



PAKISTAN: Does Sharing Test Scores with Parents Improve Student Learning?

Education is a driver of development around the world. But as many countries have found, getting children into school is only the first step. Not all schools provide the

same level of teaching, and children in especially poor countries may finish primary school without basic reading and math skills. With the renewed focus by development groups and governments on what

children learn when they're in school, it's important to understand some of the factors that might motivate schools to do better and motivate parents to successfully demand better quality.

The World Bank, as part of its commitment to quality education for all, works with policymakers to develop innovative ways to improve school quality. This requires gathering evidence on what works and why. In Pakistan, researchers sought to measure the impact of providing families with information about their child's test scores and about the test scores in the other schools of the village. The evaluation found that giving parents information led to improved test scores, lower fees in the private schools in the village and higher primary school enrollment. The results indicate that when parents know how well their children are doing in school—and know how well other children are doing in different schools—it can spur better learning. **Impact evaluation evidence increasingly is showing that people are motivated to demand more and better services when they have information that allows them to correctly judge the situation.**



Context

Private schools have become increasingly common in low and middle-income countries, where state run education systems can suffer from poor governance leading to overcrowding, teacher absences and poor facilities. In Pakistan, a third of all primary school age students are enrolled in private school. These schools, which charge tuition and are aimed at low-income families, keep costs down mainly because their teachers aren't civil servants but are instead hired directly at lower wages. Families often prefer private schools because they believe the quality of education is higher. However, while private schools in Pakistan follow a curriculum similar to that of government schools, they aren't as closely regulated. This has raised concerns that students may not always be getting

a good education and that parents may not fully realize what their children can or should be learning.

Researchers wanted to test what might help improve school quality and student achievement in both private and government-run schools. Focusing on Punjab, the largest province in Pakistan with a population of over 100 million, the research team decided to measure the impact of providing information on student test scores to parents. The question was whether this (schools whose average score was below the 40th percentile in the baseline test) would spur parents to push for better quality education, and whether this would also make the private school market more competitive because parents could now choose based on clear measures of quality.

Evaluation

The research team carried out the evaluation across three districts in Punjab province, each district picked to represent a different socioeconomic area. Within these districts, 112 villages were randomly picked from among the villages that each had at least one private school. On average, each village contained 631 households and had seven schools, one of which was government-run. These schools each enrolled an average of 166 children in grades one through five.

There were on average 18 children in each third grade and all the third graders in the villages—about 12,000 children in total—were tested. Half the villages then were randomly assigned to receive information about student and school performance on a standardized test. The information included how well the specific child tested in English, math and Urdu, how well the child ranked against

other third graders in the school, and average scores in the other schools in the village. Parents received the scores in the form of a “report card” at a school meeting, during which the information was explained. A year later, the process was repeated. The initial testing of the students and the baseline surveys took place in the spring of 2004. Parents received the test scores in September 2004, right after the summer break. The process was repeated in 2005.

Household surveys were conducted with 1,800 households in the villages at baseline and at the end of the program. The schools and teachers themselves were surveyed as well. For all tested grades, researchers also administered a short questionnaire to 10 randomly selected children, for a total of 6,000 children. These three data sources—from students, school, and households—allowed researchers to corroborate self-reported data from multiple sources.

Results

Test scores among private school students whose parents received the report cards improved, but this was only for students in lower-performing schools.

In villages where families were given information about how well their child had done on standardized tests—and data on how this score compared with scores at other schools—test scores in private schools improved and this gain continued two years after the report cards were first handed out or two years after the last report card was handed out. The increase was about 42 percent of the average yearly gain over student test scores in villages where no information was provided.

But improvement depended on the initial performance of the school. The test scores of children at low performing private schools (schools whose average score was below the 40th percentile in the baseline test) rose substantially, while those in at high achieving schools (schools whose average score was at or above the 40th percentile in the baseline test) didn't change. This suggests that schools where students tested poorly worked to improve their scores, while those where students were already doing well didn't feel the need to make changes, at least on the quality front.

Test scores at government-run schools improved, too, regardless of whether schools were already doing well or not.

Students in government schools whose parents received information on test scores were doing better on the tests a year later, when compared with students in villages where families didn't get the report cards. The gain was the same regardless of whether the government school was ranked as high performing or not before the evaluation was launched.

This result is interesting because it shows that the incentives to improve weren't just about schools doing better for fear of losing paying customers. Rather, it could be that providing information motivates everyone—including parents, students, and schools—to try harder.

Giving parents report cards was just one part of making sure they were informed. At the meetings where report cards were handed out, the scores were explained and parents were told what helps improve test scores.

The meetings, which were run by members of the Learning and Education Achievement in Punjab Schools Project, weren't designed to assign blame or to promote one school over another. Instead, the meetings offered a chance for parents to learn what can help improve test scores. Giving parents the information verbally was important because the adult literacy rate in these villages was about 37 percent, so many parents couldn't even read the reports.

Every meeting started with a 30-minute open discussion on what can influence test scores, including the teacher, the school environment, the home environment and the child's own behavior. Presenters were careful not to offer advice to parents or blame the child for a poor test score.

With increased competition, tuition rates at private schools dropped.

Giving out report cards increased parents' information about schools and raised student test scores in low performing private schools. However, this was not the only impact. Better information also helped push down tuition fees. Schools where test scores were substantially higher at baseline saw a bigger drop in their fees, by about 25 percent, compared with initially low-performing schools. On average, fees at private schools dropped by 17 percent

compared with fees among schools in villages where report cards weren't handed out.

Tuition fees dropped because now information about quality was clear and widely available.

Before the report cards, parents had some information about schools, but it was far from perfect. The only way that parents could get schools to produce high quality was by giving them high fees. This provided the incentive that schools needed, since they knew that if they produced low quality and were discovered in the process, parents would withdraw their children, leading to substantial losses in revenue. As parents' information improved as a result of the report cards, these additional inducements were no longer required and prices declined.

Private school tuition in these villages ranged from less than U.S. \$1 a month to about double that, but in any case less than the daily rate for unskilled labor at the time. Between private school fees and other schooling costs, families spent about three to five percent of their monthly budget on education.

As prices dropped and school quality increased, more children enrolled in school.

In 2004, before the study began, 76 percent of boys and 65 percent of girls ages five to fifteen were enrolled in school. After report cards were distributed, enrollment for primary school children in private and government schools rose by 4.5 percent, or about 40 children in each village, compared with enrollment in schools that were in villages that didn't get report cards. The increase in enrollment may have been because costs went down and quality improved.

The lowest performing private schools in villages where report cards were handed out were also more likely to shut down.

In villages where report cards were handed out, private schools that had low test scores after one year were 12.5 percentage points more likely to shut down, a sign that students were changing schools. As for public schools, the report cards didn't cause any closures, which was expected because their survival wasn't dependent on school fees.

In Punjab, children rarely go to school outside their village, making it important to think locally when focusing efforts to improve education.

Children rarely attend school outside their village. In fact, studies have shown that distance is usually the de-

terminating factor in whether or not a child goes to school, especially for girls. Increasing the distance to school by 500 meters reduces enrollment for boys by 1.5 to three percentage points, and for girls by nine to 11 percentage points, according to a study of education in Punjab.*

*Andrabi, T., J. Das, A. Khwaja, T. Vishwanath, and T. Zajonc (2007). The Learning and Educational Attainment in Punjab Schools (LEAPS) Report. World Bank, Washington, DC.

EDUCATION

Conclusion

Much of the debate about how to improve learning focuses on public schools. Yet, increasingly, parents face many choices when it comes to where to send their children to school. When so many choices are available, information can be a powerful tool. These results show that approaches that improve performance in the private sector can simultaneously strengthen the public sector, which may have implications beyond education.

Sharing test scores also turned out to be a fairly inexpensive approach. The report cards were inexpensive to

provide, costing just U.S. \$1 per child, which is much cheaper than other approaches that are proven to improve student performance. The importance of meetings, given that the majority of parents were illiterate, can't be ignored as a possible route for raising parental involvement and helping them understand what is going on in the schools. This is one of the areas that impact evaluation researchers focused on education may want to do further work.

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