

Home and School

Improving families' influence by 5% would do more than improving schools' influence by 70%.

By Caroline M. Hoxby

Most people believe that a child's family is the most important determinant of his or her life outcomes — not just family-related outcomes like marriage, but also achievement outcomes like test scores, whether the child graduates from college, and wages later in life. Most people are right.

There has been some good research in this area, and it usually finds that family variables explain more than 10 times as much variation in students achievement as school inputs and neighbourhood variables *combined*.

Some people find such evidence profoundly discouraging, because they would like student outcomes to be largely independent of family circumstances. Such people tend to react to the evidence in one of two ways.

Some resist the statistics and hope that by combining the numbers in some new way, they will find that families are not very important (and that non-family factors, such as schools, are). Others decide that policy efforts should be focused on improving family circumstances (through income transfers, anti-drug programs, and so forth) instead of reforming schools and other institutions that affect children more directly.

Neither of these reactions is very productive. On the one hand, family effects are of such great magnitude that varying how statistics are computed has little effect on the central conclusion that families are extremely important.

On the other hand, a key family factor that affects children is parents' own education, so that it is hard to improve one generation's achievement without having first improved the achievement of the previous generation! Moreover, both of these reactions are misguided, because it is wrong to think of families and schools as *alternative* influences on children.

There is a third way.

Instead of thinking that if families are important, schools are not, we should try to harness the interaction between families and schools to increase the transformative effects of the schools.

An example unrelated to schools may help with the essential logic. We start with the assumption that many families would like to improve their nutritional status and would tend to choose a supermarket that would make it easier for them to do this.

Families produce good nutritional status by being good consumers at the grocery store and by preparing food wisely. If the Wise Choices Supermarket begins to label its food better and make nutritious recipes available to its shoppers, and if families desirous of improving their nutritional status are able to shop at this store, then overall nutritional status will likely increase.

The improvement in nutrition would take place even though the vast majority of nutritional status was determined within the family, both before and after the change at the Wise Choices Supermarket.

Similarly, well-planned school reforms can exploit the power of families, making their influence better. In fact, one of the ways in which "good" families benefit their children is by choosing good schools for them.

On the one hand, it is right to attribute this "good school" effect to families, because school quality is a resource that they choose to provide (like nutritious meals or comfortable living space). When parents are able to choose a good school for their children, there are a number of positive effects.

Greater Parental Involvement

There is good evidence that parents with at least some choice become more involved in their children's school. They are more likely to visit the school, attend school events, and plan their child's courses with him.

Because parents know a lot about their children, their school experience is likely to be better if the school can make use of parents' knowledge.

Improved Home Environment

The evidence suggests that parents who choose their children's school are more likely to improve their home environment — taking their children to more museums and libraries, owning an atlas, providing a specific place for their children to study.

Positive Effects on Schools

Families who make choices among schools tend to force schools to communicate information to them that is relevant to their decision-making. As a result, chosen schools tend to make available more information on their students' academic performance, college admissions, etc.

In addition, schools are more likely to listen to parents in an environment where schools have to remain attractive to parents. For example, in schools where parents effectively exercise choice, they forestall the rapid introduction and discarding of curricular and pedagogical fads.

It is likely that expanded school choice is capable of achieving at least small improvements in family effects. Some of the key channels through which families affect their children are related to schools: choice of schools; pressure on schools to be achievement-oriented; control of children's school experiences through interacting with teachers and administrators; and creation of home environments that complement schools.

Because of the magnitude of family effects on educational outcomes, a reform that improved family effects by 5% might do more for students' outcomes than a reform that improved school effects by 70%.

(Adapted with permission from "[If Families Matter Most, Where Do Schools Come In?](#)" in A Primer on America's Schools. Dr. Hoxby is professor of economics at Harvard.)