How Can We Make Schools Work Better?

How can we make schools work better? It’s a question being asked around the world. Getting children to school is only the first step. From then on, there’s a host of factors that can decide whether children will be able to learn. To start, schools need basic supplies and infrastructure and teachers have to show up and be prepared. But government promises to provide communities with the right educational services and infrastructure don’t always lead to concrete changes, whether it’s because funds are misused or the schools themselves fall short. So what’s the best way to encourage successful accountability that helps ensure students get the teachers, the supplies and the schools they deserve?

At the World Bank, we are working to achieve universal primary education for every child, a United Nations Millennium Development Goal. We also recognize that promising a primary education is not enough—students must be able to learn once they are enrolled in school. To help understand the role that community groups can play in boosting the quality of local schools and learning, the World Bank supported an Indonesia pilot project to test different ways to empower local school committees and increase student learning, as measured by test scores. Results showed that giving committees money and training didn’t accomplish much. The most effective way to encourage better learning turned out to be through strengthening ties between schools committees and outside parties, such as local village councils, and encouraging democratic elections for school committee members. While there is rarely a one-size-fits-all answer to development questions, there are always lessons learned. In this case, it’s that boosting the standing of school committees within their broader communities may be an effective route for encouraging more responsible and focused parental and teacher involvement in quality education.

Researchers worked with the Ministry of Education to evaluate the impact of four different measures to strengthen school committees: giving committee members training and resources to encourage more effective involvement; holding democratic elections to promote better community representation; fostering ties between committees and the local governing body to boost committee authority; and combining elections with fostering ties, or “linkage,” between committees and local governing bodies.

The evaluation covered 520 randomly selected rural primary public schools in six districts in central Java and Yogyakarta provinces. No more than one school in each village participated and the school sample was balanced with schools with low, medium and high grade six leaving exams. The schools—and their associated school committees—were randomly assigned either to a control group or to receive one of the three interventions. School committees not in the control group also each received a block grant of $870, in the hope of re-energizing the committee and giving them some power and autonomy. Facilitators worked with all school committees not in the control group to help them create work plans, approve spending and monitor grant use.

A baseline survey took place in January 2007, with a midline survey in April 2008 and final survey in October 2008. The survey, given to parents, teachers, students, school committee members and principals, included questions related to community support for education, parental support for learning, teacher opinions and behavior and how involved committees were with the schools and encouraging learning at home (also called school-based management). To test learning, a Ministry of Education math and language test was given to all students in grade four at the baseline and then again two years later at grade six.

Did You Know...

Despite achieving universal primary school enrollment, Indonesia ranks 57 out of 65 countries in reading, and one-third of Indonesia’s 13-15 year olds do not attend secondary school.

(World Bank, Australian Government data)
The Findings

Giving committees training and money—measures that could reinforce and strengthen the existing committee structure—did not lead to better student learning.

The hypothesis was that school committees might be ineffective because they didn’t know what they were supposed to do or how to get involved in school management. Training the members was seen as a way to empower them on a practical level and make them aware of their mandate. For each of the 180 committees in this group, training was given to four committee members—a parent, principal and teacher and village representative—and covered planning, budgeting, steps they could take to support quality education and a visit to the school committee that had been successful at applying these practices. This intervention was the most costly among the three, adding up to $360 per school committee, which covered the cost of the training and three facilitator visits. Despite this support, students in schools whose committees received this intervention did not measure better on the math and Indonesian language tests.

Having school committees hold democratic elections for members proved to be an effective way to get parents more involved in their children’s schoolwork, but there was no improvement when it came to test scores.

Local school committees are supposed to advise schools and hold them accountable, but the committees themselves do not have any formal power. To encourage committees to speak out more forcefully—and to get schools and local authorities to pay attention (at baseline, only 22 percent of school committees reported that they collaborated with the village council)—one intervention focused on raising the stature and visibility of the committees by fostering closer ties with both schools and local councils. A meeting was held between committee members and their school to identify measures to improve the quality of education. These measures were then presented to the village council and discussed and refined. After that,

Background

After Indonesia successfully achieved universal primary school enrollment in the 1980s, attention turned to ensuring a quality education. The country already had in place a system of school committees—tasked mainly with raising funds for schools—and in 2002 committees were given a more explicit role in advising local schools on budgeting, teacher qualifications and facilities. The hope was that broader community involvement would result in greater transparency and accountability, resulting ultimately in better learning for students. Despite the new framework, the nine-member school committees, comprised of parents, community leaders, education professionals and associations, village officials and members of the private sector, remained largely inactive. In 2006 the Ministry of Education decided that it would be useful to test different measures that might help school committees be more involved and effective.

This policy note is based on “Improving Education Quality through Enhancing Community Participation,” (World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 5795) by Menno Pradhan, Daniel Suryadarma, Amanda Beatty, Maisy Wong, Armida Alishjabana, Arya Gaduh, and Rima Prama Artha. Financial support for the project was provided by the Japan Social Development Fund and the Dutch Government.
a memorandum of understanding was signed by the principal, the head of the committee and the head of the council. Collaboratively-reached steps in different communities included encouraging students to focus on homework by setting aside two hours an evening when all households would shut off their televisions and computer game centers would shut down; hiring contract teachers; building additional school facilities; and encouraging certain social and religious activities at school.

At a cost of about $125 per school, this intervention as the cheapest of the three and the most cost-effective based on improved test scores. Students in schools covered by this intervention boosted their test scores by close to four percentage points.

Having school committees hold democratic elections for members proved to be an effective way to get parents more involved in their children's schoolwork, but there was no improvement when it came to test scores.

Because school committee members were often handpicked by the school, it was not clear that committees included the most interested or the most representative parents and teachers. To foster more representative and thus hopefully more engaged committees, facilitators worked with school committees to hold democratic elections. Facilitators helped committees create an election committee and have meetings to select candidates to run for committee positions. After elections, committees were assisted in developing work plans. In addition, quotas were set to give parents six seats on the committee to ensure parental involvement.

Elections boosted parental knowledge of school committees by 13 percentage points. But this was not accompanied by any change in the proportion of parents able to answer questions about what their committee did or its powers. But households did report spending an additional 80 minutes a week on children's schoolwork. It’s possible that elections promoted awareness about the importance of education in general, leading parents to do more at home, where they feel they can have an immediate and strong impact. Teachers also reported spending an additional 40 minutes a day on lessons. Nonetheless, there was no corresponding increase in test scores. At $174 per school, covering five visits by facilitator, this measure was not the most costly, but it did not lead to better learning results, despite the gains in both parental and teacher involvement in student studies.

Building links between school committees and village officials did lead to an increase in test scores; when combined with democratic elections for school committee members, students did even better based on test scores.

When both measures were combined for school committees, students test scores improved the most, increasing 4.6 percentage points (0.22 standard deviations). The combination of building ties between school committees and local officials, along with democratic elections, didn’t lead to greater parental involvement in school management, although parents’ knowledge of the existence of school committees did increase by 15 percentage points.

"It is time to consolidate and make sure that school-based management in Indonesia is sustainable, lessons are learned and a road map developed."

Fasli Jalal, Deputy Minister of National Education (August, 2011)
But elections did spark greater parental involvement in student schoolwork at home, and when combined with the closer ties between community leaders and the school committees, teachers worked harder, and the time they spent on lessons increased by an hour a day. “Linkage” and elections combined were the most successful at raising test scores, but “linkage” alone turns out to be the most cost-effective when it comes to raising test scores for the least amount of money.

School-based management is often considered a good idea for empowering local authorities, stakeholders and parents and encouraging more active involvement in school affairs. But interestingly, in this example, gains in learning did not always come because school committees got more involved in how schools used their budgets or how teachers taught. Instead, test scores improved the most when measures were implemented that boosted the legitimacy of the school committees through elections and building local community ties. Even when school committees don’t appear to be any more active than they were before, the extra legitimacy accorded them appeared to raise positive perceptions of their effectiveness and motivate teachers.

The goal of the pilot in Indonesia was to see which measures were most effective at boosting school-based management, which is another word for more active participation by both parents and communities, through school committees, in how schools are run. The assumption was that greater participation by committees would result in better-managed schools, which in turn would lead to better learning.

This wasn’t the case. None of the interventions succeeded in changing the role of school committees in the running of schools. (Giving grants to committees did lead to an increase in committee meetings, although there was no increase in meetings between school committees and stakeholders.) In fact, in cases where test scores improved, the reason seems to be harder work by teachers and parents, unrelated to committee activities. This isn’t to say committees were unimportant: As a way to raise the importance of education and what communities can do to encourage students to spend more time on their schoolwork, the committees turned out to be useful go-betweens with local authorities. And holding democratic elections for committee members apparently gave teachers, at least, a new sense of legitimacy and respect (since before teachers were appointed by school principals), which caused them to spend more time on lessons. So regardless of whether or not school committees are encouraged to do more, granting them wider visibility and legitimacy may help bolster the importance of education and better learning.