Parent Empowerment Through Primary School Community Grants in Niger

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Education

Location: Niger

Sample: 1,000 primary schools

Target group: Parents Primary schools Students Teachers

Outcome of interest: Enrollment and attendance Student learning

Intervention type: Community-driven development Parental engagement School-based inputs

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Research Papers: Willing but Unable? Short-term Experimental Evidence on Parent Empowerment and ...

Partner organization(s): Government of Niger National Ministry of Education, World Bank

Giving communities power over school management and spending decisions has been a favored strategy to increase school quality, but its effectiveness may be limited by weak capacity and low authority. Researchers examined the short-term responses of a grant to school committees and find that overall, parents increased participation and responsibility, but these efforts did not improve overall school quality. Enrollment at the lowest grades increased and school resources improved, but teacher absenteeism increased, and there was no impact on test scores. The findings imply that strategies to improve quality by empowering parents should take levels of community authority and capacity into account: even when communities are willing to work to improve their schools, they may not be able to do so.

Policy issue

In recent years school enrollment has risen dramatically in developing countries; however, the quality of education is often low. In the face of significant resource constraints, both financial and in terms of human resources, governments and NGOs have increasingly looked to local beneficiary participation as a means to improve service quality. Local administration and oversight puts power into the hands of those with the most interest in seeing improvements in service delivery and the best information about current education quality. Community-based management policies have been widely adopted throughout Africa over the past decade in countries including Burkina Faso, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, and Uganda. Despite such enthusiasm for participation programs, however, the empirical question of whether, and under what conditions, community participation can actually make services work better remains unresolved.

Context of the evaluation

Niger has made significant strides in increasing access to education in the past decade, with primary enrollment doubling from 2000 to 2008 and net enrollment increasing from 27 percent in 2000 to 63 percent in 2012. Yet the country still faces considerable challenges with regards to access, rates of primary school completion, and the quality and management of the educational

system. Low population density, vast distances, and limited transportation, information, and communications infrastructure makes supervision of primary schools by the central government very costly, and the transmission of timely, local information to the central authorities for planning purposes is challenging. To address this problem, in 2006, the Ministry of Education introduced school committees (Committees de Gestion Scolaire, or COGES) in all primary schools. The committee consists of six members, including the director of the school, as well as locally elected community members. The committee is responsible for monitoring teacher attendance and performance, and managing both financial and material resources, such as the purchase of textbooks and supplies. To spur communities to take a more active role in the management of schools, the Ministry of Education also introduced a pilot project that distributed yearly cash grants to the school.



Primary school students in Niger. Photo: Pierre de Galbert | J-PAL/IPA

Pierre de Galbert

Details of the intervention

In collaboration with the Niger Ministry of Education and the World Bank, researchers used a randomized evaluation to measure the impact of the grants on community participation. One thousand schools in the regions of Tahoua and Zinder were randomly selected into treatment and comparison groups. The 500 schools in the treatment group each received an annual lump sum based on the number of classrooms in the school, with an average of US$209 per school (US$1.83 per student). All 500 schools in the treatment group received a general letter informing them of the grant program and its objectives, including general guidelines on the use of the grants. The specific project to be supported by the grants was left open to the schools.

Researchers collected administrative data from each primary school on enrollment, teacher characteristics, school facilities and resources, school performance, and community characteristics. To supplement this data, an evaluation survey was administered

to school staff and two members of the school committee at both treatment and comparison schools. The program was originally intended to last three years (with three cycles of grant disbursement), but a political coup occurred in 2009 and the evaluation ended after only one year.

Results and policy lessons

Overall, the results suggest that parents were willing to increase their participation and take more responsibility in school management, but educational quality did not improve in a meaningful way as a result of this participation.

The grant program had an overall positive impact on parents' involvement and responsibility: communities with the grant engaged in more participation actions (such as going to meetings and managing school supplies) and took over more responsibilities, although the average community did not engage in supervising teacher presence. The impact on school management is mixed: cooperation between school stakeholders improved, but overall accountability did not change, and spending shows both expected and unexpected changes: there was more spending in infrastructure and health resources, but also school festivals and playground equipment, and, most unexpectedly, investment in agricultural projects which were, probably, non-educational but intended to make a profit.

These changes were matched by an increase in participation in the lowest grade levels. The program led to a 1 percentage point decrease in Grade 1 dropouts and a 10 percent increase in enrollment of students in Grade 2 the following year. However, at least in the short run, these changes were not accompanied by any improvements in student learning. The grant also led to a 4 percentage point (5 percent) decrease in teacher effort, which the researchers attributed to the fact that some teachers might have been reluctant to collaborate with parents, especially when the average school committee did not spend the grant on expenses supporting the teachers (teacher housing, furniture, supplies, guide books, or salary).

Researchers found that more educated school committees made more contributions, invested more in infrastructure, and took charge of monitoring teacher attendance in response to the grant. However, greater parental monitoring did not lead to any changes in teacher attendance. Second, in one-teacher schools, school committees used more of the grant for expenses that directly benefitted the teacher, which led to a significant increase in teacher attendance.

Together, these results show that authority and capacity are important prerequisites for parents to undertake the more difficult aspects of management, that an alliance between parents and teachers may work better than a confrontational relationship, and that it should not be taken for granted that parents will always make optimal spending decisions to increase quality.

Beasley, Elizabeth and Elise Huillery. “Willing but Unable: Short-Term Experimental Evidence on Parent Empowerment and School Quality.” Working Paper January 2015.