

>> Welcome, you're listening to Poverty Focus. This podcast series brings together experts in their fields to discuss new poverty research and public policy. I'm Cassandra Heart, an assistant professor of education at UC Davis and it is my pleasure today to host visiting scholar, Peter Bergman. Bergman is an assistant professor at economics and education at Columbia University's Teacher's College.

His research uses randomized control trials to find low cost, scalable interventions that improve children's academic achievements and long term success. Peter, thank you for joining us today.

>> Thanks for having me, great to be here.

>> So a lot of your work touches on provision of information and the way that can drive student outcomes.

Can you tell us a little bit about why education researchers are increasingly thinking about information as a valuable commodity. That helps shape children's educational outcomes.

>> Yeah, that's a great question. So, it's actually somewhat surprising to me, to understand where information gaps exist in education. So I'll give one example from my own research, which involved providing information to parents about their kids' performance, their missed assignments, grades, and that sort of thing.

One thing that came out of that was that telling parents about their child's grades, we'd get a response to the effect of, well, your child's getting a D, and the parent would say, D, what does that mean? Is that good, is that bad? And I'd say, even I who was a former teacher in New York City, was taken aback that that sort of fundamental information gap could exist.

But in hindsight, it made a little bit more sense when you think that a lot of families depending on the context could be recent immigrants. The A through F grading system certainly isn't used everywhere, and for instance in a place like Mexico. And so if you think that, well, maybe families don't understand the grading system, well, what other fundamental aspects don't they understand about credits, and high school graduation requirements and things of that nature?

Or the college application process, and it just opens up a whole area where, if we can provide this information at the right time, maybe we can impact outcome for parents who might be facing a lot of obstacles to this information in terms of language barriers and initial know-how.

>> So, you talked a little bit about providing them with information about their student's performance. What types of information interventions have you seen coming up in the field lately that try to improve-

>> Yeah.

>> What parents or citizens know about scorecards?

>> Yeah, that's a great question, so, I think the theme for always in different context is the ability to provide timely and actual information.

So not just sort of one time information that might be distill or sort of apart from when the actual decision occurs, but right at a point some key decision, providing information that can inform that decision. So, for instance, Ben Castleman and Lindsey Page's work on encouraging FAFSA completion and providing these text message reminders that facilitate communications with counselors in a very timely fashion, seeing that can improve take up of the FAFSA.

And then, in turn, college enrollment outcomes in two year colleges. They've done similar work for students about to enroll in college as well. And how timely messages can facilitate that. My work is focused primarily on parents with children in middle school and high school. And there what I found was a key information gap was that report cards tended to come out much too infrequently and every six to eight weeks they were not very actionable either.

When I say your child was doing very poorly or failing their classes but doesn't say how to help that child, and honestly, by the time six to eight weeks rolls around, they might be missing so many assignments it's too late to make those up. So what we did, is we provided very specific information about all their child's missed assignments.

Every two weeks we had translated text messages and phone calls and emails, but primarily text messages. And the idea was that, well, you might understand the grading system, what you need to graduate high school, but you know your child is supposed to do this work, and they haven't done this work.

And we're gonna tell you the problems, the page numbers, the assignment name whenever possible, so you have this running record of what your child is missing and as it's no longer missing, you'll see that occur as well. And that was very actionable for parents and I think increase their understanding.

And also had some really interesting implications for sort of how it change their beliefs about their child's performance as well which is interesting. And lastly, I'll just finish here going through the whole K to college spectrum. Ben York and Susanna Low have some really early testing recur for early literacy as well, again, this kind of these timely actionable tips, literacy tips for parents and they saw some really promising effects in that context as well.

>> So you alluded to this a little bit earlier, but can you put this a bit in the context of inequality? So if we're thinking about information gaps.

>> Yeah.

>> Where do those tend to be the most pronounced?

>> Yeah, that's interesting and it's related to some of the extensions of this work I was just talking about.

So a couple of examples, descriptively we see, if you ask parents how satisfied are they with the communication they get from their child's school about all their schoolwork and grades. Well, in schools where most of the kids are already going on to college, 84% of parents are satisfied.

But in schools where most of the kids aren't going on to college, only 43% of parents are satisfied with this communication. So right there, you see a gap. And when you think about how this information's already being presented, again, I'm narrowing my focus to this middle and high school context.

A lot of times information might be provided online. It might be provided through parent teacher conferences, and both internet access and computer know-how, and language savvy, and your ability to know what your schedule is each week. It's definitely favors hiring from family. So, when we started working with the pushing information via text message, we started also looking at parent portals which place information about student grades online.

So we looked at the data there to see, well, how often do parents log into these systems? And which types of parents log into these systems? And because this like a natural way to make information, real time information, available to families. Turns out in the data that we saw across several hundred schools, only 24% of parents had ever logged into the system and this correlated strongly with the share of fee reduced priced lunch students in the school.

So, strong correlates with income, strongly correlates with test score performance. And the more Hispanic families there were in the school, which again could be indicative of language barriers, also the less logins. And so you think you're providing this information and maybe that could reduce inequalities. In fact, it could exacerbate it by predominantly serving those families who are at the upper income and upper performance end of the distribution.

So we've been working on interventions to try and increase access to that type of information and make sure that all families can access those type of services.

>> So does that speak to a need for more outreach to specific families that aren't accessing that information of their own accord.

>> That's exactly right. So you think of some district policies and how they release information and how they might release a new technology that's designed to improve parent communication. So, examples might be this parent portal but another example might be doing an automated alert system. So there are automated email systems.

There's actually automated text message systems that we've done experiments with where your child's grade dips

below a certain level it can fire off a text message. If your child misses a class it can fire off a text message. Now a lot of schools, districts ask parents to opt in to these services and what we show in a recent experiment that we are just writing up the results to, this is joint with Todd Rogers, where we run an experiment where there are three arms, there's a control group.

And then we have a group of parents where we say, hey, there's this new service, we can text you to tell you about your child's missed work, and attendance. But you've got to text us back start to opt in, or you can sign in via the parent portal.

And then we we add another arm when we said, hey, there's this new service, we're gonna turn it on for you. Unless you text us back stop at any point, and we'll discontinue the service, well, in the opt in group we had, 8% take up and in the opt out group we had less than 5% opt out at any point during the school year.

And so the upshot there is if you do the opt in, it's almost like you're setting your money on fire in effect. You purchased the system, you spent all this money and yet if you're compelling parents to opt in, you're not gonna get those who likely need it the most to sign up, whereas if we do the opt out they get to try this thing.

You make it easy for them to opt out, whether if your parents opt out and in fact when whether they want to continue the service in the future. Actually, those in the opt out group are more likely to want to continue than those that just are in our control group for instance, which was interesting.

Similar with the parent portal, we did an outreach intervention there where we said, hey, here's the URL to login, here's your user name, here's your account information. And we actually increased adoption and usage just with that simple outreach intervention, that was leveraging a phone bank.

>> So if you run into any instances where, it seems like one of the things that might be a concern in provision information is when does provision information become overwhelming?

Or too much for people to use?

>> Yeah.

>> How do you kind of think about the balance between overwhelming people but providing information that they need?

>> That's an ongoing point of discussion. I think we need more research evidence on this, to be honest. There's definitely a point of diminishing returns.

We've seen that in other contexts. Not necessarily the education context. But for instance, in health, providing text reminders to take your medicine. There seems to be a point where you provide too many messages. They're actually less likely to take these important medicines. There's some medium balance there which maximizes the effect.

In the educations based I'm sure that exist and actually we're talking a lot about this with Todd Rogers. We're trying to test just that. In some point there's information overload. One is with text message, but another place which I think is rich possibility which we're looking to do studying on this now is actually in the context or report cards.

With common core and increasing any sort of skill-based reports. It's a very rich set of data and eventually very useful for parents. But, again, if you have parents who don't necessarily understand the grading system and might lack literacy skills, you could see that a report card could be quite overwhelming and it might be hard to understand well what should I take away from this?

What is the actual information I should discern from this lengthy and very rich report card. So I think that could be another area where you could see information overload as well. So I think in short it's an open question that should be studied further. How many messages about what and how much information in each of those messages, yeah.

>> One of the other things that your work has touched on a little bit is the extent to which providing information to people who are monitoring performance of schools. Whether it's parents monitoring their children-

>> Yeah.
>> Or parents monitoring teachers.
>> And sort of we've done some work on publication of teacher ratings by LASD.

>> Yeah, that's right.
>> So I'm kinda curious to hear your thoughts on those pieces of work and what kinds of consequences come from providing that information for monitoring purposes?
>> Yeah, I think with the, for instance, putting information online, or pushing information via text message to parents about their child's score or good grades is interesting, in some ways it increases, like you said, the ability of parents to monitor teachers.

And one of the constraints of providing information from grades is that teachers have to enter those grades. And, in Los Angeles, three-fourths, maybe a little more, of the teachers were regularly updating their grade books. So you'd send out information about the child's English class, and the parents, well, why am I not hearing anything about the child's math class?

The teacher hasn't updated their grades, and I think most teachers are very diligent about this, but some teachers will wait until the mandatory grading periods to update their grade books. And that's a real constraint on students who want to know, so for instance, we started testing and they go to the teachers and they say, what am I missing in their math class and the teachers say, well, I got a stack of ungraded papers, I actually can't tell you right now.

And there you can think of some important sort of ground up accountability, or accountability from the ground up, from parents to teachers that's just more natural by making things more transparent. In contrast, there's the providing value added information which we studied with this work with Matt Hill in Los Angeles where they did a freedom of information act request.

They computed their own value added ratings. And made a searchable database by teacher name to view-
>> Through the LA Times.

>> Teacher ratings. On the LA Times, exactly. And so we studied both the effect of making that information public and the actual rating labels themselves. So if you're labeled more effective versus average.

What impact does that have on teacher retention and test performance? And again, there is some concerns about whether this would increase inequality potentially because what we found is that when teachers were published. The highly rated teachers tended to have, in the subsequent school year, higher performing students. So, it appears that students with higher baseline test scores started shifting into classrooms with higher performing teachers.

I shouldn't say higher performing, higher rated teachers. And low rated teachers ended up with students with lower test scores. And there could be several explanations from parents advocating for their child to be in classroom with highly rated teachers or schools allocating, once they've learned this information. But then if you think that that could easily increase inequality just by assigning higher performing students to highly rated teachers.

And then even within the ratings labels as well, if you're labelled least effective, we did see that those teachers tended to be more likely to exit the school district. But there are also these performance increases that were heterogeneous across the labels, which again, could exacerbate inequalities in a way that made it very ambiguous that if you care about it, closing the achievement gap, whether this is necessarily a good policy, but were more on agnostic about that side.

I think were just want to document what happened or the potential consequence of releasing information because it have been released in I think several contacts now in New York City they did this at one point.

>> Right.
>> I think in Ohio they might have released value added information.

And then, of course, at the school level, this things are frequently released as well.

>> So if you're thinking about those from an administrator, teacher perspective, you've worked with a bunch of school districts to try to put forth these interventions to provide information to parents. What are kind of the challenges about thinking about how to identify information gaps, and then addressing them and targeting them to the people who they're affecting the most, once you identify them?

>> Yeah, that's a good point. So one aspect is that districts often are running surveys of parents, perhaps sometimes you think about information overload, they can be surveyed too often. But, that can be one way to identify information gaps is through surveying parents. But, I think as I've seen surveys used currently they don't, again, really focus on some of these fundamental information problems and I think that's where there could be some works done by the districts as well.

What is your theory of change here that you have this sense that maybe parents are gonna understand how the high school graduation process works so they'll be more involved in what classes their children are taking and that helps their progression to graduation. Well, that's something, potentially, you could identify through something as simple as a survey.

There's also a lot of districts that leverage phone banks for various reasons. I find those a really promising way to reach out to parents as well. And connect with the district, and again, communicate with them, about timely, actual information. But, again, I think that, some of the information gaps I've seen around basic processes toward graduation, and, this timely actual information about their child's academic progress.

And I think a big focus that I've seen is on these missed assignments, so in LA and in other urban districts, we see children missing 20% of all their assignments, both homework and in class work. So then you think homework must be even worse than that, and that's stuff the parents have the potential to act on, they don't necessarily know how to directly help their kids with their homework, but they can be extremely crafty in motivating their kids I'll say diplomatically.

And that piece is I think essential. And the other aspect in terms of closing these gaps is not to think of interventions that try to bring parents to the schools. Which I think is a real challenge for families. And can create kind of a negative impression of how involved parents are because they think, well, parents aren't showing up to the teacher conferences, maybe they just don't care.

And I don't think that's true, I think there's a silent majority of parents who potentially who really want to be involved, they just need to understand what are the immediate steps they can take and you need to make it as easy as possible for parents to be involved.

In some ways if you think of schools that's providing a customer service for parents. It's not so good. If you wanna figure out, well, what's my child missing, or what homework do they have? If the only way you can find it is going online, and that can be a real challenge.

And you can't just call somebody up at 7 o'clock at night, or 8 o'clock at night and figure out, well, what is my child suppose to be doing now? So inevitably they come home and say, hey, did you do your homework. Of course, they say they did or they don't have any.

There's no recourse for parents in that fashion.

>> Great.

>> Yeah.

>> Okay, well, thank you so much for joining us today Peter. It was a pleasure to talk to you.

>> Great, likewise. Thanks for having me.

>> I'm Ann Stevens, the Director of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis, and I want to thank you for listening.

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