

## Do schooling reforms improve long-term health?

It is difficult to find consistent evidence that schooling reforms provide health benefits

Keywords: schooling reform, long-term health, local treatment effect

### ELEVATOR PITCH

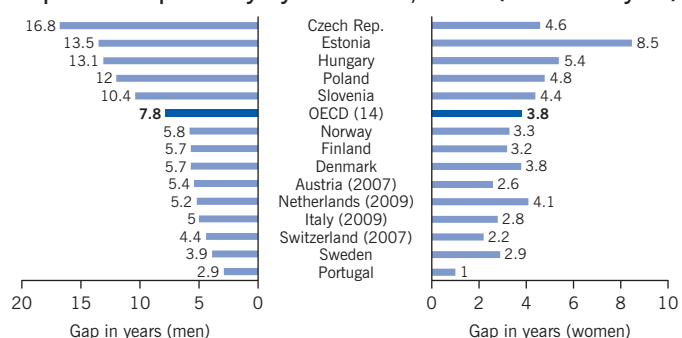
A statistical association between more education and better health outcomes has long been observed, but in the absence of experimental data researchers have struggled to find a causal effect. Schooling reforms such as raising school leaving age, which have been enacted in many countries, can be viewed as a form of natural experiment and provide a possible method of identifying such an effect. However, the balance of evidence so far is that these reforms have had little impact on long-term health. Thus, policymakers should be cautious before anticipating a health effect when introducing reforms of this nature.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### Pros

- + Compulsory schooling reforms provide opportunities to measure the causal links between education and health outcomes such as reduced mortality and morbidity.
- + Some studies suggest that schooling reforms have provided additional health benefits in some cases.
- + Early research using country-level variation in the introduction of compulsory schooling laws shows a causal effect from education to health, possibly arising from delaying engagement in hard physical labor.
- + There is evidence of an effect of compulsory schooling reforms on cognitive functioning, which may be reflected in reduced incidence of dementia.

#### Gap in life expectancy by education, 2010 (or nearest year)



Note: Gap in expected years of life remaining at age 30 between adults with tertiary and below upper secondary education.

Source: OECD, Health At A Glance, 2013. Online at: <https://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/Health-at-a-Glance-2013.pdf>

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#### Cons

- More sophisticated research designs with better quality data suggest no causal link from schooling reforms to health.
- The conditions required to achieve health benefits from compulsory schooling reforms may no longer be present in most developed countries.
- If compliance with the reform is weak, then only modest health effects can be expected.
- The impact of reforms appears to be local and context specific, which delimits the generalizability of any observed effects.
- Existing evidence is ambiguous enough that it cannot be assumed that educational reforms will have positive health effects.

### AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

Changes in compulsory schooling laws allow to investigate causal relations between education and health. Results have varied, however, with some studies showing a causal link between such reforms and subsequent health outcomes such as improved longevity and reduced dementia and others showing no causal link at all. Results appear to be sensitive to when the reforms were implemented, the use of individual versus aggregate data, and the type of research design adopted. The lack of uniformity in results suggests that it cannot be guaranteed that compulsory schooling reforms will necessarily have health benefits.