Achieving universal enrollment in primary school, and high attendance among those enrolled, has been a major policy focus in developing countries for the last decade. There is now considerable evidence from randomized evaluations on the effectiveness of the different strategies that have been used to promote student participation. Parents are sensitive to the cost of school and even small subsidies can improve participation. But the most cost-effective approaches of those examined here are providing families with information about the higher wages earned by those who complete school, and addressing health problems such as intestinal worms and chronic anemia. So far there is little evidence that families vary their demand for schooling in response to education quality, such as more teacher attendance or a remedial curriculum, but this question has only been looked at over the shorter term.

When interpreting this cost-effectiveness, it is important to bear in mind that some programs, particularly conditional cash transfers, achieve other objectives than just improving school participation. Additionally, programs will tend to be more expensive in richer countries, not least because attendance rates tend to be higher to begin with.

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