Accountability Reforms in Developing Countries

Symposium Justification

School systems in most developing countries largely fail to deliver quality primary education to poor children. Although considerable gains have been made in bringing children into school, there are still regions in the world where primary enrollments and retention remain low; currently an estimated 60 million primary school-age children are out of school. But the bigger problem may be that even when children are in school, they are learning very little. The results of international achievement tests consistently show that even children who do enroll attain such poor instruction that they are effectively functionally illiterate.

Until recently, efforts to improve education typically focused on providing inputs to schools—increasing spending along existing allocation patterns. But, substantial research now demonstrates that increased funding is not sufficient for improved learning outcomes. First, incremental funds may be allocated to inputs that have weak impacts on student learning, such as textbooks that are too difficult to comprehend. Second, when the inputs given to schools are substitutes for inputs at home, increasing school inputs may decrease home inputs thus curtailing overall gains in learning. Third, teachers and other education personnel (who represent almost the totality of education spending) may be poorly motivated to perform. Poorly prepared teachers, high levels of absenteeism, an environment of weak supervision, inadequate regulatory oversight and poorly designed incentives contribute to poor performance. The underlying cause of such failures in basic service delivery in developing countries could be weak accountability relationships between the state, service providers, and the citizens and clients they serve. In the education sector, efforts to strengthen these accountability relationships through system reforms have been numerous. However, designs have varied considerably and there has been little rigorous evaluation of impact until recently.

This symposium provides rigorous evaluations of accountability-promoting reforms in basic education in two directions. Countries may decide to strengthen accountability by empowering public schools. Or they may increase accountability by incentivizing teachers to perform. School-based management is examined through a program that attempts to empower parents to improve schooling outcomes with resources and capacity building. Efforts to improve accountability and thereby results by incentivizing teachers is analyzed through experiments with teacher performance pay.

There are some positive effects associated with parental empowerment programs. Student learning improves significantly, especially for those students in the program the longest. While such programs may have the potential to improve outcomes for the poorest, in order to have an effect on education systems, they would benefit from enhanced accountability measures. For instance, the programs could provide more resources in the hands of school committees, and/or increase the level of decision-making at the school, for example, by allowing school committees to have a say in hiring and firing of teachers.

While the idea of teacher performance-pay is increasingly making its way into policy, the evidence on the effectiveness of such programs is both limited and mixed. The central questions in the literature on teacher performance pay to date have been whether teacher performance pay based on test scores can improve student achievement, and whether there are negative consequences of teacher incentives based on student test scores. Teacher incentive programs
produce large and significant effects on student learning. Results suggest that performance pay for teachers could be an effective policy tool in developing countries.