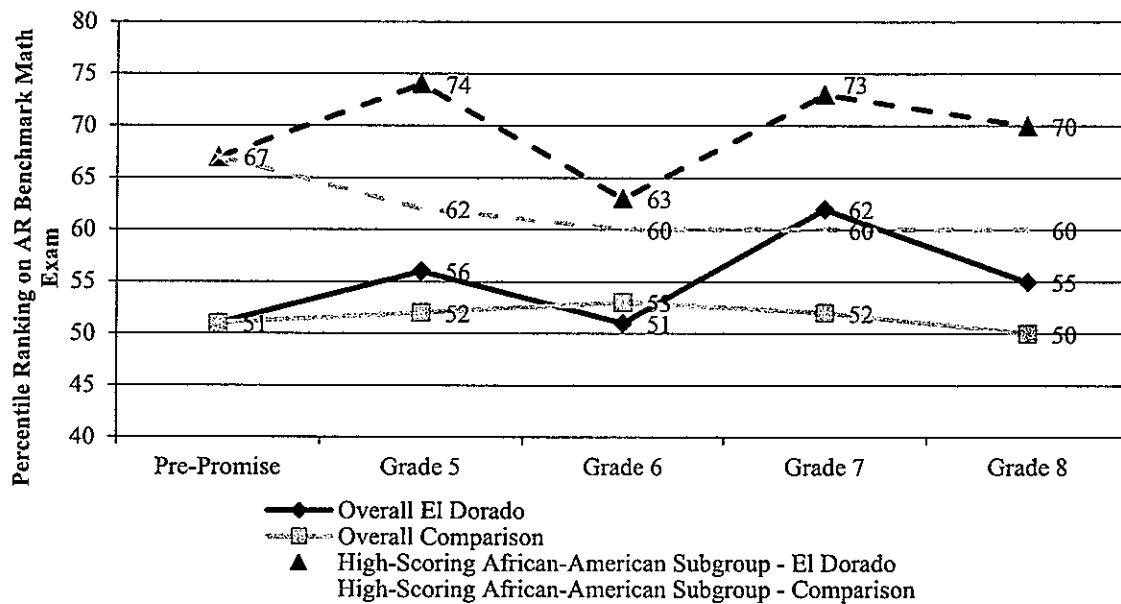
Table i: Summary of effects by subgroup

	8th Grade Math z-scores	8th Grade Literacy z-scores
Overall	0.14***	0.17***
N	2286	2402
Highest-Scoring Half, African-American	0.25***	0.32***
N	367	393
Highest-Scoring Half, Low-income	0.25***	0.26***
N	419	453

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Finally, to illustrate these effects in a more user-friendly manner, we present grade-by-grade percentile scores for El Dorado students and their matched peers in Figure *i* below. The overall results are represented by the solid line below, and a subgroup result is represented by the dotted line below. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, we only show results for the high-scoring African-American subgroup here. Additional results and the literacy results (which follow the same pattern) can be found in the results and conclusion sections of the full document.

Figure i: Percentile rankings on AR Benchmark Math Exam for El Dorado students and matched comparison students, 2005-06 to 2011-12



As Figure i indicates, the overall sample of both El Dorado students and their matched peers scored at roughly the 50th percentile in 2006 prior to the implementation of the Promise program. Over time, those students exposed to the El Dorado Promise improved relative to their matched peers by roughly 5 percentile points in math, thus ending in the 55th percentile at the end of their 8th grade year. The figure also illustrates the achievement for the high-scoring African-American subgroup, which started at the 67th percentile and improved relative to their matched peers by roughly 10 percentile points, thus ending in the 70th percentile.

The fact that the largest impacts are seen for high-achieving students from traditionally disadvantaged groups comes as no surprise, as this group is comprised of students with high academic ability, but who have traditionally faced challenges in attaining post-secondary education.

The best illustration of these changing expectations for all students came from a teacher describing the difference in student participation in high-level courses post-Promise: “Our AP classes went from country club to parks and rec.” The inference we drew from this wry and clever comment was both that more students began to view themselves as college-bound and teachers began to hold them to that expectation. Whether it is seen in the diverse enrollment in AP classes or in the numbers displayed in this report, the evidence is mounting that El Dorado is living up to its “Promise.”