State of the Evidence

Description of the Evidence

- Programs that make education-related information available to parents or students have increased learning outcomes at low cost. Many categories of information can be made available:

- Providing parents with actionable guidance on how to be more involved in their child’s academics has improved learning outcomes for children in the United States (see York et al. 2019, Kraft and Monti-Nussbaum 2017, Doss et al. 2019, Cortes et al. 2021, and Cortes et al. 2019) and Botswana (Angrist et al. 2020). Effect sizes ranged from 0.11 to 0.31 standard deviation increases in test scores. Programs have bridged this gap by sending parents actionable advice such as activity suggestions or short, simple tips, often via text message.

- School performance statistics improved parental engagement and increased student learning outcomes in Chile (Allende et al. 2019) and Pakistan (Andrabi et al. 2017) by 0.11 to 0.20 standard deviations.

- Providing parents with information about their child’s performance in school has increased learning in Bangladesh (Asad 2019), Chile (Berlinski et al. 2016), Mozambique (De Walque and Valente 2018), Pakistan (Andrabi et al. 2017), and the United States (see Bergman 2021, Bergman and Chan 2020, and Kraft and Rogers 2015). Programs provided information on academic performance, attendance, behavior, and missing assignments. Effect sizes were measured in a variety of ways, resulting in a 27 to 41 percent reduction in class failure in the United States; an increase of 0.11 to 0.38 standard deviations in test scores in Bangladesh, the United States, and Pakistan and a 9 percent increase in test scores in Mozambique; and an improvement in grades of 0.08 standard deviations in Chile.

- Health information sometimes helps parents improve their child’s ability to learn (such as in these examples in the United States (Glewwe et al. 2018) and China (Mo et al. 2014), but only if parents understand and can act on the information.

- Information about financial aid may not increase learning unless other barriers are also addressed. Programs in Chile (Dinkelman and Martínez 2014), China (Yi et al. 2015), and Mexico (Avitabile and De Hoyos 2018) told students about financial aid opportunities, but only the program in Mexico improved learning (an increase in test scores of 0.29 standard deviations), perhaps because it was the only one that increased student motivation through additional information.

- Information about the financial returns to education has led to improved learning outcomes. If parents underestimate these returns, they may be less willing to pay tuition or conduct a serious search for high-quality schools. If students underestimate returns, they may spend less effort on academics. Three programs in Chile (Allende et al. 2019), Madagascar (Nguyen 2008), and Mexico (Avitabile and De Hoyos 2018) that told parents, students, or both about average wage returns to different levels of education all increased test scores by 0.20 to 0.29 standard deviations.
Notes on Context

These types of programs may be particularly effective when parents were not previously aware of how their child was performing in school or were not engaged directly in content instruction. Addressing perception gaps may not increase learning in contexts where students face other significant barriers to learning that this knowledge alone cannot overcome, or if parents face significant barriers to engagement with their children’s education that this knowledge alone cannot overcome.

Of note, while in many high-resource contexts parents are highly engaged in education at home with their children, this is less common in low-resource contexts where caregivers often believe education is the domain of the school. However, interventions that encourage caregivers to engage directly in education, even in relatively low-literacy settings, can improve early grade foundational learning. In settings where school systems are higher quality, encouraging more parental engagement with the school may increase learning outcomes, while in settings where school systems are lower quality, encouraging more parental engagement with students themselves may be more contextually appropriate.

Additionally, a note that the delivery channels chosen may require schools to have contact information for parents (often phone numbers or emails).

In order to communicate information to parents or students, the information must be available in the first place. Depending on the type of information, this may mean that schools must be collecting data on student performance, which requires that schools have a system in place to track and record student absences, late assignments, academic progression, and/or in-class behavior.

Equity Considerations

It is important to understand parental literacy rates in order to ensure that these types of programs do not exacerbate existing inequalities among children. If parental literacy may present a barrier in an area with low adult literacy rates, calls or short in-person meetings might be more appropriate in that context. Parental information programs have been successful even in low-literacy contexts, but more care must be taken to ensure that the information is being conveyed to all parents.

In some areas, cell phone, internet, or electricity coverage could prevent parents from receiving phone or email-based messages. In these cases, schools should determine the most reliable method of conveying information to parents. Again, it is important to understand these factors to ensure that children who are already disadvantaged compared to their peers (due to having less reliable access to electricity or internet) are not further disadvantaged by the intervention.

Operationalization

Generalizability

Drawing on J-PAL’s Generalizability Framework, below are questions that will help you determine if providing parents with information on students’ performance in school might increase learning outcomes in your context. The below questions are not meant to be an exhaustive list of questions you will need to answer to determine if this type of program is appropriate for your context. They can, however, provide a starting point for applying the global evidence on this type of program to your specific context.

Local Conditions

- Do parents know how their children are performing in school?

  Parents may think they are aware of how their children are performing in school, but their perceptions may be inaccurate. A survey of parents, compared with children’s grades or test scores, can determine if parent perceptions tend to be accurate.

- Is there already a system in place that informs parents of children’s grades, exam scores, attendance records, etc.?

- Is it typical for parents in your context to be engaged with their children’s education? In some contexts, it may be more or less common for parents to help with homework, ask questions about school, meet with teachers, etc.

- Is it feasible for parents to become more involved in their child’s education if they have more information about their child’s performance and specific needs?

  Working parents may have less time to help their children with schoolwork.

  Parents with lower levels of literacy may have a harder time helping their children with schoolwork.

  The above factors don’t necessarily mean that these types of programs won’t help parents engage more with their children. They are simply factors to consider as you determine the best approach for your context.

Generalized Lessons on Behavior

- Providing parents with information about their child’s performance in school has increased learning.

- Impacts on learning are likely due to changes in parents’ behavior, which in turn can improve student effort or instruction quality at school. The pathways through which this increased parental engagement might affect learning outcomes include more parent-teacher meetings, parents contacting schools more often, increased time spent helping children with homework, parents taking away privileges for bad grades, and parents changing the content of conversations with children to better emphasize what they could improve in school.
Successful Examples

- Learning the Value of Education in the Dominican Republic (Berry et al. 2017)
- Providing School Report Cards to Improve Quality and Pricing of Education in Pakistan (Andrabi et al. 2017)
- Sending Text Messages to Parents to Improve Student Achievement in Middle and High Schools in the United States (Bergman and Chan 2019)

Implementation Guide

Guidance on Evidence-Based Parental Engagement Learning Approaches

Further Action

Approaches with high and consistent effectiveness are recommended for direct action through pilots to demonstrate local proof of concept and generate momentum in-country; scale-up is recommended especially if an existing country effort is operational and ready for scale. These takeaways are meant to only be a guide rather than a definitive recommendation. In some cases, even effective and well-studied interventions might benefit from further research, for example, to test scale pathways or to optimize programs for cost-effectiveness. Based on the evidence for this category, potential next steps might include:

- Connecting with implementers to learn more about how to adapt and pilot evidence-based programs in this category;
- Connecting with researchers to identify relevant open questions on implementation and scale that may benefit from further research;
- Other activities to think through the policy implications of this evidence in your context.

If you are interested in exploring these or other options, please contact the J-PAL Education team at JPAL_Education@povertyactionlab.org to set up an initial exploratory meeting. The team will be happy to brainstorm potential next steps.