

Boarding schools only boost the academic performance of strong students

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Sending disadvantaged children to boarding school does not automatically lead to an improvement in their academic performance, an economist from the University of Warwick has discovered.

Dr Clement de Chaisemartin's investigation found that while stronger students benefit from excellent study conditions, the effects of being away from home prevent weaker children from thriving.

The disruption of boarding has a negative impact on these pupils, who reported lower levels of wellbeing to researchers – a likely explanation for their lack of [academic progress](#).

His results have been published in a working paper, Ready for boarding? The effects of a boarding school for disadvantaged students, today (5 February) by the University of Warwick's Department of Economics.

A number of programmes have recently been implemented in the US, in France, and in the UK to provide places at boarding schools for disadvantaged children. "Policy makers seem to believe that sending disadvantaged students away from their home environments will increase their academic performance. Our investigation shows it's not quite as straightforward as that," said Dr de Chaisemartin.

Together with fellow scholars Luc Behaghel and Marc Gurgand, from the Paris School of Economics, he followed 395 children from low-performing French schools, who all applied for places at one of the

country's internats d'excellence, or 'boarding schools of excellence', in Paris – which teaches students from poor families for free.

As there were more applicants than seats, a lottery was conducted to determine which applicants got admitted to the boarding school.

There were 258 successful applicants or lottery 'winners' while the other 137 lottery 'losers' continued at regular schools, acting as a control group for the study. At the end of each academic year the different groups were given cognitive and non-cognitive tests.

"After the first year, the test scores were very similar for both groups, however after two years the boarders outperformed the lottery losers who had stayed in regular schools on the maths test, with a sizeable difference in performance," explained Dr de Chaisemartin.

"But we found this positive effect was mostly seen in students who were already doing well in maths before they started boarding. The students who were weaker to begin with did not seem to benefit from being there – even after two years there were no test score gains among them."

The study found that boarders experienced substantially better study conditions, benefited from smaller classes and reported much lower levels of classroom disruption. Students also praised the engagement of their teachers.

But Dr de Chaisemartin and his team identified concerns about the wellbeing of students at the boarding school.

He added: "It's clearly a huge upheaval for children to move away from their friends and family to a place where they face higher academic demands. That's probably why the test results after the first year don't seem to show much of a difference when compared to children at

regular schools – because they need this time to adapt.

"One year after they had entered the boarding school, the general well-being of boarders was lower than that of lottery losers. After two years, there were no differences anymore. The initial negative shock was larger for weaker pupils, while the recovery was faster for the stronger ones. Our theory is that the stronger pupils, once they've adjusted to their new environment, tend to excel in the boarding school. Adjusting is harder for weaker students, and that might be the reason why they do not make academic progress.

"Overall, boarding seems to be a disruptive form of schooling and it doesn't automatically lead to better [academic performance](#). Once they've adjusted, stronger students make substantial progress, but for weaker students boarding school might not be a suitable approach.

"Similar programs granting access to boarding schools to [disadvantaged students](#) are currently being implemented in the UK. Studies evaluating these programs will tell whether the results we found in France continue to apply across the channel."

More information: "Ready for boarding? The effects of a boarding school for disadvantaged students." [www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/eco ...
ady_for_boarding.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/eco...ady_for_boarding.pdf)

Provided by University of Warwick

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