Empowering Parents to Improve Education Quality in Rural Mexico

Researchers:

Paul Gertler

Harry Anthony Patrinos

Eduardo Rodríguez-Oreggia

Sector(s): Education, Political Economy and Governance

Location: Mexico

Sample: 250 schools

Target group: Parents Students Rural population

Outcome of interest: Dropout and graduation Empowerment Student learning

Intervention type: Cash transfers Training

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0006424

Data:

Partner organization(s): Mexico, Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo (CONAFE), Spanish Impact Evaluation Fund, World Bank, Bank Netherlands Partnership Program (BNPP)

Parental involvement plays an important role in children's educational outcomes. Yet, parents often face substantial challenges in supporting their children's education. Researchers in Mexico evaluated the impact of providing parent associations with larger grants and more information on educational outcomes. Providing information to parent associations reduced students' disciplinary actions in schools without improving students' test scores. Meanwhile, larger grants did not improve educational outcomes.

Policy issue

Parental involvement is influential in shaping children's educational outcomes, but parents can face challenges in supporting their children's education. Many parents do not know their children's learning levels and do not have the necessary time and mental energy to support them. Conversely, schools often assume that parents can easily engage with teachers and administrators, failing to fully consider income, cultural, and linguistic differences. This misunderstanding can lead to lower quality school-home relations and the exclusion of vulnerable households from school resources.

Parental involvement programs, also commonly known as family engagement programs, aim to improve student outcomes by strengthening relationships between schools and households. Prior evidence suggests that parental involvement programs can reduce students' disciplinary infractions without improving their cognitive skills. However, non-cognitive skills such as character, goals, and motivations may be key to explaining the long-term gains of other early childhood education interventions.[1]

Can parental involvement programs help even disparities in educational outcomes between less-resourced indigenous schools and more-resourced general schools?

Context of the evaluation

Since 1996, the Government of Mexico has run Apoyo a la Gestión Escolar (AGE), a program to increase parental involvement in primary schools. AGE has two key components: one financial and one informational. In the financial component, the government provides an annual US$500-700 grant to primary school parent associations, groups which exist in all schools. Parent associations can spend the grant on school infrastructure, supplies, and activities, but not salaries. In the information component, the government provides guidance on how parents can involve themselves in their children's education through five one hour-long interactive sessions. The sessions cover topics like the importance of parental involvement in education, how to become more involved in school decision-making, or resources available in the community. Each school appoints a trained advisor to facilitate the sessions, usually the school principal.

Researchers evaluated the impacts of AGE in primary schools in four states with a sizable indigenous population: Chiapas, Guerrero, Puebla, and Yucatan. Mexico's indigenous population has faced discrimination and social exclusion, resulting in disparities between non-indigenous and indigenous students in educational achievement. Public schools predominantly serving non-indigenous families, or general schools, have historically received substantially more financial resources from the central government than indigenous schools. In primary school, indigenous students are 2.5 times less likely than their non-indigenous classmates to pass proficiency exams.

Students in grades three, four, and five participated in this study and about half were girls. Parents in the study report low levels of education, with most reporting primary school as their highest level of education attained. Teachers are substantially more educated than parents on average and most teachers have at least a teaching college degree.

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Details of the intervention

Across four states, researchers partnered with the Government of Mexico to run two randomized evaluations of a national education program supporting parent associations with grants and information, Apoyo a la Gestión Escolar (AGE).

The first evaluation involved 250 indigenous-serving and general public schools that had previously received AGE programming and took place between 2007 and 2010. Researchers randomly assigned schools to one of two groups:

1. *Comparison group*: 125 schools received "standard" AGE programming, which included a US$500-700 grant for the parent association and the usual information sessions facilitated by a community advisor.
2. *Doubled grant group*: 125 schools received the standard AGE information programming, plus a larger grant of US$1,000-1,400 for the parent association. The purpose of doubling the size of the grant was to evaluate if this would increase parental involvement and improve student educational outcomes. The value of the doubled grant is still relatively small, amounting to about US$7.5 per student per year, or less than 0.07% of the annual household budget for minimum wage workers.

The second evaluation involved 180 general public schools that had never participated in AGE and took place between 2009 and 2010. Researchers randomly assigned schools to one of two groups:

1. *Comparison group*: 100 schools continued with the status quo and did not receive AGE programming.
2. *Information group*: 80 schools received the standard AGE information intervention, but did not receive any grants to parent associations in order to measure the effect of the information alone.

Results and policy lessons

Doubling grants to parent associations did not increase parental involvement at school or home, though it did help parents exert more control over school decisions during the first year. The double grant intervention did not change parents' involvement in school activities, nor did it lead to changes in meetings with teachers to discuss student performance. In the first year of the intervention, doubling grants increased parental involvement in school decision making by 15.3 percentage points (26 percent). This effect faded quickly, suggesting that double grants create only temporary change.

Information provision to parent associations substantially increased parental involvement at school and at home. Parents in schools that received the information intervention were 15 percentage points more likely to organize school activities (20 percent), 12.9 percentage points (17 percent) more likely to meet regularly with teachers to discuss student performance, and 7.3 percentage points (37 percent) more likely to help their children with schoolwork. These positive effects are large enough to close the gap in parenting practices between comparison group families attending historically under-resourced, primarily indigenous schools and families attending better-resourced, primarily non-indigenous schools. Parents who were already members of the parent associations drove the increases in at-school involvement, likely because parents who were not already members of the parent associations were largely prevented from participating in the first place by their work schedules.

Doubling grants to parent associations did not improve educational outcomes. Doubling grants did not change school progression rates, student test scores, or student behavior. These findings are consistent with the earlier result that the double grants intervention did not meaningfully improve parenting or teaching practices.

Providing information to parent associations reduced students' disciplinary actions in schools without improving students' test scores. Information provision reduced students' in-school disciplinary actions by 6.2 percentage points (a 24 percent decrease from a base of 25 percent).

The information intervention increased trust between parents and educators, while the grant intervention decreased trust. Double grants led to substantial decreases in parents' trust for teachers and teachers' trust for parents. The decline in trust may be due to

teachers' and parents' conflicting expectations around how additional funds should be distributed, as well as parents believing that teachers are failing to uphold their responsibility of supporting children's learning. This lack of trust may explain why increased parental involvement in school decision-making processes did not last. The information intervention increased parents' trust in teachers but had no impact on teachers' trust for parents. This result suggests that future information interventions may more effectively build trust and parent-teacher communication channels if they formally involve both parents and teachers.

In this study, a simple, low-cost (US$0.98 per student) information intervention provided at scale reduced student disciplinary actions by changing student and parent behaviors. In light of the pressing need to address historical discrimination and social exclusion of indigenous people, it is notable that the intervention closed gaps in parental involvement in education between families attending indigenous schools and families attending general schools.

Gertler, Paul, Harry Anthony Patrinos, and Eduardo Rodriguez-Oreggia. "Parental Empowerment in Mexico: Randomized Experiment of the ‰Û÷Apoyos a La Gestion Escolar (AGE)‰Ûª in Rural Primary Schools in Mexico." Working Paper, August 2012.

1. Kautz, Tim, James J. Heckman, Ron Diris, Bas ter Weel, and Lex Borghans. 2014. "Fostering and Measuring Skills: Improving Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skills to Promote Lifetime Success." Working Paper. National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w20749.