

Learning with 'stronger peers' yields no boost

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Students don't necessarily perform better just because they're surrounded by higher-achieving classmates, finds a study co-authored by Scott Imberman of Michigan State University. Credit: Michigan State University

A new study contradicts the popular theory that students perform better when surrounded by higher achieving classmates.

Michigan State University's Scott Imberman and colleagues found that marginal [students](#) in a middle school gifted and talented program – despite learning alongside the "best and brightest" – performed no better

on national tests than a similar group of students who didn't qualify for the program.

"This paper is part of a growing body of literature suggesting that just because you have stronger peers doesn't necessarily mean you are going to perform better," said Imberman, associate professor of economics and education.

Gifted and talented programs have grown in popularity, with more than 3 million students now enrolled nationwide. The study, in the *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, provides an important first step in understanding the effects of gifted and talented programs on students.

Using a sample of more than 14,000 fifth-graders in an urban school district, Imberman, Sa Bui of Cornell University and Steven Craig of the University of Houston analyzed the students' [standardized test scores](#) in math, science, reading, social studies and language arts.

The study targeted a group of students who qualified for a gifted and talented program by barely meeting a certain threshold based on past academic performance. Their test scores were compared to the students who just missed meeting the threshold – in other words, students who were very similar academically.

Imberman said the marginal students in the gifted and talented program showed no improvement in test scores over the non-qualifying students in any of the five subjects.

The study also looked at gifted and talented students who were picked in a lottery for a "magnet" program, which emphasizes a more intensive, specialized curriculum. The researchers compared [test scores](#) of the magnet students who won the lottery to the gifted and talented students who lost the lottery and found no significant difference in four of the

five subjects: math, reading, social studies and language arts. The magnet students did show improvement in science.

Provided by Michigan State University

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