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The Importance of Information Targeting for School Choice

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While school choice programs are common, researchers and policymakers know little about the underlying decision-making processes and the transfer of information across agents. Researchers typically model the household as a unitary decision maker, yet the preferences and information sets of students and their guardians can differ widely. Knowing who ultimately decides and how the information available to each agent affects the decision has crucial implications for the optimal design of school choice systems, policies to increase participation in such schemes, and the most effective information dissemination strategies. The key barriers to understanding the choice process and the role of information are a lack of data and the endogenous allocation of information. In this study we focus on Ghana, a country with universal senior high school choice. Our study experimentally varied the provision of information about school quality, admissions standards, and application strategies to students and their guardians to observe changes in behavior and the decision maker's identity.

In Ghana, and elsewhere, tremendous scope exists to improve students' schooling choices

and thus outcomes, through enhanced information access. First, poorly informed choices lead to inefficient and expensive *ex post* sorting and suboptimal matching. Second, even high-ability students make choice errors, and these errors are more common among marginalized groups (Lai, Saloulet, and de Janvry 2009 in Beijing; Lucas and Mbiti 2012 in Kenya; Ajayi 2013 in Ghana). Third, in settings with optional school choice, low-income or low-education households can be excluded entirely (Walters 2014).

Directly involving guardians in the choice process can further reduce these inefficiencies and improve student outcomes. Previous research that sought to inform both parents and students targeted students and then encouraged them to share the information with their parents (Dankelman and Martinez 2014 on higher education financing in Chile) or only targeted students as parents proved too difficult to reach directly (Hoxby and Earner 2013 on university applications in the United States). Giannelli (2016) modeled the decision process based on survey and choice information, but did not experimentally vary information provision. We build on these studies by randomizing whether guardians were direct recipients of information. Further, we are one of the few studies to directly interview guardians, the notable exception being Banerjee et al. (2010).

To test the effect of information access and targeting, we created an information booklet and video that we delivered in school-based information sessions. We tested the effects through a 900-school randomized controlled trial in which we randomly assigned each junior high school in the sample to one of three arms: information session for students, separate information sessions for students and guardians, and a control group.

Based on data collected from a survey of guardians, our intervention increased the likelihood that guardians reported helping with, having the final vote in, and being the only decision maker in the selection process. In addition,

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²In our sample, 93 percent of guardian respondents were parents. We use the more inclusive category of guardian to account for alternative household structures.

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