

CONSIDERING ALL THE OPTIONS: A LOW-COST WAY TO REDUCE SCHOOL DROPOUT

Parent meetings with school principals that provided guidance on selecting academic tracks helped reduce grade repetition and high school dropout among low-achieving students in France.

Featuring an evaluation by **Dominique Goux, Marc Gurgand, and Eric Maurin**



PARENTS ATTENDING SCHOOL INFORMATION MEETINGS. PHOTO: AUDE GUERRUCCI | J-PAL

School dropout is a widespread problem in many countries: in 2012, 12.7 percent of youth in Europe aged 18-24 had not completed high-school and were no longer pursuing education or training (representing roughly 5.5 million young people).¹ These young people are more likely to be unemployed, experience poverty, or end up in the criminal justice system.²

Many factors can lead students to leave school before graduation. Students may not fully understand the benefits of education (such as higher future earnings), face financial hardship, or lack support from their families, schools, or communities. They may also lack information about their educational prospects and options, particularly in contexts in which students can select from several educational tracks of varying levels of selectiveness. Without realistic expectations about their chances of being accepted and succeeding in particular tracks, students may be discouraged and drop out of the educational system altogether.

In partnership with a local education authority in France, J-PAL affiliates Marc Gurgand (Paris School of Economics) and Eric Maurin (Paris School of Economics), along with Dominique Goux (CREST), evaluated a program designed to improve parental knowledge about high school-level educational opportunities on schooling decisions and dropout. Can school principals shape parents' and students' educational preferences and help them formulate realistic and effective educational objectives?

KEY RESULTS:

Parents invited to meetings with school principals became more involved and satisfied with the information received from school. The proportion of parents who took part in general school information meetings increased by 24.2 percentage points. The proportion of parents who reported interacting with other parents increased by 9.3 percentage points.

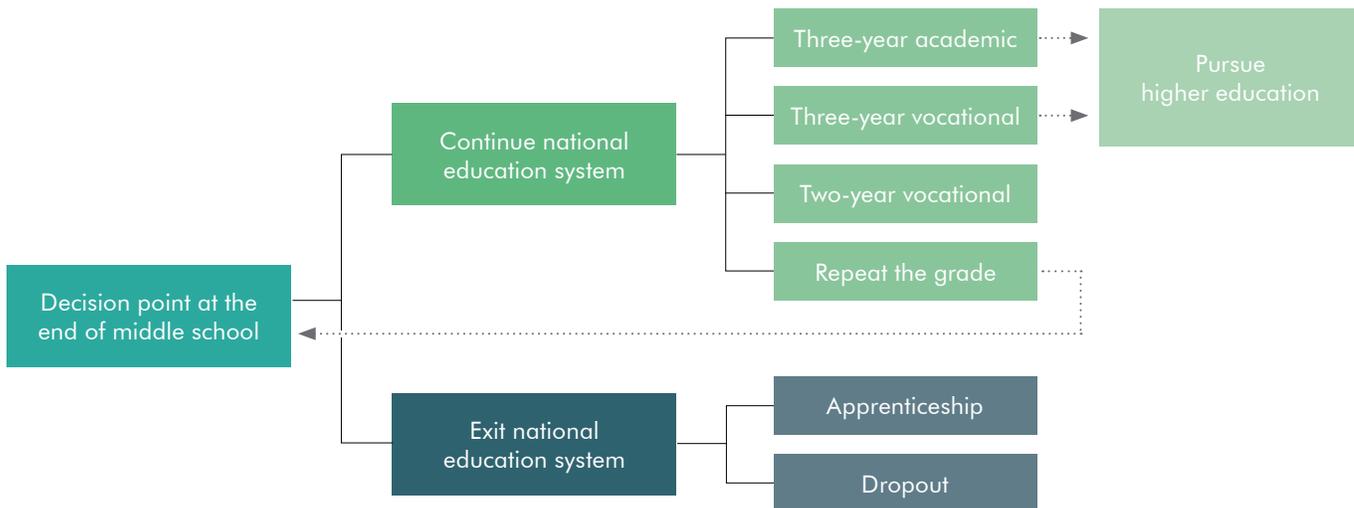
The meetings helped parents of the 25 percent lowest-achieving students and their children form more realistic educational expectations. At the end of the school year, parents who met with school principals were 8.2 percentage points less likely to expect their child would complete a three-year academic or vocational program.

Students whose parents received invitations to informational meetings were less likely to repeat a grade or to drop out. One year after the parent-principal meetings, grade repetition and dropout rates reduced by 28 and 42 percent, respectively.

The program did not affect the share of students who chose the most selective programs.

EVALUATION

FIGURE 1. FRENCH STUDENTS FACE A COMPLEX ARRAY OF SCHOOLING CHOICES AT THE END OF MIDDLE SCHOOL



In France, grade 9 marks the end of compulsory schooling, and during this school year students choose to pursue either one of three high school tracks in the public school system, an apprenticeship in the private sector, or to drop out of school and training entirely. The most selective high school program is a three-year academic track. The alternative is one of two vocational tracks lasting three years or two years, the latter as the least selective track. Students can also elect to repeat grade 9 to try to improve their academic performance in order to qualify for a better track.

The local education authority (LEA) of Versailles, which includes all suburbs to the west of Paris, serves over 1.3 million students,³ or almost 10 percent of the total number of French students. In 2010, LEA launched a preventive program designed to provide parents of children with poor academic performance information on educational options after compulsory schooling.

At the beginning of the school year, school principals selected students most at risk of dropping out within each class, comprising roughly the bottom quartile of students in terms of academic performance. Then, within each school, researchers randomly assigned roughly half of classes to receive invitations to informational parent-principal meetings (97 classes). The remaining classes served as a comparison group (82 classes). In total, the evaluation tracked outcomes for 4,291 students identified at risk of dropping out in 179 classes at 37 middle schools.

Principals invited parents of the students in treatment classes identified as at risk of dropping out of school to attend two 120-

minute group meetings to discuss their children’s choice of track. The meetings took place in the evening at schools between January and April 2011. During the meetings, principals communicated that important choices have to be made by the end of the academic year, explained the application and admissions procedures, and encouraged parents to get involved in their children’s decision.

During these meetings, principals discussed the specific aspirations of each family regarding the academic performance of their children. Principals also provided targeted information on alternatives to grade repetition (which rarely improves admission outcomes) or dropout, such as vocational high schools and apprenticeships. Principals also showed a short video that included testimonials from parents, students, and teachers, who discussed the difficulties they encountered while choosing a high school program.

Researchers obtained administrative data from schools and LEA to measure impacts of the parent-principal meetings on track choice, enrollment, and dropout.

¹ European Commission. 2013. “Reducing Early School Leaving: Key Messages and Policy Support.” Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/esl-group-report_en.pdf.

² Van Praag, Lore, Ward Nouwen, Rut Van Caudenberg, Noel Clycq, and Christiane Timmerman, eds. 2018. *Comparative Perspectives on Early School Leaving in the European Union*. Oxon: Routledge.

³ France. Ministry of National Education. 2018. “Repères et Références Statistiques.” http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/RERS_2018/83/2/depp-2018-RERS-web_986832.pdf.

RESULTS

Parents invited to meetings with principals became more involved and realistic in their expectations. At the end of the first year, parents of students in the treatment group attended more general informational meetings unrelated to academic track choice and were better informed about options for secondary education. These parents were 8.2 percentage points (11 percent) less likely to expect that their child would complete a three-year high school program, compared to 77.5 percent of parents in the comparison group. Furthermore, the share that expected their child to complete a two-year vocational degree increased by 3.4 percentage points (33 percent) from 10.3 percent among comparison group parents. Given that their children fell in the bottom quartile of academic performance, these shifts in expectations represent meaningful adjustments in beliefs that better align with the likelihood of acceptance into different tracks.

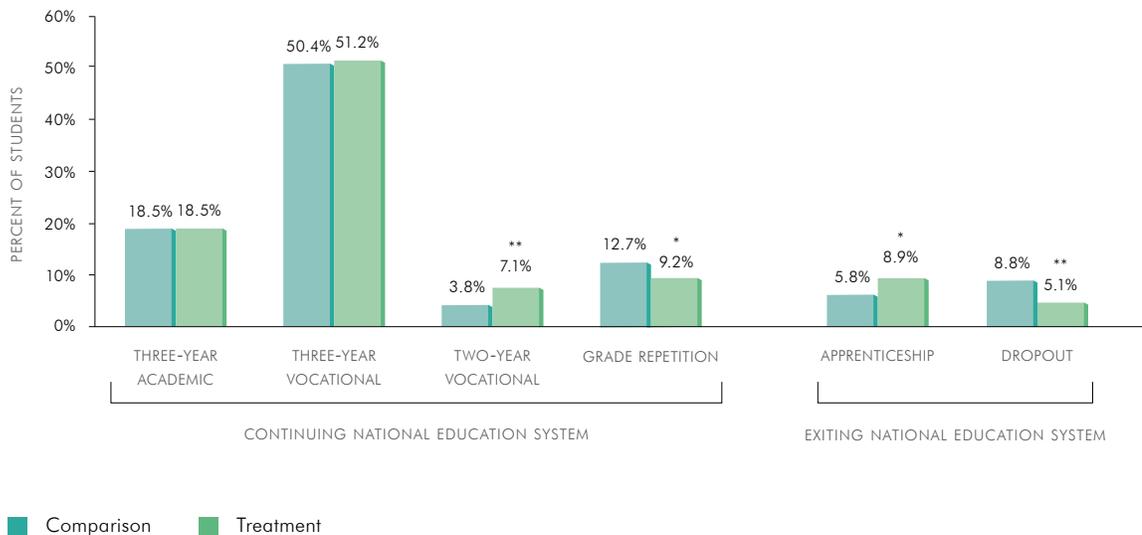
The parent-principal meetings encouraged invited parents and their children to make choices that reflected more realistic educational expectations. When students ranked their preferred high school programs, the proportion of students who included at least one two-year vocational program increased by 4.9 percentage points, an increase of 31 percent compared to 15.8 percent of students in the comparison group. The share of students wishing to repeat grade 9—with the hope to improve their grades enough to be admitted to a selective three-year high school program—similarly decreased (7.4 percent among the

parent-principal group compared to 10.4 percent in the comparison group). These results suggest that the parent-principal meetings not only adjusted expectations about the possible outcomes of the high school assignment process, but also enhanced perceptions of two-year vocational tracks.

Because students were more likely to apply to (and enroll in) tracks that matched their academic performance, they were less likely to drop out at the end of grade 9 or drop out of their chosen academic track (see bars 4 and 6, Figure 2). At the beginning of the following academic year, children of parents invited to meetings were more likely to enter one of the high school tracks they listed during the selection process or to start an apprenticeship. They were 3.5 percentage points less likely to repeat ninth grade, as compared to 12.7 percent who repeated the grade in the comparison group, and 3.7 percentage points less likely to drop out of school entirely (5.1 percent in the treatment group compared to 8.8 percent in the comparison group). A year later, the impacts on dropout were even larger.

The parent-principal meetings had no impact on academic performance, disciplinary records, nor acceptance rates to a three-year academic track (see bar 1, Figure 2). This suggests that educational choices and the resulting decrease in dropout rates reflected changes in expectations, not improved academic performance.

FIGURE 2. STUDENT PLACEMENT ONE YEAR AFTER TREATMENT



Note: Statistically significant difference relative to the comparison group is noted at the 5% (**) or 10% (*) level.

POLICY LESSONS



HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CLASS. PHOTO: ALESIAKAN | SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

High school preferences and expectations are malleable. Particularly in contexts in which students face multiple options for continuing schooling or training, students may struggle to assess the value of various tracks and may fail to consider programs that match with their academic records.

A light touch, targeted informational program helped parents and students better assess realistic prospects and shaped their preferences. In particular, it boosted students' perceptions of apprenticeships, which schools do not often promote, but offer valuable skill development opportunities for students with low academic records.

Aligning student aspirations with realistic prospects can improve student outcomes. Low-achieving students who had high and unrealistic expectations were able to align their aspirations with their academic ability, reducing dropout. In the long run, this impact could translate to higher wages for students that would have otherwise left schooling or training earlier.

School principals successfully targeted students at risk of dropout, without any negative impacts on students bound for more competitive academic tracks. Low-achieving students who had high and unrealistic expectations were able to align their aspirations with their academic ability. However, this did not come at the expense of changing the trajectory of higher performing students, whose aspirations to enroll in selective trackers were more in line with their academic ability.

The program's success stresses the importance of engaging parents in educational decisions. The success of the targeted informational meetings, which did not directly engage students, demonstrates that parents have sway over student outcomes. Increasing parents' involvement in their children's education in general, and particularly during decisive moments of their schooling, can be a low-cost means to reduce dropout.

Featured Evaluation: Goux, Dominique, Marc Gurgand, and Eric Maurin. 2017. "Adjusting Your Dreams? High School Plans and Dropout Behaviour." *The Economic Journal* 127 (602): 1025–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecoj.12317>.

Briefcase Author: Ana Maria Tabacaru | **Editor:** Rebecca Toole

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