

Uma Casey
Entry essay

My research process was long and tedious. From inception to submission, I was constantly searching for literature and data to support, or disprove, my hypothesis. After I decided that I wanted to research the economics of public school education in my hometown of Oakland, CA, I immediately began searching for data. I searched for data, rather than literature first because of the demarcation in time that I chose. My original time period was 1995-2007 so I assumed that it might be a challenge to find all of the data points I needed. I found some school district websites and sent emails to the records keeper to request specific data I wanted and decided to continue with my literature search. I originally planned to use the SAT as my test and originally requested SAT score data. I received an email back from the records keeper that data that far back was unavailable and useful SAT data points could not be shared with me, anyway. As I read articles for my literature review, I came to the conclusion that STAR tests would be the most useful test, not the SAT, considering the district and other requirements that the test fulfilled, per other research done on this topic. After many hours of scouring the web and the school district sites I was able to find a historical archive of some school district data. But, I was unable to find STAR data for my original time period. So, I changed my time period to all the years that STAR data was available. However, as I was aggregating the data in Excel, I found many gaps in the data, necessitating yet another change in time frame. Although there was not a wealth of literature specifically on funding and finance reforms' relationship with public education, my greatest challenge was certainly trying to find the necessary district and state testing and financial data to analyze for my hypothesis. There were many times that I grew increasingly frustrated at my inability to find the numbers I needed, and it was certainly the personal nature of this research that gave me the motivation to continue searching. Fortunately, after many adjustments were made, district and government websites proved fruitful and gave me sufficient data to perform a correlation analysis. I learned a great deal from this process, most notably that some flexibility in parameters is often necessary to complete research and that early uncertainty regarding parameters hinders the data gathering process. If I were to do this thesis over again, I would still begin with a perfunctory data search to make sure that there is a district website with the potential to provide data, but I would not dig deeper or place any data requests until I had fully immersed myself in my literature review. If I had focused on literature before data, I would have been able to identify the test I needed and other data points earlier. If I had done so, I would not have wasted time searching for useless data prematurely, and instead been able to search for the data I actually needed with direction and clarity.