

GETTING PARENTS INVOLVED

Parental involvement meetings increased parents' participation in their children's education and reduced delinquent behavior and absenteeism in France. Positive effects were also seen in classmates whose parents did not participate in the program.

Featuring an evaluation by Francesco Avvisati, Marc Gurgand, Nina Guyon, and Eric Maurin



PHOTO: AUDE GUERRUCCI | J-PAL

Parental involvement is widely touted as an important determinant of students' educational success. However, it can be more challenging for socioeconomically disadvantaged parents to support their children's schooling for linguistic, financial, logistic (long distances from school), or informational (not understanding the way the school functions) reasons. Reduced support from parents may in turn affect the educational success of their children.

If disadvantaged parents are unaware of the school's structure or unsure of how to support and monitor their children with homework and schooling decisions, then parental involvement programs could improve students' educational success. Yet, little is known about what schools can do to encourage parents—particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—to participate more in their children's education at home and in school. One proposed policy has been to use parent-school meetings to encourage parents to engage in their children's education.

Researchers Francesco Avvisati (OECD), J-PAL affiliate Marc Gurgand (Paris School of Economics), Nina Guyon (Department of Economics, National University of Singapore), and J-PAL affiliate Eric Maurin (Paris School of Economics) conducted a randomized evaluation to measure the impact of a parent-school meeting program on parents' involvement and their children's behavior. Can increased parental involvement help improve students' behavior and educational outcomes?

KEY RESULTS:

Program take-up was modest. Only 22.5 percent of parents with children in classes assigned to the program volunteered to attend the discussions.

Parents who participated in meetings became more involved in their children's education. Participation in meetings increased parental involvement both in school and at home compared to parents in comparison classes. The program had no impact on parents in program classes who did not volunteer to attend meetings.

The program reduced average rates of absenteeism and delinquent behavior for all students, not just those whose parents attended the meetings. The program reduced the absenteeism of children of volunteer and non-volunteer parents by 25.3 percent and 12.7 percent, respectively. Children in program classes were less likely to be sanctioned for disciplinary reasons (41.8 percent for volunteer parents and 20.9 percent for non-volunteer parents).

The program had a long-term impact on students' behavior and French test scores. Eighteen months after the program, students in program classes whose parents attended the sessions improved behavior in school and scored higher on French tests than their counterparts in comparison classes.

EVALUATION

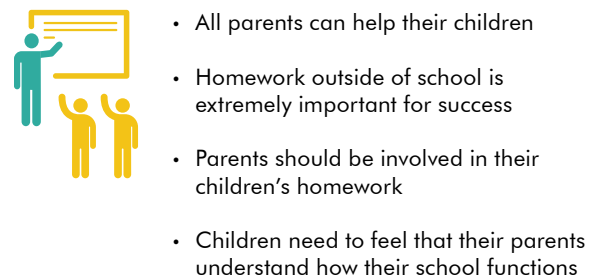
In France, there are large disparities in parents' involvement in their children's education, which the French government has attempted to address over the years through various policies. One attempt to address this problem has been to increase parental engagement through facilitated meetings between parents and school officials, especially at key moments in students' educational careers. This intervention, called *La Mallette des parents* in French, was designed to improve communication between parents and schools and focused on students' transition from primary school to middle school in 6th grade.

Researchers partnered with the densely-populated and disadvantaged school district of Créteil¹ to evaluate the impact of the *La Mallette* program. Parents of 6th-graders in 183 classes were offered to volunteer to participate in three facilitated discussions on how to successfully navigate their child's transition to middle school. Researchers then randomly assigned 96 classes to participate in the program. The remaining 87 classes served as a comparison group with no facilitated meetings.

Because parents volunteered for the meetings before assignment into program or comparison classes, researchers were able to compare parents who volunteered and participated to parents who volunteered but were not given the opportunity to participate as they were assigned to the comparison group. This also allowed researchers to see if the program impacted students in program classes whose parents did not participate in the meetings.

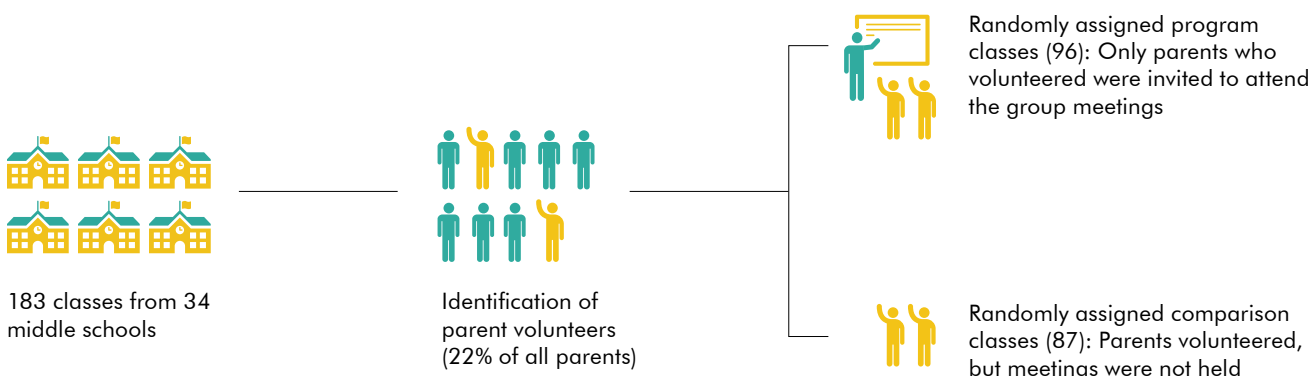
The purpose of the meetings was to explain to parents how they can become more involved in their children's education and encourage them to succeed. The three meetings lasted for two hours each and took place after school over a two-month period. School principals facilitated most of the meetings, using guidelines created by educational experts at the district level as well as standardized materials, including a DVD explaining the purpose of various school personnel and documents describing the functions of various school offices.

FIGURE 1. CORE POINTS DISCUSSED DURING FACILITATED PARENT-SCHOOL MEETINGS



To measure the impact of the program, researchers collected administrative data on students' academic achievement and behavior, including absenteeism, disciplinary sanctions, and good conduct. They also administered one questionnaire to determine parents' understanding of, perception of, and involvement in their child's education, and one questionnaire to measure teachers' assessments of parents' attitudes and children's behavior and performance.

FIGURE 2. ASSIGNMENT OF CLASSES AND PARENTS TO PROGRAM AND COMPARISON GROUPS



¹ Créteil is a suburban area east of Paris where roughly one third of children receive means-based scholarships.

RESULTS

Program take-up was modest. Only 22.5 percent of parents volunteered for the program. In program classes, 54.7 percent of these parents attended at least one of the discussions, and 13.5 percent attended all three. This imperfect attendance means that the small proportion of parents who actually attended meetings drove the impacts of the program.

Parents who participated in meetings became significantly more involved in their children's education—both in school and at home. After the program, volunteer parents who were selected to attend the meetings were more likely to make individual appointments with teachers and attend parent-teacher meetings, scored higher on a global parent-involvement index, and had better understanding and perception of the school's functioning. They were also more involved in their children's education at home than parents in comparison classes. There was no change in involvement for non-volunteer parents in program classes.

The program reduced absenteeism and delinquent behavior for all students, not just those whose parents attended the meetings. As a result of increased parental involvement, the behavior and attitudes of all students in program classes improved on average, not just of those whose parents participated in the meetings. Children of volunteer and non-volunteer parents in program classes were 41.8 percent and 20.9 percent less likely (respectively) to be sanctioned for disciplinary reasons than their comparison class counterparts. These children were also less absent from school than children in comparison classes (see Figure 4). The effect on children of non-volunteer parents was likely due to the positive influence of the improved behavior of their peers.

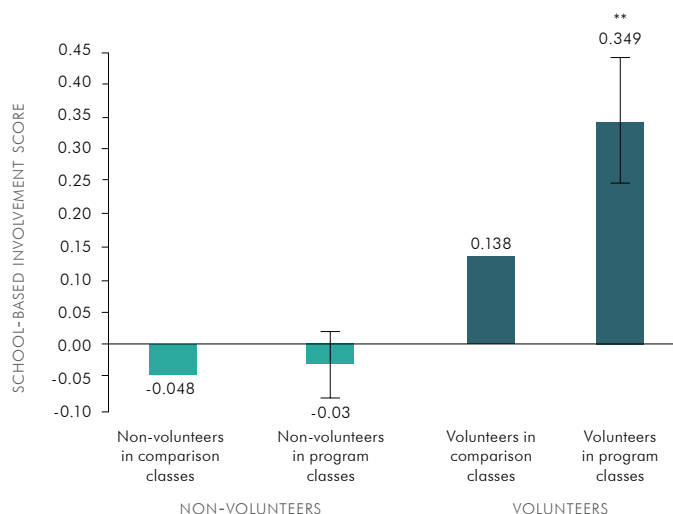
The program had a long-term impact on students' behavior and French test scores. Eighteen months after the end of the program, students whose parents attended meetings had 3.2 percent higher French test scores than those in non-program classes. After 18 months, these students were also 9.5 percentage points more likely to score a top mark for "good conduct," from a baseline of 28.7 percent, compared to children in comparison classes whose parents had volunteered.

Program expansion is possible at low cost. Running the parent-school meetings involved some start-up costs, such as designing guidelines and producing DVD materials. The additional cost of expanding the program is estimated to be approximately €1,000 (US\$1,415 at the time of the evaluation) per school per year. When compared to other costlier school-based interventions, such as reducing class size or providing teacher trainings, increasing parental involvement may be more cost-effective.



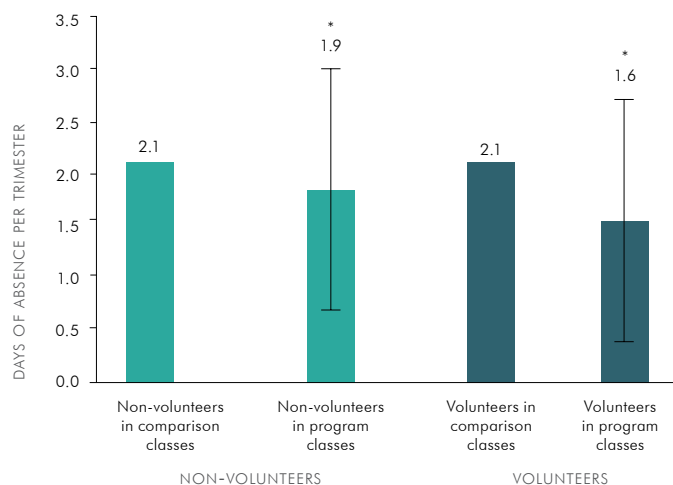
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FIGURE 3. PARENTS WHO ATTENDED MEETINGS BECAME MORE INVOLVED IN THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOLWORK



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistically significant difference relative to the comparison group is noted at the 1% (***), 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

FIGURE 4. CHILDREN IN PROGRAM CLASSES WERE ABSENT LESS FREQUENTLY



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistically significant difference relative to the comparison group is noted at the 1% (***), 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

POLICY LESSONS



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Discussion groups between parents and school staff can be a low-cost policy tool for increasing parental involvement. In just three evening meetings held over a two-month period, parents gained considerable knowledge about the functioning of local schools and appeared to use this knowledge to better support their children's education. This parental involvement translated into improvements in educational outcomes and behavior, for both their children and their children's peers.

Schools can play a role in encouraging parents to become more involved in their children's education. Despite numerous barriers characteristic of disadvantaged neighborhoods, schools were able to increase involvement rates among low-income parents. However, not all parents who could have benefited from the program participated. Future research is necessary to better understand how to increase take-up of similar school interventions.

POLICY INFLUENCE

Based on these results, in 2010 the French Ministry of Education announced the expansion of the *La Mallette* program to all grade 6 classes across 1,300 public middle schools in priority education areas.² In 2016, the Ministry made the program materials available to all schools and published guidelines for running the sessions on the Ministry's website. The program is now available at two different points during a child's schooling: in grade 1, when students start primary school, and in grade 6, when they enter middle school.³

Featured Evaluation: Avvisati, Francesco, Marc Gurgand, Nina Guyon, Eric Maurin. 2014. "Getting Parents Involved: A Field Experiment in Deprived Schools." *Review of Economic Studies* 81, no. 1: 57-83.

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Suggested Citation: J-PAL Policy Briefcase. 2021. "Getting Parents Involved." Cambridge, MA: Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab.

This research was made possible by:

Partners: Rectorat de l'Académie de Créteil

Funders: Fonds d'Expérimentation pour la Jeunesse

² Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, France. 2010. "Extension du dispositif « Mallette des parents »." Bulletin officiel no. 29 du 22 juillet 2010. <https://www.education.gouv.fr/cid52640/mene1000704c.html>.

³ Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, France. 2017. "Tous mobilisés pour vaincre le décrochage." http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/02_-/_fevrier/69/4/Dossier_de_presse_decrochage_scolaire_Isere_fevrier_2017_718694.pdf

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