



## GETTING PARENTS INVOLVED

Parental involvement campaigns significantly increased parents' interaction with schools and improved student behavior in France, and effects spilled over onto classmates whose parents did not participate in the program.



**P**roblems of truancy, violence, and discipline can contribute to many schoolchildren in industrialized societies graduating from school without mastering basic skills. Increasing parental involvement has been widely touted as a means of overcoming these difficulties, and significant amounts of funding are available to programs which promise to increase parental participation. However, it is still not clear whether parental involvement programs are a direct cause of children's success, or whether these programs simply selectively attract parents who are already motivated to be engaged in their children's success. **Can parental involvement be used as a lever to improve educational outcomes in underprivileged areas of France?**

An evaluation by J-PAL Europe affiliated professors Marc Gurgand and Eric Maurin, along with Francesco Avisati and Nina Guyon, sought to test whether participation programs have a meaningful impact on parents' involvement, and whether increased parental involvement actually improves students' educational outcomes. In an underprivileged educational district near Paris, 37 schools offered a program of group meetings and discussions designed to make parents aware of the structure of the school and the staff who were available to support them. After allowing parents to volunteer for these meetings, researchers selected a random group of classes from which volunteer parents would be accepted.

- **Parents who attended meetings were significantly more likely to understand local schools and be involved in their children's education.** They were more likely to make individual appointments with teachers and to attend traditional parent-teacher conferences.
- **Children in classes where parents attended group meetings were absent from school less frequently and were more likely to receive high disciplinary marks.** There was a 16 percent reduction in student absenteeism in classes where parents attended the meetings, and all children in these classes were 12 percent more likely to receive honors than their counterparts in comparison classes.
- **The behavior of all students in the selected classes improved, including those whose parents did not participate.** Although parents in the selected classes who did not attend meetings were no more likely to be involved with their children's schoolwork, their children were still absent less often and 14 percent more likely to receive top disciplinary marks than children in comparison classes.

## EVALUATION

**T**he school district of Créteil is a densely populated area of suburbs east of Paris with large populations of recent and second-generation immigrants. A recent survey showed that more than 20 percent of the local population are first-generation immigrants, and many are relatively poor. These parents face numerous barriers to navigating the hierarchical education system: many speak limited French and work far away from local schools. In this environment, researchers sought to discover whether increasing parental awareness and involvement has the potential to improve children's educational success in local middle schools.



At the beginning of the 2008–2009 school year, parents in 200 sixth-grade classes were asked to volunteer for a program of three facilitated discussions with the school staff on how to successfully navigate the transition to middle school. Around 1,000 parents (22 percent of the total) volunteered for the program, understanding that, because of the experimental nature of the program, only some volunteers would be selected to participate.

In a randomly selected 102 of the 200 classes, the parents who had previously volunteered were invited to participate in the discussions. By randomly selecting a subset of all the parents willing to participate in the program, the researchers were able to compare parents who participated to a valid comparison group: parents who would have participated in the program had they been given the opportunity. This allowed researchers to separate the effects of the program from the effect of parents' preexisting involvement in their children's education.



Discussions were facilitated by the school head, drawing upon precise guidelines designed by the district's educational experts and were open to all volunteer parents in the 102 selected classes. Facilitators were given standard materials, including a DVD explaining the purpose of various school personnel and documents explaining the functions of the various school offices.

Meetings took place in November and December of 2008, and data on parental involvement, student behavior, and test scores was collected several months later at the end of the academic year. Overall, the meetings emphasized the following:

- a) All parents can help their children, regardless of their familiarity with the school.
- b) Work outside of school is extremely important for success.
- c) Parents should be involved in their children's homework.
- d) Children need to feel that their parents understand how their school functions and care that they adhere to the demands of teachers and administrators.

# RESULTS

**Take-up of the program was modest.** About 22 percent of parents volunteered for the program. In the selected classes, around 58 percent of these attended at least one of the discussions, and 16 percent attended all three. This imperfect attendance means that the significant differences observed between classes were driven by the small proportion of parents who actually attended meetings.

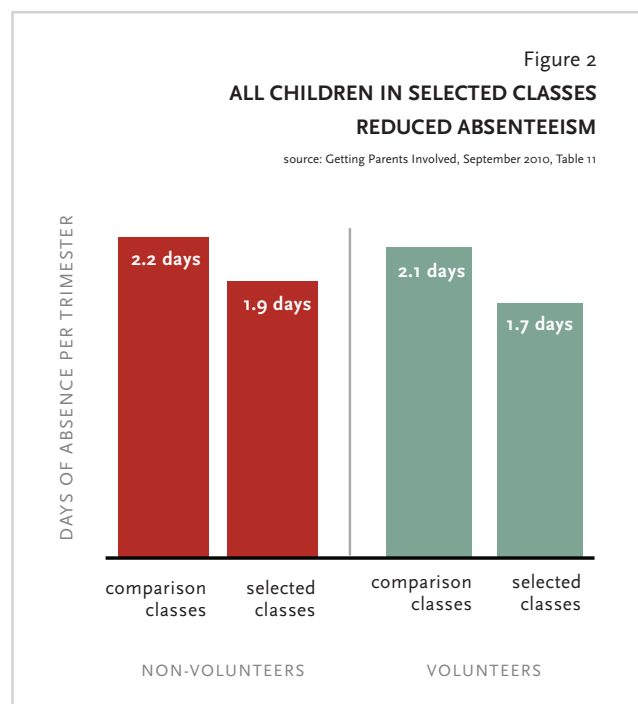
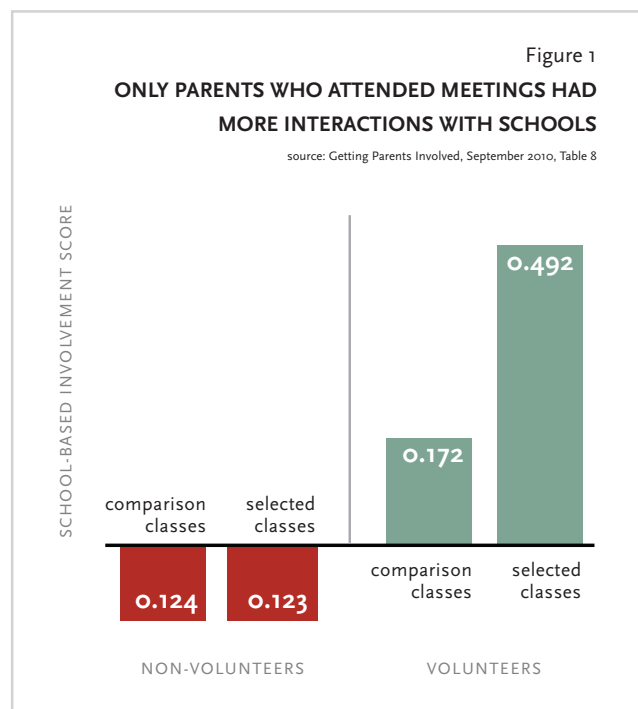
Overall, there were no strong observable differences between volunteer and non-volunteer parents. Parents of boys and girls volunteered equally, and the children's previous test scores were similar. Volunteers tended to be slightly wealthier than their non-volunteer counterparts, but the differences were small: they were 3 percent more likely to have white-collar occupations and were 4 percent more likely to be from a two-parent household.

## Parents who attended meetings became significantly more involved with schools.

Parents in the selected classes who had volunteered to attend changed their behavior significantly in response to the program. These parents were more likely to make individual appointments with teachers and more likely to participate in parents' organizations. On a questionnaire of their involvement in children's education at home, these parents also scored one-tenth of a standard deviation higher than their volunteer counterparts in comparison classes. This change in parental involvement is of the same magnitude as the initial gap in involvement between blue-collar and white-collar families. However, there were no changes in parental involvement among parents in the selected classes who had not volunteered for the meetings (see Figure 1).

**All students in selected classes improved their behavior.** This increase in parental involvement caused a large improvement in student behavior, and this improvement was seen even in classmates whose parents were not volunteers and did not attend meetings. Children of volunteer parents in selected classes were 34 percent less likely to be sanctioned for disciplinary reasons than children of volunteer parents in non-selected classes, and children of non-volunteer parents in selected classes were 19 percent less likely to be sanctioned than their comparison class counterparts. Similar results were seen in other measures of behavior improvement (see Figure 2). These improvements in behavior also had a limited but significant impact on children's test scores in French, though these impacts were concentrated among the children of volunteer parents.

The fact that these benefits were enjoyed even by students whose parents did not participate in meetings contradicts the view that parental involvement campaigns are bound to benefit only the small fraction of actively participating families.



## Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab

### J-PAL GLOBAL

Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
30 Wadsworth St., E53-320  
Cambridge, MA 02142, USA

### J-PAL AFRICA

SALDRU, School of Economics  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch 7701, South Africa

### J-PAL EUROPE

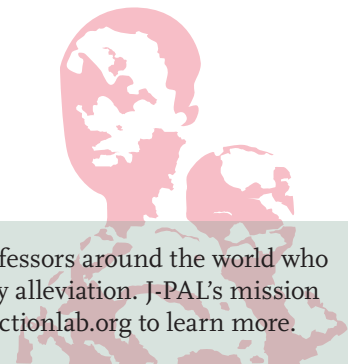
Paris School of Economics  
66 bis Avenue Jean Moulin  
75014 Paris, France

### J-PAL LATIN AMERICA

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile  
Instituto de Economía  
Av. Vicuna Mackenna 4860  
Santiago, Chile

### J-PAL SOUTH ASIA

Institute for Financial Management and Research  
IIT Madras Research Park  
A1, 10th Floor, Kanagam Road  
Taramani, Chennai 600 113, India



**About J-PAL** The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a network of affiliated professors around the world who are united by their use of Randomized Evaluations (REs) to answer questions critical to poverty alleviation. J-PAL's mission is to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is based on scientific evidence. Visit [www.povertyactionlab.org](http://www.povertyactionlab.org) to learn more.

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## POLICY LESSONS

- **Directed parent discussion groups were an effective policy tool for increasing parental involvement, even in an underprivileged area.** In just three evening meetings held over a two-month period, parents gained considerable knowledge about the functioning of local schools and appeared to use this knowledge to better support their children's education.
- **Increasing parental involvement and awareness of school structure improved student behavior and positively impacted learning.** From the parents' perspective the program was time limited, but for their children the program corresponded to a long-term change in the attitudes of their parents.
- **Even though only a small fraction of parents chose to participate in this program, the benefits of their involvement were felt by all children in the classroom.** While parents who did not attend meetings showed no changes in involvement, their children still benefited from the improved attitudes of their peers whose parents had attended meetings.

**FOR FURTHER READING:** FRANCESCO AVVISATI, MARC GURGAND, NINA GUYON, AND ERIC MAURIN. "GETTING PARENTS INVOLVED: A FIELD EXPERIMENT IN DEPRIVED SCHOOLS." *CEPR DISCUSSION PAPER 8020*, 2010.