



Can provision of free school uniforms harm attendance? Evidence from Ecuador[☆]



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ABSTRACT

To raise school participation, many programs in developing countries eliminate or reduce private contributions to education. Using data from a randomized experiment in Ecuador, we ironically find that announcing a free school uniform program had a negative impact on attendance. The school uniforms were distributed in only 63% of the schools that were told that they would get them, thus this negative impact could have been generated by creating false expectations of free distribution, or also by a sunk cost effect on those who did actually receive the uniforms.

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1. Introduction

Governments of developing countries and NGO's alike consider it a priority to increase school participation. The government of Ecuador is no exception. Because financial constraints are regarded a barrier for children from poor families to go to school, the Ecuadorian government eliminated school fees for children from poor families and provides free school meals and textbooks. Recently it also started to provide free school uniforms to children from poor families in rural areas with the plan to expand this program to poor urban areas.¹

We examine to what extent the provision of free school uniforms to children in primary schools contributes to an increase in their school attendance. Free uniforms may increase attendance if children more often have

clean clothes to wear to go to school, or if they have to spend less time earning money to cover the expenses of a uniform. For this study we took advantage of the further expansion of the program into poor urban areas in Ecuador. One hundred and one schools – randomly chosen from a sample of 201 schools – were scheduled to receive free uniforms one year ahead of the official schedule (in 2009 instead of 2010). Information about school and teacher characteristics was collected through a baseline survey in the beginning of the school year (in May 2009). Through three unannounced visits (in July, September and November) to the schools, we registered attendance of children enrolled in fifth and sixth grade.

The study took place in five provinces in the coastal part of the country. In three provinces, the program was executed as intended. The uniforms were produced and delivered to the schools on time. Compliance with the assigned treatment status was high but not perfect. Some schools received free uniforms while they shouldn't and some other schools did not receive free uniforms although they should. In the two remaining provinces, however, the local offices of the Ministry of Education failed to arrange the procurement of the uniforms and just two out of 52 schools received the free uniforms. Since assignment to treatment status was stratified by province, results can be presented separately for the group of three provinces where the schools were delivered on time (to which we will refer as “served provinces”) and for the group of two provinces where the schools were not delivered on time (“unserved provinces”).

Somewhat unexpectedly, we find that assignment to the free uniforms program reduces attendance. Averaged over the three unannounced visits, attendance is 2 percentage points lower in the schools assigned to treatment than in the control schools. This should

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¹ Ecuador is among the countries where school uniforms are compulsory. Other countries where uniforms are compulsory or common include many countries from the Commonwealth, as well as Brazil, Cambodia, Chile, China, Honduras, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Philippines, South Korea and Turkey. Arguments in favor of (compulsory) school uniforms include: (1) increasing students' safety, (2) increase of student learning and positive attitudes towards school, (3) decreased behavior problems by increased attendance rates, lowering suspension rates and decreasing substance use, and (4) increased self-esteem (Brunsmma and Rockquemore, 1998).

be compared to attendance among controls of 92 percent, implying a 25% increase in absenteeism.

We explore several explanations for this finding. We first test whether the result can be attributed to selection effects, where treatment schools attract additional (perhaps less motivated) students. By not publicly announcing the assignment of schools to the free uniforms treatment and by concentrating on pupils in fifth and sixth grades who are less likely to switch schools, it was attempted to avoid such selection effects. We also formally examine whether assignment to treatment affects school enrollment and find that it does not.

A second explanation is related to disappointment. Our results suggest that there is also a negative impact of assignment to treatment in the two unserved provinces. This may be explained by parents in the schools where free uniforms were announced but not delivered being disappointed with the school and therefore more likely to keep their children at home. Alternatively it may be that these parents were unable to (immediately) buy the uniforms when it turned out that the free uniforms were not delivered. The fact that the negative impact estimate in the two unserved provinces is only significant at the first unannounced visit (if no control variables are included) is consistent with this. In the three served provinces, 14 school of the 76 schools that were assigned to treatment did not receive the free uniforms that were promised to them. This means that 18% of the disappointment effect found in the unserved provinces may also be present in the served provinces. Since the negative effect in the unserved provinces is typically smaller (in absolute terms) than the negative effect in the served provinces, the disappointment effect can explain a part but not the entire negative effect in the served provinces.

We also discuss other explanations, including the sunk cost fallacy, anticipation of free uniforms in the near future among the controls, stigmatization and poor quality of government-provided uniforms. Unfortunately, we do not have the data necessary to assess the importance of these other explanations.

Our findings stand in contrast with the results reported by Evans et al. (2012), who evaluate the impact of a very similar intervention in which free uniforms were provided to primary school children in western Kenya. They find that receiving a uniform increased attendance by 7 percentage points, where baseline attendance is 78 percent. There are some differences in the setting and the design of their study and ours that may explain the different results. We elaborate on this in Section 1.²

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the context of the education system in Ecuador and provides further details of the free uniforms program. Section 3 describes the experimental design and the data. Section 4 presents the main results and discusses these. The final section summarizes and concludes.

2. Context and program

Ecuador is a low-middle income country with a large share of poor families and high inequality. Compulsory schooling in Ecuador starts at the age of 5 and ends at the age of 14. This covers one year of pre-school, six years of primary school and three years of basic secondary school. Enrollment at the primary level is almost universal, but drops sharply at the transition from primary to secondary school.³ This drop is mainly concentrated among children from poor families. Official statistics on school attendance are not available. Based on the data used in this paper, absenteeism is close to 10 percent. Typically, school-aged girls

who do not go to school help their mothers with domestic work, whereas boys usually help with farm work or work as street vendors.

Wearing a school uniform is compulsory in Ecuador and children can in principle not attend school without one. Normally, parents buy uniforms in specialized shops before the beginning of the school year. Each city or town has some of these shops, which make uniforms for several schools. In some cases, parents' associations have an agreement with artisans to make uniforms. Schools do not play any role in this process. Extremely poor parents may instead of buying a uniform, buy the raw materials and make the uniforms themselves.

In 2007 the government of Ecuador launched the free uniforms program. The program has two main objectives. First, it intends to increase school participation among children in poor areas. Secondly, it aims to improve local economic conditions by contracting small and medium-sized local artisans for the production of the uniforms. Artisans could only be contracted for the government's free uniform program if they satisfied certain quality standards, to ensure that free uniforms were of at least the same quality as regular uniforms. In the first phase of the program only children enrolled in public schools in rural areas were served. In 2008 the government decided to expand the program to public schools in poor urban areas by 2010. The free uniforms are paid for by the government; the expenses are not deducted from the budget of the schools that receive the free uniforms.

Since school uniforms are compulsory, exposure to the free uniforms program implies that parents do not have to pay for a uniform on which they would otherwise have spent between 20 and 25 US\$.⁴ This amount can be compared to average monthly household expenditures in the two lowest quintiles of the wealth distribution of around 100 US\$ (cf. Oosterbeek et al., 2008). A school uniform (self-bought or government-provided) typically consists of: pants or skirt, blouse, shirt, round neck shirt or polo shirt, shorts and sweat suit.

3. Design and data

3.1. Design

The program of free school uniforms is part of a larger program called "Eliminating barriers to access to school". The primary objective of that larger program is to increase enrollment. The government of Ecuador invited us to evaluate the impact of the provision of free uniforms on school enrollment. In meetings with people from the Ministries of Education and of Planning that took place before we implemented the design, we learned that they also expected that the provision of free uniforms would increase attendance (they were aware of the 2005 version of Evans et al., 2012). During these meetings we had various discussions with the ministries about possible research designs. Designs that would allow us to evaluate the impact on enrollment turned out to be infeasible and therefore we chose to implement a design that would provide relatively clean evidence about the impact of free uniforms on attendance.

Given the planned expansion of the program, we proposed to provide the free uniforms to some schools one year ahead of the official schedule, in 2009 instead of 2010. From a list of over 5000 schools, 201 schools in five coastal provinces were randomly drawn to participate in the experiment. We then randomly assigned 101 of these 201 schools to the provision of free school uniforms one year ahead of the official schedule. The other 100 schools were assigned to the control group and were thus supposed not to receive free school uniforms in 2009. Randomization was stratified by province.⁵

² Duflo et al. (2011) manipulate the cost of schooling by providing free school uniforms to school children in Kenya. This intervention reduces the dropout rate, teen pregnancy and teen marriage, but not the risk of sexually transmitted infection. The study does not look at the impact on school attendance.

³ In a sample drawn from the bottom two quintiles of the wealth distribution, the enrollment rate among children aged 10 or 11 – the ages when children are in grades 5 and 6 – is equal to 0.97. For children aged 12 or 13 the enrollment rate in this sample drops to 0.79. (This is based on the data used in Oosterbeek et al., 2008).

⁴ Based on the 2006 Survey of Life Conditions in Ecuador. When we restrict this sample to children aged 10–12, living in the provinces included in our experiment and from families in the lowest two quintiles of the wealth distribution, average expenditures are 24 US\$.

⁵ The actual randomization was conducted through a small computer program that assigned a random number between zero and one to each school. Schools were then sorted on province and random number. The first half of the schools of each province was assigned to the treatment group, the others to the control group.

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