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School based management effects: Resources or governance change? Evidence from Mexico



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ABSTRACT

In their struggle to improve student learning, many developing countries are introducing school-based management (SBM) reforms that provide cash-grants to school councils. School councils are expected to work collaboratively and decide on the best use of the funds. In this paper, we study the effects of one such program in Mexico on student outcomes. We complement the differences-in-differences analysis by qualitatively exploring program implementation. Results suggest the program had substantial positive effects on third grade Spanish test scores, with most benefits accruing to schools receiving SBM cash grants for the first time. These results are robust to alternative model specifications. The implementation analysis suggests school councils did monitor grant use, but parental participation did not significantly improve in other areas. Our findings suggest that the observed positive program effects are likely to be the result of providing schools with financial resources to meet pressing equipment, material, and infrastructure needs.

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1. Introduction

Despite great improvement in education access in recent decades, developing countries continue to struggle to ensure that children in primary school acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to further their education and pursue better economic opportunities. Toward this end, many developing countries have implemented school-based management (SBM) reforms. SBM has been championed by international organizations such as The World Bank as a promising way to improve education through better use of financial resources (World Bank, 2004). It is

argued that by decentralizing decision-making authority and responsibility for school operations from the federal level to local stakeholders, these decisions can better reflect local needs and priorities leading to improved student outcomes (Barrera-Osorio, Fasih, & Patrinos with Santibañez, 2009; Khattri, Ling, & Jha, 2010; King & Ozler, 1998; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990). There are currently estimated to be more than 800 SBM programs around the world operating in countries as diverse as El Salvador, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Kenya, and Israel (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009). The popularity of SBM programs notwithstanding, rigorous evidence supporting the impact of such programs on student achievement is only beginning to emerge.

In their review of evaluations of SBM programs in over 20 countries, Barrera-Osorio et al. (2009) found mixed evidence regarding their impact on student test scores. Several cases showed positive results, such as programs in

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El Salvador, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Nicaragua (Jimenez & Sawada, 2003; Khattri et al., 2010; King & Ozler, 1998; Sawada & Ragatz, 2005). In addition, several studies showed improvement on pass rates and, to a lesser degree, on dropout rates (Carnoy, Gove, Loeb, Marshall, & Socias, 2008; Di Gropello & Marshall, 2005; Gertler, Patrinos, & Rubio Codina, 2012; Jimenez & Sawada, 2003; Pães de Barros & Mendonça, 1998; Skoufias & Shapiro, 2006). Other studies found no effects of program participation on student achievement (see for example Carnoy et al., 2008 for Brazil, or BN Consult & Marshall, 2012 for Cambodia). Most of these studies were non-experimental, and thus provide less rigorous findings regarding the effects of SBM. A few recent studies of SBM effects based on experimental evidence stand out because they specifically explore the effects of supporting interventions designed to enhance the role of the school council in school decision making (i.e. training, democratic elections). Although the body of evidence is still small, these more recent, experimental studies suggest positive effects of SBM on student outcomes.

In Indonesia, a study of SBM found improvements in student achievement when a wider base of the community is represented in the school council. In 2006, researchers carried out an experimental pilot study to test the effects of three measures aimed at helping school committees expand their role in school decision making: increased capacity and knowledge of the committee (through training and financial resources), increased community representation in the committee (through democratic elections), and improved ties between the committee and a local (village) governing body (Pradhan et al., 2011). The study's findings suggest that interventions that reinforce existing school committee structures (grant and training) have limited impacts on learning. However, interventions that change these structures, through democratic elections that allow a wider base of the community to be represented in the school committee, or by linking committees to the larger community (village), were associated with increased test scores in Indonesian language between 0.17 and 0.22 of a standard deviation (SD).

In Mexico, the *Apoyo a la Gestión Escolar* (AGE) program was first introduced in the 1996/1997 school year. AGE is designed to financially support the work of schools' parent associations. Monetary support varies from US \$500 to US \$700 per year depending on school size and the use of funds goes mostly to infrastructure improvements and small civil works. In return for the grant, parents must commit to greater involvement in school activities, undertaking of the infrastructure improvements and civil works and attending training sessions delivered by state education authorities (Bruno, Filmer, & Patrinos, 2011). A recent randomized impact evaluation of the program found that AGE schools had reduced their dropout rate by 1.5–1.7 percentage points compared to control schools, during the first year of implementation. As part of the experiment, a pilot program that doubled the AGE cash grant was also tested. This pilot had a positive effect on Spanish and mathematics test scores of around 5% and 6–8%, respectively. This effect was observed mostly for third grade students (Gertler, Patrinos, & Rodriguez-Oreggia, 2010).

Mexican education authorities followed-up AGE with the *Programa Escuelas de Calidad* (PEC) program in 2001/2002. PEC was initially targeted to urban areas, and was one of the earliest large-scale SBM reforms in a developing country. PEC provides cash grants averaging around US \$4500 dollars to schools in exchange for collaboration between principals, teachers and parents for school planning and decision making.¹ The program provides some training to school principals, but not to school councils. Evaluations of the program using quasi-experimental methodologies have found small, but significant positive effects of PEC on indicators of school quality such as dropout, repetition, and failure rates (Murnane, Willet, & Cárdenas, 2006; Shapiro & Skoufias, 2006; Skoufias & Shapiro, 2006). None of the previously cited studies of PEC used test scores as an outcome variable.

This paper adds to the evidence base on the effects of SBM reforms on student achievement through an evaluation of the "*Programa de Fortalecimiento e Inversión Directa a las Escuelas*" or "Program to Strengthen and Invest Directly in Schools" (PEC-FIDE) in Mexico. Since 2006/2007, Mexico has a national standardized evaluation "ENLACE" in math and Spanish. All students from third to ninth grade in both public and private schools are required to take this test. We use ENLACE test scores as the measure of student achievement.

The program was launched in 2008–2009 as a spin-off of PEC and implemented in six Mexican states: Hidalgo, Guanajuato, Estado de México, Quintana Roo, Chihuahua, and Coahuila. PEC-FIDE is financed with matching grants from states and the federal government. A state program coordinator manages PEC-FIDE's operations in each state. In the year this study took place, over 220 primary schools in the six states participated in the program. Schools that have participated in PEC are eligible for PEC-FIDE, but a school cannot receive funds from both programs simultaneously.

Like PEC, PEC-FIDE seeks to improve student achievement and reduce dropout rates by providing cash grants to schools in exchange for collaborative school planning and shared decision making. The amount of PEC-FIDE's cash grant depends on school enrollment, with the average school grant being around US \$4500, at the average US dollar to Mexican Peso exchange rate of 2008, and larger schools receiving upwards of US \$20,000 dollars per year. Program regulations specify a suggested allocation of funds for allowable expenses: training, interventions for at-risk students, materials or equipment, and infrastructure improvements.

Under PEC-FIDE, school councils – a crucial aspect of most SBM reforms – include the principal, teacher representatives, and parent representatives. School councils oversee both school planning activities and their implementation, drafting a five-year School Improvement

¹ Elementary schools in Mexico serve grades one through six. Schools are administered by state education authorities and principals have little autonomy to select teachers or set curriculum. Principals are not selected by parents or the community, but are assigned to the school by central authorities. All principals and teachers belong to the National Teachers' Union (also known as "SNTE"). SNTE has no formal role in managing PEC or PEC-FIDE.

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