

Do parents do less when schools improve?

Evaluation asks whether information about improved school quality leads to decreased parental investment in children



Schools in England are typically inspected by Ofsted for quality every few years, with the results being sent to parents and published. Ofsted's intention is to provide information to parents, promote improvement, and hold schools to account for the public money they receive. Parents will respond in different ways, such as selecting better schools, and even moving home to get into a particular catchment area. This research focused on how it might affect their input into their child's education.

It showed that a reduction of parental investment in circumstances where parents hear of improved school quality is a rational but unintended consequence of the inspection regime. Interestingly, the results also reveal that the children's time investment was in the opposite direction to that of their parents, increasing in response to news of improved school quality.

The data sets used offered the policy evaluation a high degree of counterfactual control. The timing of when families responded to the wide-topic annual survey is random and therefore independent of when they received news of any changes to school quality.

This evaluation therefore represents a rare real-world example of a randomised double-blind controlled study, as those asking and responding to the annual survey were effectively blinded from knowing that they were in the treatment group, control group or even taking part in the evaluation. In addition, the longitudinal nature of the survey provided confirmation that any changes in time investment were made in response to news of changes to school quality, not the cause of the change in assessment.

Why was the policy considered necessary?

The policy to inspect schools in England through the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) was introduced in 1992 as a response to concerns about the quality of education in the country. The inspections assess various aspects of a school's performance, including quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management. Schools are given an overall inspection rating on a four-point scale: outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate. These ratings are sent to all parents, and a full inspection report is made available online within four weeks. [An annual survey](#) of parents undertaken by YouGov since 2015 shows 90% of parents are aware of their child's school's inspection rating.



The main route of improvement is via internal changes within the school in response to the report, with existing parents having an indirect role via parents pressurising schools to maintain standards, and prospective parents selecting schools based on previous performance. Additionally, parents have an incentive to invest more time in their children to counteract a poor inspection outcome.

How was the evaluation carried out?

The study used a restricted access version of household panel data from Understanding Society that identifies which school is attended by each child in the household. This allowed for the data to be linked to administrative records on school inspection ratings and further linked to the school's administrative data on individual test scores.

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Previous assessment outcomes were used to define whether the new inspection rating reveals good, bad or no news to parents about school quality. This was combined with survey data on parental time investments into their children, and on children's own time investments from the self-completed questionnaire for 10-15-year-olds. Together, these data showed the household responses to any news of an inspection rating. 4,660 English households who responded to waves 1, 3 and 5 of Understanding Society had an Ofsted school inspection during the academic year of interview. Of these, 621 showed changes in parental help with homework.

The research design exploited the fact that school inspections can take place in any month during the academic year and household survey interviews can take place in any month.



So, the researchers observed some households being interviewed before their school was inspected (control group), and some interviewed post inspection (treated group).

What were the strengths of using Understanding Society data?

There are some significant strengths of using Understanding Society data in this policy evaluation including:

- **The (restricted) ability to link survey data** with the children's school inspection reports and school's administrative data on individual test scores.
- **The longitudinal nature** of the data meant the researchers were able to confirm that the observed changes in time investment were made in response to news of changes to school quality, not the cause of the change in assessment.
- **The wide-ranging and unrelated nature** of Understanding Society means that this evaluation represents a real-world randomised double-blind controlled study, as both those asking and responding to the annual survey were effectively blinded from knowing who was in the treatment group, control group or even the role of the study in the evaluation.

Findings

When parents receive good news about school quality, they are significantly more likely to reduce time spent supporting their children with schoolwork compared to parents in the control group who got the same news later. Interestingly, the results show that children's time inputs move in the opposite direction to the behavioural response of parents: when a household receives good news about school quality, children are significantly more likely to increase time spent on homework, partly compensating for the loss of parental input.

Further, the results suggest that parents do not seem to substitute one form of input into their child (time spent on homework) with another (time talking about important matters): rather both parent-child interactions are substitutes for parent's beliefs about school quality.



Source: Ellen Greaves, Iftikhar Hussain, Birgitta Rabe, Imran Rasul, *Parental Responses to Information About School Quality: Evidence from Linked Survey and Administrative Data*, *The Economic Journal*, 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/uead015>