



## PAKISTAN: Can private schools catering to the poor increase access and improve learning?

Educating children is a priority across the world, but low-income countries can face enormous challenges. Schools are often overcrowded and in disrepair. Teachers don't always show up or may not be qualified or interested in teaching. Parents hesitate to send children, especially girls, to schools that aren't close by

or they may want to keep them at home to help with housework. The numbers tell the story: Worldwide, 58 million children who should be in primary school are not, despite the push for universal primary educa-

tion by national governments and international organizations. In the effort to boost enrollment, raise teaching standards and strengthen school accountability, policymakers and education experts are exploring a variety of approaches, including leveraging the private and other non-governmental sectors to offer quality education to disadvantaged children.

In Pakistan's Sindh province, only about half of primary school age children go to school. Through the International

Development Association (IDA), the World Bank's fund for the poorest, the Sindh government received assistance to develop and implement its Sindh Education Sector Reform Program, which aimed to raise enrollment, improve learning, and increase accountability and better governance, thereby reducing social disparities in education. This included a public-private partnership program, in which the government provides cash subsidies to private entrepreneurs who establish and operate free, co-educational primary schools in villages in remote areas where government schools are not always available.

An evaluation was integrated into this program to assess its impacts. The impact evaluation found that boys and girls in villages that were randomly assigned program schools were more likely to be in school and they did better on tests than children in villages without such schools. Parents also had bigger dreams: they were more likely to want their daughters to become teachers rather than housewives and were more likely to want their sons to become doctors or engineers instead of security personnel. The World Bank is supporting the Second Sindh Education Reform Program, which is helping continue this public-private partnership program and support and strengthen the quality of the schools.

### Context

Private schools in Pakistan, historically catering to children of the country's elite, have become popular among poorer populations as lower-cost private options have expanded. More than a third of all Pakistani students are now enrolled in private schools, where tuition averages less than \$5 a month in rural villages, a small fraction of average household income. Research studies of these schools have generally found that student learning is higher and teachers perform better, although teachers are

paid less and are often less educated than their counterparts in government schools.

Pakistani policymakers and education experts are turning to for-profit private education as one route to improve the quality of education and expand access for the country's primary school age children, more than a quarter of whom aren't in school. While the models differ in details, these public-private partnership programs generally require that schools waive tuition in exchange for

receiving a per student subsidy that schools use for their costs. The subsidy is set low, often lower than the cost to run a government school where teacher salaries tend to be much higher, and accountability measures are built into the programs to promote quality. In Pakistan's Punjab province, for example, in a program initiated in 2005, existing low-cost private schools can qualify for a per student subsidy if they waive tuition and ensure that a minimum percentage of students pass a standardized academic test offered on a regular basis. This program, which has proven successful at raising school enrollment and student test scores (see Evidence to Policy note, October 2012, "Can low-cost private schools improve learning?"), now covers more than 1.7 million students in some 3,500 program schools.

In Sindh province, education experts have also turned to low-cost private schools to increase access to education and improve student learning, especially in villages that lacked local schools. The Promoting Low-Cost Private Schooling in Rural Sindh program was created by the Sindh Education Foundation, a semi-autonomous agency of the provincial government,

working with a World Bank team. The program, launched in 2009, seeks to encourage private entrepreneurs to build and operate primary schools in educationally underserved villages, generally defined as having limited access to government schools. Local private entrepreneurs are invited to apply to the program through an open call in newspapers and to propose underserved villages where they will establish and operate schools. To qualify, schools must meet minimum facility standards, be co-ed, waive tuition fees for all students, and hire teachers with at least eight years of schooling. Two of the teachers have to be female. In return, the private entrepreneurs receive a per student subsidy. They also get additional non-financial assistance, such as free textbooks and other materials, teacher training, and regular visits by foundation staff to advise on how to improve teaching and learning. This policy note reflects new and updated results since the previous Evidence to Policy note published in September 2013, "Using Low-Cost Private Schools to Fill the Education Gap: An impact evaluation of a program in Pakistan."

## Evaluation

At the start, the program was implemented in eight districts, chosen because they ranked very low on three school access measures: the number of children in school, gender equality among children in school and the percentage of households less than 15 minutes walking time from the nearest primary school.

The evaluation sought to test not only the impact of program schools on enrollment and student learning, but also whether giving some schools a bigger per student subsidy for female students had a larger impact on girls' outcomes. A total of 199 villages in the districts were randomly assigned to one of three groups: 82 villages in which program schools received a subsidy of 350 rupees per student (\$5 in 2008 US dollars), regardless of gender; 79 villages where program schools received the 350-rupee subsidy for each student, with an additional 100 rupees (\$1.50 in 2008 US dollars) for each female student, and 38 control villages where no program support was offered. Both the gender neutral and differen-

tiated subsidy treatment groups received training, textbooks and teaching materials.

Because the schools opened in the summer of 2009, a few months after the start of the school year in the spring, students in the program schools had a shorter first school year. The baseline survey was conducted in February 2009, with a follow-up survey in April-May 2011 after the second school year ended. The baseline survey interviewed 5,556 children aged five to nine and the follow-up survey interviewed 17,720 children aged five to 17. During the follow-up household survey, children aged five to nine were given a language and math test and queried about work they did apart from school, their enrollment status, and their desired future occupations. Schools were also surveyed at follow-up to gather information on their operations, facility, and staff. Teachers were interviewed and attendance lists were checked through unannounced visits to cross verify reported enrollment and attendance.

## Findings

### **Enrollment among children in villages with program schools rose sharply, and children in these villages continued in school longer.**

The primary school enrollment rate in rural Sindh for children aged six to 10 was about 56 percent at the start of the program—among the lowest in the country—with a significant gender gap: Enrollment was 65 percent for boys, compared to 46 percent for girls. In the areas where the program was implemented, enrollment was even lower, about 30 percent for primary-school aged boys and girls. Two years after the program started, enrollment of boys and girls aged six through 10 had increased by 30 percentage points relative to the control group. There was no difference in the increase for villages where schools also got an additional subsidy for enrolling girls. Researchers also found that children in program villages completed an extra half a grade on average as compared to children in control villages. And despite the fact that the program didn't target them, enrollment for children aged 11 to 17 also increased by 12 percentage points.

### **Children in program villages did much better on standardized tests.**

Math and language tests were administered to children age five to 10 years old in household samples in both program and control villages as part of the follow-up measurement. Overall, when looking at all children in villages where the program was rolled out—regardless of whether or not the child had enrolled in school—test scores in both math and language rose by 0.63 standard deviations, which is equivalent to moving a child from the average score to the 74th percentile. When just looking at the children who enrolled in school because of the program, the impact was even larger: test scores for those children increased by two standard deviations, equivalent to moving a child from the average score to the 98th percentile. These higher test scores are particularly significant because children enrolled in program schools were more likely to come from socioeconomically

disadvantaged backgrounds: their fathers were less educated and more likely to be farmers, and their families lived in more poorly-constructed homes.



### **Program impacts on school enrollment or student test scores didn't differ by gender or by the gender-based structure of the subsidy.**

The impact of the program on enrollment and test scores was similar for both girls and boys. The additional subsidy to encourage program schools to attract girls to school didn't improve girls' enrollment or test scores beyond the subsidy provided to other program schools for all children.

### **Program schools not only did a better job teaching—despite having less experienced teachers than government schools—but they provided their students with better facilities.**

Similar to findings from studies of low-cost private schools in other parts of Pakistan, the program school operators in Sindh



province did a better job of keeping the schools staffed and running. And the type of subsidy a school was offered – whether gender neutral or with an additional payment for girls – didn't affect how schools were structured or operated. The schools usually had more classrooms than government schools and were more likely to have sufficient desks for students, drinking water facilities, an electrical connection, and toilets. Researchers also found that program schools were open an extra half day a week, on average. The program required that these schools hire at least two female teachers, and the total number of female teachers was higher than in government schools. Program school female teachers generally had less teaching experience than their counterparts in government schools, and they were paid less.

**The evaluation found that going to a program school didn't just give children the chance to learn, but it gave them the chance to dream bigger.**

Families in program villages were more likely to hope that their daughters became teachers, and less likely to hope that they become housewives. They were more likely to want their sons to be doctors or engineers, and less likely to want them to become security personnel, as compared with families in the control villages. Families also raised their expectation of the ideal education level by one and a half years.

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## Conclusion

Private schools catering to poorer populations in Pakistan are proving very successful at attracting students—boys and girls—and teaching them effectively for less money than it costs to run a government school. Some of the lower costs come from hiring teachers who receive lower salaries than government school teachers, but this doesn't appear to be hurting the quality of education. On the contrary, program school students did substantially better on tests than their

counterparts in government schools in the general vicinity. There is still more to learn about ways to create and support programs that expand educational access and improve school quality. But as policymakers explore solutions to the global learning crisis, it's important to keep in mind that with minimal government support, local actors and entrepreneurs have the potential to create cost-effective solutions to address local challenges in education.

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