School Communication Strategies and School Outcomes in France

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Sector(s): Education

Location: Educational district of Créteil, which includes all suburbs to the east of Paris

Sample: Families of 5,107 pupils from 37 middle schools

Target group: Parents Secondary schools Students

Outcome of interest: Enrollment and attendance Student learning Aggressive behavior Attitudes and norms

Intervention type: Information Training Parental engagement

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Partner organization(s): Fonds d'expérimentation pour la jeunesse (FEJ), Government of France Ministry for Youth, Rectorat de l'academie de Créteil

Parental involvement in a child's education is widely believed to bolster school performance, but many parents face barriers to supporting their children's education. In France, researchers evaluated the impact of various school communication strategies designed to encourage parents to participate in their children's schooling. They found that personalized invitations increased parental participation in school meetings, especially for parents of low-performing children and from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Policy issue

Parental involvement in their children's education is widely believed to bolster school performance, but many parents face barriers to supporting their children at school. If they are unaware of the school's structure or unsure what role they can play, they may be less involved in their children's schooling. Previous evaluations, such as Awareness Campaign for Parents of Middle School Students in France, have shown that parent-school meetings designed to inform parents of the school structure and of the staff available to support them can increase parental involvement and improve student behavior. While the results from this first study are promising, more research is needed to investigate ways to increase parental participation in these programs.

Context of the evaluation

The school district of Créteil encompasses all suburbs to the east and north of Paris, France. It is a densely populated area with high proportions of recent immigrants and second-generation immigrants, and high rates of unemployment (14 percent in 2011, compared to 9 percent nationally). Around one-third of the schools are located in "priority education" zones, a term given to historically disadvantaged areas. In this context, there are multiple barriers to parental involvement in schools. Parents may lack the time to participate in school events, underestimate the benefits of participating in school meetings, or lack information about what the school expects from them. Parents, especially those from poor socio-economic backgrounds, may feel that invitations to

participate in school events are a mere formality.



Presenting schooling options to parents in Paris, France.

Photo credit: Aude Guerrucci, J-PAL

Details of the intervention

Researchers investigated the impact of different communication strategies designed to encourage parents to participate in a program to increase parental involvement in education, ultimately improving pupil outcomes.

37 middle schools in the suburbs of Paris held parent-school meetings, and while all parents could attend the meetings, researchers varied the intensity with which the meetings were advertised. First, researchers varied the proportion of parents within each class who would receive one of several types of personalized invitations. In “low-intensity” classes 50 percent of parents received a personalized invitation, and in “high-intensity” classes 90 percent of parents received a personalized invitation. Then, among the families assigned to receive a personalized invitation, researchers randomly assigned each to one of several different treatments:

1. *Letter only*: At the beginning of the year, parents received a letter from the school district head presenting the program and inviting parents to participate;
2. *Letter and DVD*: At the beginning of the year, parents received the same letter from the school district head and a multilingual short DVD presenting the program and inviting the parents to participate;
3. *Text message reminder*: Parents received a text message one day before each meeting encouraging them to attend;

4. *Letter, DVD, and texts*: Parents received the letter from the school district head, the multilingual DVD, and text messages before each meeting.
5. *Letter, DVD, texts, and phone call*: Parents received the letter, the DVD, and text message reminders. In addition, they received a call from the school district, where the parent were explained the program directly and invited to participate.

The pupils (and their parents) in each class who did not receive any form of personalized invitation served as the comparison group.

At the end of the school year, researchers collected survey and administrative data on individual school performance, behavior problems, and absenteeism for all students, as well as on parenting practices.

Results and policy lessons

Personalized invitations increased parental participation in school meetings, especially for parents of low-performing children and from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Personalized invitations increased participation in the parent-school meetings program: In high-intensity classes, where 87 percent of parents received a personalized invitation, 16 percent of parents attended the meetings, a 5 percentage point increase compared to low-intensity classes, where just 52 percent of parents received a personalized invitation and 11 percent of parents attended. Had all the families been personally invited, attendance to the school meetings would have increased by roughly 15 percentage points. Similarly, within a given class, 17 percent of parents who received a personalized invitation attended the meeting, 12 percentage points higher than the participation rate of parents who did not receive a personalized invitation (just 5 percent).

Personalized invitations had a greater effect for parents of low-performing children and for parents from a poor socio-economic background: In low-intensity classes, parents of low-performing children and parents from a poor socio-economic background were less likely to attend the meetings than other parents. However, they were particularly responsive to personalized invitations, and in high-intensity classes, their participation reached levels similar to those of other parents. These results suggest that parents who were initially less involved with the school required more explicit invitations to take part in school activities.

Some communication strategies were more effective than others: Sending the letter or the letter with a DVD had no impact on participation rates, but text message reminders significantly increased attendance at the meetings. Text messages were even more effective when they were accompanied by a phone call from the school district.

The behavior of all students in high-intensity classes improved, including those whose parents did not participate: Students in high-intensity classes were more likely to receive top marks for behavior, to participate in class, and to do their homework than students in low-intensity classes.

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