The Impact of Informational Meetings on Secondary School Choice in Kenya

Sector(s): Education

Fieldwork: REMIT Kenya

Location: Busia County, Kenya

Sample: 3,000 students

Initiative(s): Post-Primary Education Initiative (PPE)

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Partner organization(s): REMIT Kenya, Busia County Department of Education, The Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA), University of California, Berkeley Center for African Studies, National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Secondary school completion can lead to large improvements in economic, health, and social outcomes, but many students and parents lack information on school distance, cost, and quality that may limit their ability to make an informed choice on which secondary school to attend. Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of short informational meetings with students and parents on secondary school choice. They found that these meetings increased students' and parents' knowledge of the application process and led students to pick lower-cost and more commutable schools.

Policy issue

While primary school completion rates have increased worldwide in recent years, secondary school completion remains relatively low, with many students dropping out before graduation. Choosing the right secondary school can greatly influence the likelihood of secondary school completion. For example, students may drop out if their secondary school is too far away, too expensive, or a poor academic match. Though many students have some choice in the secondary school they attend, they may not have access to high-quality information on schools' location, cost, or quality prior to making a selection. Furthermore, they might not clearly communicate their choice with parents, who may have different school preferences, prior to school selection. Existing research has largely focused on providing information regarding school quality or selectivity, but has rarely examined the role of student-parent communication in decision-making. Can short information meetings on secondary school options, either with students alone or with students and parents together, alter students' choice of secondary school?

Context of the evaluation

Kenyan students have a large array of choices on secondary schools to attend, but may not be informed of the relative merits of these choices. At the beginning of Grade 8, Kenyan students can apply for up to eleven secondary schools across four categories (national, extra county, county, and sub-county). These schools vary in location, performance, and cost. National schools are perceived as the most prestigious, but are generally higher cost, may not be located near students, and often have more difficult admission standards. Conversely, sub-county schools are generally day schools (whereas the others are typically boarding schools) and may be seen as less prestigious, though the quality of sub-county schools can vary, with many out-performing county and extra-county schools. They also cost an average of US$100 per year, compared to US$300-500 for the other three categories of schools, with schools generally becoming more expensive as they move from sub-county, to county, to extra county, to national. After making their selections, students take a qualifying exam and then receive a secondary school assignment based

on their exam scores, county-level quotas, and their listed preferences.

When students make their selections, they can view a 300-page document that lists all schools by name. However, this document does not contain information on school location, cost, average performance, or admission cut-offs. Students, parents, and teachers may have relatively low levels of knowledge on some of these characteristics; for instance, surveyed teachers could only accurately identify an average 1.65 of the five top-performing schools in their sub-county. Parents and students may also have low communication with one another on school choice: parents and children in the comparison group were aware of only about 30 percent of the other's school preferences, even after submitting the application form.

This study took place in five of the seven sub-counties of Busia County, Kenya. Households' average income in the sample was US$102 per month, and 51 percent of parents had less than a primary school education.



A mother and her child study together in Kenya

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Details of the intervention

Researchers, in partnership with the Busia County Department of Education, conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of short informational meetings with students and parents on secondary school choice. Researchers randomly assigned 183 schools, comprising 2,952 Grade 8 students and their parents, into one of three groups:

1. S*tudent meeting group (974 students)*: For schools in this group, each student had a one-on-one meeting with their teacher and a trained enumerator on secondary school options. Enumerators shared a map of all boarding schools in Busia County, as well as another map of all the day schools to which students could easily walk to from their homes. In addition

to sharing distances to schools, enumerators shared information on school fees and average academic performance. After viewing the informational content, the student had an opportunity to discuss their choices with their teacher.

2. *Student and parent meeting group (906 students)*: For schools in this group, both students and their parents met jointly with the teacher and trained enumerator. The same information was provided as in the previous group, and then the student, parent, and teacher had the opportunity to discuss their choices.
3. *Comparison group (1,072 students)*: Students and parents in schools in this group did not participate in any informational meetings. However, they did still receive the same list of all schools to which they could apply.

Researchers collected administrative data on student attendance, test scores, and application decisions, as well as conducted several rounds of surveys. The baseline surveys and the intervention took place between January and March 2020, while follow-up surveys took place between May 2020 and October 2021. Researchers surveyed students and parents on their knowledge of the school application process and of particular schools, their school preferences, and the preferences of their parent or child, both prior to and following the intervention.

Results and policy lessons

Participating in informational meetings made parents and students more informed about the application process, their available options, and each other's preferences, and ultimately led students to pick more affordable and closer schools.

Knowledge of application process: When students and parents were invited together to informational meetings, parents increased their knowledge of schooling costs across all four schooling categories by 23 percentage points (57 percent). In addition, both parents and students exhibited increased knowledge of the total number of schools students could apply for and the exam marks necessary for acceptance.

School preferences: Among the comparison group, 45 percent of parents expressed the hope that their child would attend a national school, while only 19 percent preferred that their child would attend a local sub-county day school; among students, 54 percent preferred a national school and only 11 percent preferred a local sub-county day school. However, parents who were offered an informational meeting were 5 percentage points (an 11 percent increase) less likely to prefer a national school, while students were 7 percentage points (13 percent) less likely to prefer a national school when a parent was present in the meeting. However, students did not shift their preferences away from national schools when parents were not present, suggesting that parental presence in meetings may influence children's preferences.

Furthermore, after being offered the chance to attend a meeting, students were 15 to 16 percentage points (79 to 84 percent) more likely to pick entirely commutable schools on their list, and chosen schools were 1.1 km to 1.3 km closer on average. Parents were 9 percentage points (32 percent) more likely to want their child to choose entirely commutable schools.

This shift away from expensive and far national schools, and toward commutable day schools, does not seem to have negatively impacted the quality of schools that students listed. Students who were offered the chance to attend an informational meeting by themselves picked an 8 percentage point (13 percent) higher share of schools that were in the top half of academic performance, while parents did not shift their preferences on performance after attending meetings.

Alignment between parents and students: Parents and students had more knowledge of one another's preferences after being given the chance to attend informational meetings together, and shared more common preferences. Students were 11 percentage points (35 percent) more likely to know all of the schools on their parent's preferred list, while parents were 12 percentage points (43 percent) more likely to know all schools on their child's preferred list. Furthermore, parents and students were 15 percentage points (60 percent) more likely to agree on preferences after a joint meeting.

In addition, parents who were offered an informational meeting expressed more confidence in their ability to help their child select a good school, particularly for parents with lower education levels.

School enrollment: Students who were offered informational meetings by themselves were not more likely to ultimately enroll in lower-cost sub-county day schools, but students who were offered meetings with their parents were 6 percentage points (11 percent) more likely to do so. Students who received meetings with parents paid an average of US$19 less per year (US$28 less among households with below-median incomes). Though students overall who enrolled in day schools were no more likely to attend a school within 7km, students in families below median income were 13 percentage points (24 percent) more likely to do so when meetings included both students and parents.

Choosing the right secondary school can have a significant impact on students' likelihood of completion, and both cost and distance can be major barriers. The results of this intervention suggest that informational meetings with students and parents can increase knowledge of school options and ultimately impact secondary school choice, particularly when parents are present as well. Therefore, these meetings may be an effective way to address information gaps that prevent students from finding a good secondary school match. Future follow-ups will assess the longer-run effects of the intervention on secondary school performance, attendance, and completion.

Bonds, Stephanie. "Information, Student-Parent Communication, and Secondary School Choice: Experimental Evidence from Kenya." Working Paper, April 2023