

CASE STUDY 1: GETTING PARENTS INVOLVED

Program Theory and Measuring Outcomes



This case study is based on “Getting Parents Involved: A field Experiment in Deprived Schools” by Francesco Avvisati, Marc Gurgand, Nina Guyon, and Eric Maurin, CEPR Discussion Paper 8020, 2010.

J-PAL thanks the authors for allowing us to use their paper.

KEY VOCABULARY

Hypothesis: a proposed explanation of and for the effects of a given intervention. Hypotheses are intended to be made ex-ante, or prior to the implementation of the intervention.

Indicators: metrics used to quantify and measure specific short-term and long-term effects of a program

Logical Framework: a management tool used to facilitate the design, execution, and evaluation of an intervention. It involves identifying strategic elements (inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact) and their causal relationships, indicators, and the assumptions and risks that may influence success and failure

Theory of Change: describes a strategy or blueprint for achieving a given long-term goal. It identifies the preconditions, pathways and interventions necessary for an initiative's success

INTRODUCTION

Problems of truancy and discipline can contribute to many schoolchildren in industrialized societies graduating from school without mastering basic skills. The school district of Creteil, in France, is a densely populated area with high proportions of immigrants from mostly Maghreb countries, and has very poor socioeconomic indicators. In such a setting, linguistic and social barriers along with financial and logistical constraints can prevent parents from paying closer attention to their children's education.

Increasing parental involvement has been widely touted as a means of overcoming difficulties in child learning and behavior. The program called "La mallette des parents" was designed to foster parental involvement through a series of monthly meetings with the school staff on how to successfully manage the transition from primary school to middle school. These discussions provided parents of sixth graders with information on the French school system and guidelines on how to assist children with homework. Can parental involvement be used as a lever to improve educational outcomes in France? Does greater engagement by parents improve discipline and behavior? Do classroom interactions also result in positive effects for children whose parents don't attend the meetings?

THE FRENCH EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The French state-run educational system is highly centralized with schools having limited autonomy. All schools teach the same education curriculum and employ teachers that are selected through national examinations. There is no tracking of students by ability and French parents are not free to choose what school their children will attend.

The pool of students in the district of Creteil, where the program took place, is very heterogeneous in ability and diverse in cultural backgrounds. These suburbs East of Paris have large populations of recent and second-generation immigrants. A recent survey showed that more than 20 percent of the local population is first-generation immigrants, and many are relatively poor. These parents face numerous barriers to navigating the hierarchical education system: many speak limited French and work far away from local schools. This lack of parental involvement might be the cause of problems like truancy and indiscipline in children, especially in the poorer districts, where many pupils are still far from reaching the basic requirements of curricula (OECD, 2010).

INFORMATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR PARENTS

Just after the start of the academic year, schools sent informational leaflets to families of sixth graders asking them to register for a series of meetings with school staff on how to successfully navigate the transition to middle school. (Not all schools were planning to offer this program, however. The registration was less of an enrollment process and more of a tool to gauge the level of interest from parents.) Those schools that ultimately participated would offer a series of three meetings over the course of three months.

After registration, the families in participating schools were given an offer to continue with one of two additional programs, or to abstain from further involvement:

Program A: An additional series of monthly meetings that complement the three initial meetings. Parents and school are encouraged to invite external experts to these meetings.

Program B: An additional series of more intense meetings held as often as twice a week for four or five months. These meetings focus on providing training for parents needing further support to improve their literacy or computer skills.

THE SCOPE OF DISCUSSIONS

The goal of these highly interactive meetings was to help parents understand the role of each member in the educational community, the school's organization, and to help them develop positive involvement attitudes towards their children's education. Facilitators were given standard materials, including a DVD explaining the purpose of various school personnel and documents explaining the functions of the various school offices. The two initial sessions focused on how parents could help their children with homework and the last session took place after the distribution of report cards to help them adapt to the first term results and to give them tips on how to go forward.

Your evaluation team has been entrusted with the responsibility of evaluating the campaign's impact on child learning and behavior. Your evaluation should address all dimensions in which informational campaigns for parents can affect cognitive and non-cognitive abilities of children. How might the meetings encourage greater involvement by parents? What are the most important outcomes to test? What steps must occur in order for these changes to take place? What data should your team collect to evaluate the intervention?

Discussion Topic 1

Needs

1. Who is the target population?
2. What are the problems faced by the student?
3. What characteristics of the French educational system make it particularly challenging for these students?
4. What features of the home environment make it challenging?
5. What might we see different in households of high-performing students?

Discussion Topic 2

Program Theory

1. What are the main characteristics of these informational meetings?
2. How might these meetings encourage parents to pay more attention to their children's education?
3. What are the potential challenges? Why might the program fail?

Discussion Topic 3

Outcomes and Indicators

1. What are the possible positive, negative and null effects of the intervention on child development and learning?
2. Please list all the indicators you would use to measure each of these potential outcomes.

Discussion Topic 4

Defining the Hypothesis

1. What might be some examples of key hypotheses you would test? Pick one.
2. Which indicators would you use to test your primary hypothesis?

Discussion Topic 5

Formalizing the Theory of Change

1. What are the steps or conditions that link the informational campaign for parents to the final outcomes?
2. What indicators should you measure at each of these steps?
3. Using the outcomes and conditions, draw a possible logical framework, linking the intervention to the final outcomes.