District and subdistrict "meso-level" education officials play an increasingly important role in many education systems. They provide guidance and support to teachers and school leaders and provide a means for education systems to regularly monitor teachers and schools and hold them accountable for challenges in service delivery, such as high rates of teacher absenteeism, a trend that severely limits learning in many low- and middle-income countries. Numerous countries have created such a role for subdistrict officials in recent years in a bid to support improved student learning outcomes.

Results-based incentives have been extensively tested in education, particularly through incentives for teachers such as performance-related pay, but there have been few rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of such incentives for meso-level officials. In particular, there have been few studies on whether incentives can increase the capacity of meso-level officials to influence teacher attendance, or

A REACH-supported study explored the use of results-based incentives for subdistrict education officials and teachers to improve teacher attendance at school.

The Results in Education for All Children (REACH) Trust Fund supports and disseminates research on the impact of results-based financing on learning outcomes. The EVIDENCE series highlights REACH grants around the world to provide empirical evidence and operational lessons helpful in the design and implementation of successful performance-based programs.

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whether improving attendance requires teachers to be directly incentivized.

The REACH Trust Fund provided a grant to a World Bank team that partnered with an Indian non-governmental organization, Learning Links Foundation, to explore methods to strengthen the capacity and motivation of subdistrict officials in order to drive improvement in teacher attendance and teaching practices.

**CONTEXT**

The study was conducted in Jharkhand, a low-income, medium-sized state in eastern India. Levels of learning are low in India’s schools: Only a quarter of children in grade 3 can read a grade 2-level short story or complete a simple two-digit subtraction problem. Teacher absenteeism is a significant problem in India, particularly in Jharkhand where on a given day as many as 35 percent of teachers are absent in a typical school. These high rates of absenteeism stem from a range of reasons, including low motivation, time commitments to other earning activities, and a low risk of any consequences. This low risk stems from weaknesses in the governance and accountability mechanisms for teachers in India, as most teachers are permanent government employees and enjoy a high degree of job security.

To address these accountability gaps and improve outcomes in schools, the State of Jharkhand in 2009 recruited a new cadre of Resource Persons (RPs), each responsible for a number of schools, to visit schools regularly and provide a range of support, including monitoring teacher presence and practices; providing academic mentoring to teachers; collecting and analyzing data on student achievement; and galvanizing local community participation by supporting School Management Committees (SMCs). However, the impact of these RPs was limited by a relative lack of experience among those appointed; a lack of oversight for RPs themselves; and problems of low motivation—effectively replicating many of the issues with teacher motivation and accountability further up the management chain.
WHY WAS THIS INTERVENTION CHOSEN?

The intervention formed part of a wider study that tested the impact of a training program for RPs, with a subset of participants also receiving rewards for improvement in teacher attendance in their schools. The original design included the use of financial incentives, but these were seen as fiscally unsustainable for the government, particularly if the intervention were to be scaled up. Ultimately, nonfinancial rewards (such as certificates) were chosen to incentivize RPs to improve their monitoring and mentoring efforts. In turn, the hope was that their increased effort would positively impact teacher attendance and classroom instruction.

However, in the planning stage, it was decided that RPs lacked adequate power over teachers to single-handedly enforce improved attendance, regardless of incentives. Teachers are in many cases career government employees, whereas RPs are typically on short-term contracts and have lower salaries than teachers, creating asymmetric power relations which limited RPs’ ability and motivation to influence teachers to attend school. To achieve improvements in attendance, there was therefore a need to align the incentives of teachers with those of RPs by also rewarding the teachers themselves for high attendance. To increase the salience of the awards, the certificates were presented to winning RPs in ceremonies presided over by district officials.
HOW DID THE INTERVENTION WORK?

The full intervention, of which the results-based incentives were a part, had three components: training for RPs; results-based incentives for RPs for high teacher attendance in their schools; and results-based incentives for teachers for high attendance. The training took the form of five days of in-person training, in August 2018, focused on motivating RPs and improving their ability to conduct classroom observations, provide feedback to teachers, and use technology for data entry. This was followed by five months of onsite capacity building by Learning Links Foundation staff, who accompanied RPs on school visits and provided support and feedback on how to prioritize and focus feedback offered to teachers and schools. The team selected 134 RPs, representing 473 schools, to participate in the training.

The RPs were randomly selected from Ranchi District, the most populous district in the state, and the training took place in Ranchi.

Of the 134 RPs, a random subset of 67 RPs, representing 230 schools, was selected to also be eligible for results-based incentives. Certificates were awarded to RPs based on the average level of teacher attendance in the schools that they oversaw. RPs whose schools had an average teacher attendance rate of 90 percent or higher received gold certificates, RPs whose schools had an average teacher attendance rate of 80 percent or higher (but below 90 percent) received silver certificates, and those with an average teacher attendance rate of 70 percent or higher (but below 80 percent) received bronze certificates.

Teachers at the schools overseen by these RPs were also eligible to receive certificates based on their personal attendance levels. These were awarded based on the same system as for the RPs, with bronze certificates for 70 percent attendance, silver for 80 percent and gold for 90 percent. The certificates to RPs were awarded in public ceremonies in the presence of a district official, and certificates to teachers were publicized through social media groups of teachers and officials. The team expected that the social recognition that came with winning a certificate would be an effective incentive despite the certificates lacking monetary value.

Attendance was calculated based on a series of eight school audits.
conducted in August 2019. The schools were not informed of the visits in advance, so that the RPs could observe a typical day at the school. To be counted as present, a teacher had to be in the school within 15 minutes of the auditor’s arrival.

A baseline survey of participating RPs was conducted prior to the training, while baseline surveys of teachers and students were conducted during the five-month training period. These surveys were used to collect information on teaching practices, such as whether the teacher used a lesson plan or teaching and learning materials, so that the team could later assess potential impacts from the RP training on these practices.⁸

In addition to the 134 RPs who received training and in some cases incentives, an additional 67 RPs, also from Ranchi, received neither training nor incentives, but were selected to act as a control group and to take the baseline survey. However, as a result of budget constraints, audits were not completed in these control schools, so potential impacts of the intervention could only be estimated by comparing the treatment schools to the baseline results at the control schools. In addition, endline audit visits were originally planned for March 2020 to measure the final impacts on attendance, but these were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The team thus had to estimate impacts using data from endline phone surveys with participating RPs and teachers.

In-person training focused on motivating RPs and improving their ability to conduct classroom observations, provide feedback to teachers, and use technology for data entry.
WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

The incentive, along with training for RPs, significantly improved teacher attendance. Averaged across the August 2019 audits, the likelihood of being present at school was 15 percentage points higher for teachers who were eligible for incentives than for those in control schools. The specific difference in attendance rates varied across the various audits, from a low of 11 percentage points to a high of 19 percentage points but was significant across all eight audits.

The researchers were unable to differentiate the impact that the teacher incentives had on their attendance versus the impact of the RP incentives or the RP training. Because all of the RPs eligible for incentives also received the training, and all teachers in their schools were eligible for incentives, the research design did not enable the team to determine the relative contributions to the improvement in attendance from the training or the two levels of incentive. However, in the baseline survey conducted in December 2018, following the initial five days of classroom training and several weeks of onsite capacity building, but before the incentive program was rolled out, there was no significant difference in teacher attendance between schools in the training and control groups, which may suggest that incentives played an important role in driving the improvement in attendance.

The training program increased the time RPs spent mentoring teachers, but did not significantly affect teaching activities. RPs who participated in the training reported having spent significantly more time—0.8 more hours—in the previous week mentoring teachers, but did not spend significantly more time on administrative work, visiting classrooms, working with School Management Committees, or other tasks. However, neither the RP training nor the combination of training and incentives appears to have led to any significant changes in teacher behavior. Teachers in schools overseen by trained RPs, including those eligible for incentives, were not significantly more likely to report having used lesson plans, teaching and learning materials, or the blackboard, or having asked students to work in groups, than teachers in the control group.
What were the lessons learned?

Incentives for meso-level officials may be unlikely to improve school outcomes unless paired with incentives elsewhere in the management chain. In the case of Jharkhand, it was decided that RPs could provide support to teachers, but that they lacked sufficient power over teachers to drive changes in behavior such as increased attendance, regardless of their motivation and training. Therefore, the team decided it was necessary to also provide incentives directly to teachers. The study design does not enable the team to assess whether the RP incentives alone could have been impactful without the teacher incentives. However, the training did not drive changes in any teaching practices that were not linked to direct teacher incentives, which may suggest that the teacher incentives for attendance played a key role in the improvements.

Ensuring the availability of credible data is essential to successful implementation of incentives. The research team found that choosing the right indicator, and being able to measure it, was critical to implementation success. However, even with relatively easy-to-measure indicators such as attendance, there was still the opportunity for gaming and cheating. For example, teachers could coordinate with the Block Resource Persons to be present on the days when attendance monitoring was scheduled. Hence, an independent organization was tasked with conducting random spot checks of teacher attendance.

RBF appeared to play a role in teacher attendance

The likelihood of being present at school for teachers who were eligible for incentives versus for those in control schools
CONCLUSION

A REACH-supported study tested the impact of results-based incentives for meso-level officials (Resource Persons, or RPs) and teachers on teacher attendance at school. The incentives led to a 15 percentage point increase in the likelihood of a teacher being present, averaged across audit visits. The training increased the amount of time RPs spent mentoring teachers, but this increased mentoring did not lead to any changes in teaching practices.

4 There are two classifications of RPs: Cluster RPs, who oversee a single cluster of about 10 schools, and Block RPs, who oversee blocks of about 10 clusters each. Both Block and Cluster RPs participated in the training and incentive scheme, with incentives calculated based on the average teacher attendance rate in their jurisdiction, regardless of size.
5 Surveys were completed with 196 of 201 RPs sampled, and teachers and students were surveyed at 347 of their schools.

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