

Beyond Beliefs: Experimental Evidence on Follow-Through Frictions at School Transitions*

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Abstract

A key puzzle in economics is why households underinvest in education despite high returns. While standard explanations focus on information, this paper highlights the role of follow-through frictions in a school-level RCT in 231 primary schools in Quiché, Guatemala. We document a substantive intention-action gap: 65% of students plan to enroll in secondary school yet 34% of those fail to follow-through on their plans. To causally isolate the effect of follow-through frictions, we randomly assign schools to a pure control, an information treatment, and a mentoring treatment that delivers identical informational content, along with follow-through support comprising classroom based socio-emotional skill-building and personalized educational counseling. Information provision has no effect on enrollment. Mentoring increases enrollment by 8.4 percentage points (18%) relative to information, with larger effects among students who already planned to enroll. The evidence points to socio-emotional skills as the operative channel in how mentoring helped improve follow-through.

JEL Codes: I21, I24, I25, I28, O15

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Beyond Beliefs

Experimental Evidence on Follow-Through Frictions
at School Transitions

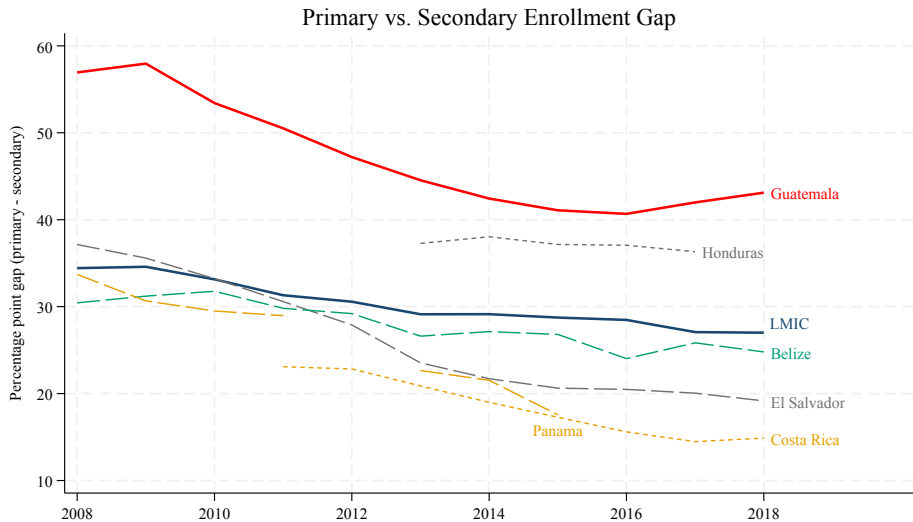
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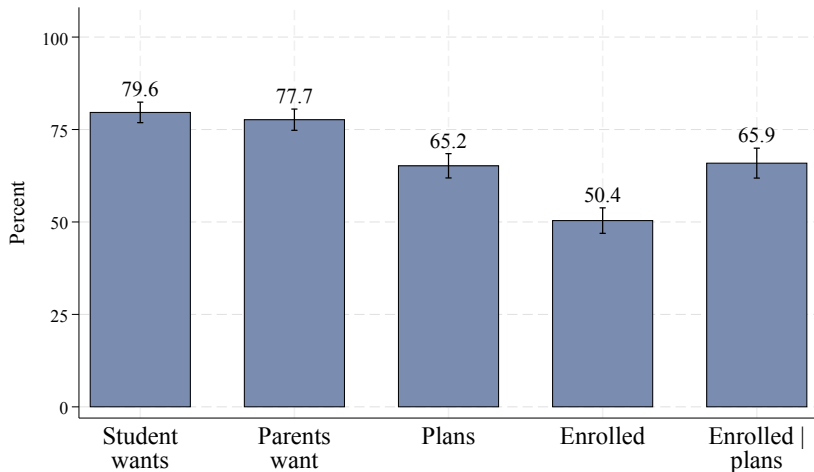
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Pre-registered: AEARCTR-0013889

Approaching universal primary school, but dropout at the end of primary persists



The puzzle: students plan to enroll but don't



34% of planners fail to follow through — even over a 2-month window (Oct plans → Jan enrollment: 35% fail). 45% of all non-enrollment occurs among students who planned to enroll. *Sample: Control group students that participated in the baseline survey (N=810)*

Our current focus is principally on who plans — not who follows through

- ▶ Discontinuous jump in direct costs (Filmer and Schady 2008; Barrera-Osorio et al. 2011; Garlick 2013; Kaufmann 2014; Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2021)
- ▶ Supply-side scarcity (Filmer 2007; Burde and Linden 2013; Muralidharan and Prakash 2017)
- ▶ Merit Rationing (Lucas and Mbiti 2014; Ozier 2018)
- ▶ Learning Crisis (Pritchett 2013; 2018 World Development Report; Muralidharan, Singh and Ganimian 2019)
- ▶ Gender specific mechanisms such as puberty, marriage and safety (Field and Ambrus 2008; Baird, McIntosh and Ozler 2011; Adukia 2017; Buchmann et al 2023)
- ▶ Opportunity Costs (Schultz 1960; Atkin 2016; Shah and Steinberg 2017)
- ▶ Information Frictions (Jensen 2010; Nguyen 2008; Dizon-Ross 2019)

Design: hold information fixed, vary follow-through support

Department of Quiché, Guatemala:

- ▶ 76.5% multidimensional poverty
- ▶ 55% fail to transition to lower secondary (basico)
- ▶ LSec enrollment is free but not automatic
- ▶ 231 schools across 21 municipalities

School level RCT

Three arms:

1. Control
2. Information (5 sessions on returns, logistics, laws, risks)
3. Mentoring (same info plus 14 weekly group sessions and individual meetings)

Identification:

- ▶ Info vs. Control = Information frictions
- ▶ Mentoring vs. Info = Ability to act on that information (under content parity assumption)

Design: Balance holds; compliance is high

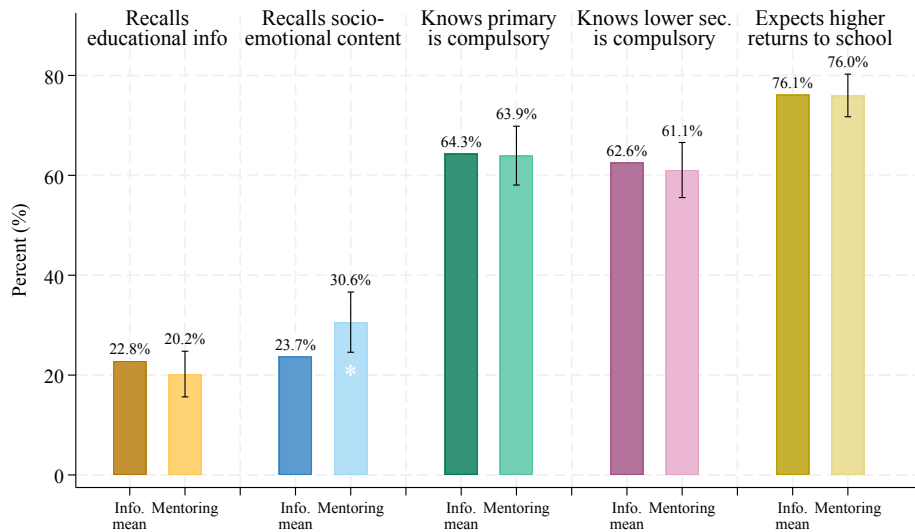
Balance:

- ▶ No systematic differences across arms on 15 baseline covariates
- ▶ Joint chi-square test: $p = 0.641$
- ▶ [Full balance table](#)

Compliance:

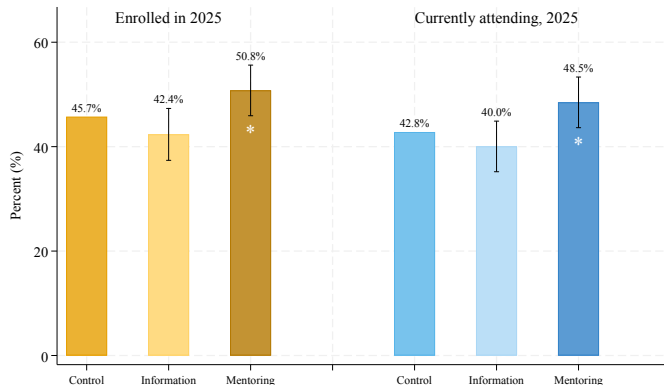
- ▶ 96% of info arm attended ≥ 1 session
- ▶ 98% of mentoring arm attended ≥ 1 session
- ▶ Mean attendance rate: 88%
- ▶ 77% of mentoring students received individual sessions
- ▶ **2SLS rescales ITT by take-up** to recover LATE for compliers (attended all info sessions, or $\geq 12/14$ mentoring sessions)

Design: content parity holds; arms differ where they should and only there



Source: Midline data,mentoring and information arm only

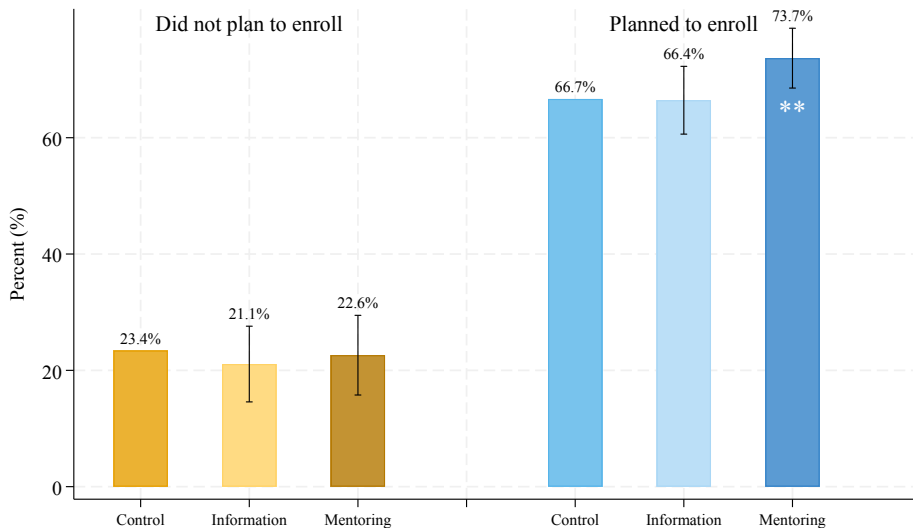
Mentoring promotes school enrollment; information alone does not



Enrolled 2025	ITT	2SLS (compliers)
Information vs Control	−3.4pp (3.0)	−4.6pp
Mentoring vs Information	+8.4pp*** (3.0)	+13.6pp***
Mentoring vs Control	+5.0pp* (2.9)	+9.0pp

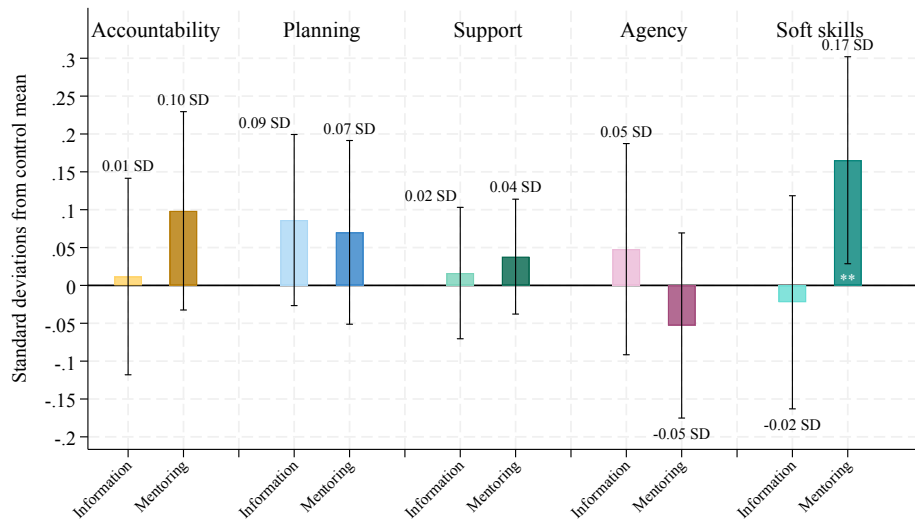
SEs clustered at school in parentheses; control mean 45.7%. Attendance effects nearly identical. *** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.10$. Source: Endline data

Treatment effects concentrated in students who already intend to enroll



Source: Endline data with baseline available

Mechanisms: Soft Skills, not Measured Support



Source: Endline data

What this adds to the literature on school transitions

1. A new fact about the transition from primary

- ▶ 45 percent of dropout AFTER plan is formed
- ▶ Even over 2 months

2. Design that separates follow through from information

- ▶ Prior work varies information without support: (Jensen, 2010; Nguyen, 2008; Avitabile and De Hoyos, 2018) or bundles both: (Carrell and Sacerdote, 2017; Alan et al., 2019; Edmonds et al., 2023)
- ▶ We add experimental content parity, a compulsory schooling age LMIC margin, zero attrition outcomes (enrollment), and direct mechanism measurement

3. Evidence on what friction binds

- ▶ Effects concentrated in planners
- ▶ Extends behavioral lit on intention-follow through gaps (Madrian and Shea, 2001; Bhargava and Manoli, 2015; Duflo et al., 2011) to one-shot irreversible (ish) decision
 - ▶ Effective intervention builds capacity rather than reducing hassle
 - ▶ In contrast to Duflo et al. (2021) that relax price constraints, we move enrollment without touching prices, beliefs, or resources

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