The Impact of a School-Based Management Program on Student Performance in Mexico

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Education

Location: Colima, Mexico

Sample: 98 primary schools

Target group: Primary schools

Outcome of interest: Student learning

Intervention type: Cash transfers Community-driven development Unconditional cash transfers

School-based management programs aim to improve learning outcomes by empowering those who best understand school challenges to identify solutions. However, few studies have employed experimental methods to determine whether such programs are effective. Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to determine the effect of a school-based management program, *Programa Escuelas de Calidad*, on student performance in Mexico. The program combined a cash grant with state support to design and carry out school improvement plans. The intervention did not have any effect on school performance after one year.

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Improving school performance, including test scores and attendance, remains a key challenge for communities in many countries. One strategy aims to shift decision-making power from the federal or state level to the schools themselves via school-based management (SBM) policies. Under these policies, parents, teachers and school directors oversee budget allocations, staff recruitment, curriculum development, and the procurement of educational materials, for example. Enabling local stakeholders who are most familiar with their school's challenges and potential solutions to address those problems may improve learning outcomes for several reasons. These include more effective resource use, greater administrative efficiency, increased participation of students and staff, and more balanced decision-making between parents and teachers. Studies have evaluated the effect of SBM programs on school performance, including on test scores, drop-out rates, and teacher and parental engagement; however, very few have employed experimental methods to evaluate SBM or the long-term effects of these programs.

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Building off of previous small-scale SBM initiatives, the Mexican federal government ran its most extensive SBM program, *Programa Escuelas de Calidad* (PEC), from 2001 to 2014. PEC aimed to encourage parents, teachers, and directors to design and carry out school improvement plans, known as School Strategic Transformation Plans, that responded to the needs of the school

and its students. Annually, PEC awarded a cash grant and technical assistance to implement School Strategic Transformation Plans in selected primary schools. The program expanded from 2,239 schools in 2001 to 55,432 schools in 2014.

An evaluation of the PEC program took place in the state of Colima, which ranks first among all Mexican states in the OECD's international achievement test, PISA. The state enacted a number of innovative education initiatives beginning in the late 1990s, including regional centers for teacher training (*Centros de Maestros Regionales* or CMR), annual assessments (*Concurso Escuelas de Calidad* or CEC), competitive testing of all new teachers, and an agreement with the teacher union to end teacher rotation during the school year. The state also created a mandatory SBM program, *Proyecto de Gestion Escolar* (PGE). Rolled-out in 1998 to all schools (excluding private institutions), PGE promoted the development and implementation of school improvement plans. PEC grants introduced in 2001 supported existing PGE programs in Colima.



Group of students in Mexico

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Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of the PEC program on school performance. Beginning in 2006, all primary schools in 10 municipalities were invited to submit their improvement plans; the highest quality plans were eligible for PEC benefits for one year. Benefits included a cash grant of between 50,000 and 150,000 Mexican pesos (approximately US$2,500 to US$7,600 in 2019) to enable schools to implement their improvement plan. Most of these funds were spent on school infrastructure, maintenance, or pedagogical materials, while the rest went to trainings for teachers, parents, or school directors. Additionally, schools received support from the state government in implementing their plan, managing funds, and providing professional development for teachers and principals as well as workshops to encourage parental participation.

Of the 98 schools that applied for PEC in 2006, 49 were randomly assigned to receive benefits through the PEC program and therefore comprised the treatment group. The other 49 schools were randomly assigned to not receive PEC benefits and formed the comparison group. Following the first year, all schools were required to re-apply to receive funding, regardless of whether they had previously been a beneficiary school or not. In the second and third years, 40 and 31 schools received a PEC grant, respectively, but were no longer randomly assigned to receive the grants.

Researchers evaluated school performance based on third through sixth grade Spanish and math test scores, which were drawn from the National Evaluation of Academic Achievement in School Centers (ENLACE) from 2005 to 2012.

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The PEC program did not improve overall learning outcomes in treatment schools after one year of implementation. Additionally, PEC had no impact on average math or Spanish scores, or on learning outcomes by grade. Given that many schools already had regular school autonomy practices in place, additional PEC programming did not meaningfully increase student learning, but only supported existing SBM practices. Additional analysis suggests that the benefits of the program might be realized with several years of exposure.

Researchers identified several implementation challenges of the PEC program that could be considered when designing SBM interventions going forward. For example, requiring schools to go through the highly bureaucratic process of re-applying each year may disincentivize them from participating. Additionally, schools that have the capacity to apply may not be those that are most in need of the PEC grant and support.

Based on these results, the Colima Secretariat of Education continued the school-based management program as designed. They also institutionalized evidence use that has informed the implementation and evaluation of their Specified-Attention Program for School Achievement Improvement (*Programa de Atencion Especıfica para la Mejora del Logro Educativo*, PAE); the program targeted the lowest performing schools.