

in brief...

What can be done to help low-achieving teenagers?

Young people who drop out of school are far more likely to experience unemployment and poverty than their peers. Experimental research by **Eric Maurin** and colleagues in deprived neighbourhoods of Paris shows the effectiveness of low-cost interventions that clarify educational options for low-achievers and dramatically reduce the number of dropouts.

A simple programme of meetings facilitated by school principals and targeted at low-achieving 15 year olds can help them to identify educational opportunities that fit both their tastes and their academic ability. That is the central finding of a large-scale randomised experiment that we conducted in Paris.

Our study reveals that the outcome of an intervention in deprived neighbourhoods of Paris has been a very significant reduction in the number of students repeating educational years ('grade repetition') and in the number of students dropping out of school altogether. Compared with most existing interventions, this is a very low cost way to help young people who struggle at school to find the educational track most suited to their needs and, as a result, drop out early.

In many developed countries, a uniform schooling system terminates at adolescence. It then gives way to a

highly stratified system of schools and 'tracks' that typically involves a prestigious academic track and a complex structure of vocational programmes.

Given that only the best students can get access to the most sought-after tracks, such a system may be a source

Young people who struggle at school need help finding the educational track most suited to their needs



of disappointment and disengagement for many young people, especially the academically weaker ones and those who lack information on available options and assignment mechanisms. Many find themselves obliged to choose among tracks that they never planned to study – and this may eventually lead them to drop out of education.

Our experimental research took place in 37 middle schools in the suburbs of Paris, mostly in deprived neighbourhoods. At the end of middle school (ninth grade), students in France can apply either to enter a three-year academic programme or to pursue a vocational programme. Students are also entitled to repeat ninth grade at least once.

We asked school principals to pre-select the quarter of ninth graders that they considered the most exposed to the risk of early dropout. Once the lists of pre-selected students were available, we randomly chose about half of the classes, in which the parents of the pre-selected students (and only these) were invited by school principals to attend two group meetings during the second term.

During these meetings, the principals discussed the specific aspirations of each family taking into account the academic performance of their children and, whenever necessary, provided them with specific feedback and targeted information on alternative options.

Our research finds that a year on, these parents had become more involved and had formed educational expectations better adapted to the very low academic record of their children.

This is reflected in their children's applications at the end of the year in which the meetings with principals took place: the proportion that included at least one low-level vocational programme in their list of possible school

assignments increased by about 30%. At the same time, the proportion who asked to repeat the year (with the aim of being accepted for the more selective three-year programmes) decreased by about the same proportion.

This adjustment in applications was followed by very significant shifts in actual assignments. One year after the intervention, the grade repetition rate of these students had fallen by about 30% and their dropout rate by about 45%.

Two years after the intervention, the students had not been induced to make unsuitable choices, nor had they simply postponed dropping out: the same proportion were in the second year of vocational education as one year before, and there were even fewer dropouts.

By encouraging many students to opt for a vocational programme rather than repeating ninth grade, the intervention did not harm their education prospects; rather, it helped to reduce their dropout rates further.

By contrast, the intervention had no negative impact on the share of pre-selected students who chose (and ended up in) three-year academic programmes: principals were able to target their intervention so as to avoid reducing the aspirations of the best performing students.

Our study reveals that having aspirations that are ill adapted to young people's academic ability is an important source of school dropouts. By showing that a simple intervention facilitated by the school principal can induce a significant fraction of would-be dropouts to identify and opt for programmes in which they can persevere and pass grades, our study contributes to the body of evidence on effective dropout prevention policies. Compared with most existing interventions, the set of meetings considered here is extremely low cost.

This article summarises 'Adjusting Your Dreams? High School Plans and Dropout Behaviour' by Dominique Goux, Marc Gurgand and Eric Maurin, which is forthcoming in the *Economic Journal*.

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Encouraging
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