Involving Parents in their Children's Education in Chile

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Education

J-PAL office: J-PAL Latin America and the Caribbean

Location: Santiago, Chile

Sample: Over 21,000 students in 62 schools

Target group: Parents Students

Outcome of interest: Enrollment and attendance Student learning

Intervention type: Social networks Training Soft skills

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0000200

Partner organization(s): Fundación CAP, Focus, Estudios y Consultorías

While researchers have identified parental involvement as a key factor to students' success, there is little rigorous evidence on the impacts of parental involvement programs. Can a multi-dimensional program enhance parental involvement and student outcomes? Programa Aprender en Familia (Family Learning or PAF), a program implemented in elementary public schools attended by poor students in Chile, led to improved parental involvement and improved relationships between parents, students, and teachers. Results were largest for younger students (second through fourth grades) and the second cohort of schools to receive the program.

Policy issue

Research demonstrates that students with more involved parents have better educational and behavioral outcomes, and that families' socioeconomic status may affect student performance more than the resources available at school.[1] Family characteristics play an essential role not only in academic achievement, but also in outcomes later in life. However, often parents do not know how to best support their children, and schools often do not set clear expectations for parental involvement. There are few programs that promote these parent-child relationships, and there is little rigorous evidence of their impacts. Can a multi-dimensional program enhance parental involvement and student outcomes?

Context of the evaluation

The evaluation took place in 62 elementary public schools in five municipalities in Chile: Vallenar, Coquimbo, La Granja, San Bernardo, and Talcahuano. These schools are in relatively poor areas: of the five participating municipalities, in 2011 four had poverty rates above the national average of 14.4 percent,[2], ranging from 15.9 percent in La Granja to 19.5 percent in Talcahuano.[3] Between 67 and 89.6 percent of students in these schools were considered of a vulnerable economic status. The program was offered in pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade classrooms and lasted for three years, meaning that participating students were in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade at the start of the evaluation and in first through eighth grade at the end.



Students at a participating elementary school

Photo credit: Pablo Izquierdo, J-PAL

Details of the intervention

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to measure the impact of a parental involvement program on student performance and perceptions of parental involvement.

Programa Aprender en Familia (Family Learning or PAF) was a multidimensional program run by the CAP Foundation. It lasted three years and consisted of various activities designed to strengthen parental involvement in their children's learning and in their children's schools. These activities fell into three main categories:

1. Establishing a plan and training teachers on how to involve parents in their children's education and improve communication channels with them.
2. Conducting six "Parent School" sessions per year to teach parenting skills and create a space for parents to share their experiences with other parents. Session topics varied by grade level and changed slightly over the three years of the program. Themes included family identity, supporting reading and learning, family relationships, drugs and alcohol, rules and limits, parental roles, networks, and communication.
3. Hosting community-wide cultural and athletic activities to strengthen social ties.

Researchers randomly assigned 26 schools to receive the PAF program and 36 schools to serve as comparison, with the first cohort of schools beginning the evaluation in early 2012 and the second cohort beginning in September 2012.

Researchers collected data at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the program. They measured student, parent, and teacher perceptions on a range of topics via surveys. They also examined student test scores and attendance.

Results and policy lessons

Researchers found that the program had a high take-up rate and improved students', parents', and teachers' perceptions of parent involvement with their children. These results were strongest for younger students, particularly for those in second through fourth grade in the second cohort of schools.

Take-Up: On average, schools conducted 5.3 of the six planned sessions per year and 65 percent of parents attended the Parent School sessions.

Student Perceptions and Performance: Younger students (grades two through four) in the program reported that their parents were more involved in their learning, and reported feeling more engaged in reading assignments, seeing and experiencing less violence, and having higher self-esteem. They also attended around two more days of school per year, compared to students in schools that did not receive the program. Among the second cohort language scores on a national, standardized exam improved by 6.7 points, from a baseline of 224.7 points (a 3 percent increase), and math scores improved by 6.1 points, from a baseline of 227.1 points (a 2.7 percent increase) in 2015 at all grade levels.

Parent Perceptions: The program improved parents' perceptions of their own involvement in their children's education, especially for parents of younger students in the program's second cohort. For example, parents in participating schools were 2.4 percentage points more likely to agree to the statement, "If my child's grades get worse, I will spend more time helping him/her," from a base of 69.53 percent.

Teacher Perceptions: Teachers, especially those teaching younger students in the second cohort, also reported positive effects from the program. Teachers in treatment schools noted greater adherence to school requirements, better cooperation between parents, and better parent support of their children.

Higher Gains for Younger Students and Second Cohort: Younger students and those in the second cohort reported higher overall gains from the program. Stronger outcomes for younger students might be due to the program having an impact more quickly among younger students, more impressionable family customs among younger students, higher parent engagement, and curriculum that is more relevant to younger students. The second cohort's stronger impacts may have resulted from greater teacher involvement in the second iteration of the program or from improvements in program administration over time.

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1. Hoxby, Caroline. 2001. "If Families Matter Most, Where Do Schools Come In?" In *A Primer on American Schools,* by Terry M. Moe, 89-125. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

2. Encuesta de Caracterización Socioeconómica Nacional. 2011. "Indicadores de Pobreza." Accessed October 10, 2016.

3. Ministerio de Desarrollo Social de Chile. 2013. "Incidencia de la Pobreza a nivel Comunal, según Metodología de Estimación para Áreas Pequeñas. Chile 2009 y 2011." *Serie Informes Comunales* 1:1-18. Accessed October 5, 2016.