

# Research Brief

Reducing Student Absenteeism  
in the Early Grades by Targeting  
Parental Beliefs: A Summary of  
Research

November 2020

# Executive Summary

Attendance predicts outcomes for students, and increasing attendance improves student achievement. However, successful evidence-based attendance initiatives are often difficult to implement due to logistical and financial constraints. In this study, Carly Robinson, Monica Lee, Dr. Eric Dearing, and Dr. Todd Rogers replicated the results of previous research by implementing and evaluating a low-lift and scalable intervention to address absenteeism in Grades K–5. By using behavioral science insights and mailing personalized attendance nudges to families of high-absence students, they developed an effective intervention that decreased chronic absenteeism by 14.9% across all demographics.

## Research at a Glance

### 10 Districts across California

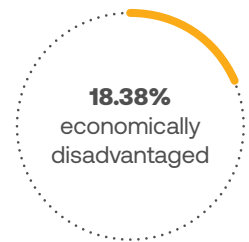
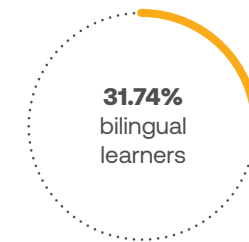
Urban, suburban, and rural elementary districts



**Participating grades:**  
K–5



**42,000+**  
students



**Strong Evidence**  
under ESSA



**14.9%**  
reduction in chronic absenteeism

This research brief is a summary of original research published in the *American Educational Research Journal*:

Robinson, C. D., Lee, M. G., Dearing, E., Rogers, T. (2018). Reducing student absenteeism in the early grades by targeting parental beliefs. *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 55(6), pp. 1163–1192.

# Background

The belief that regular school attendance is important for student success isn't new, but the mounting evidence in support of this idea is. **Poor attendance is increasingly associated with:**



**Lower literacy proficiency by Grade 3**



**Lower standardized test scores in ELA and math**



**Lower graduation and college enrollment rates**

As research links attendance to these crucial outcomes, there have been recent national initiatives to address absenteeism in schools. Absenteeism is a challenge that spans all grade levels.

**Developing strong attendance habits begins as early as kindergarten, and lower grade absenteeism can lead to increased and chronic absenteeism in the upper grades as well.**

The causes of absenteeism are complex and varied, and can include transit problems, illness, family obligations, and other factors. Moreover, effective, evidence based attendance interventions like mentors for high-absence students tend to be costly and not scalable.

**Families are an underutilized resource for absence prevention.** They have significant agency over student attendance, especially in the early grades. There are a couple of reasons why, despite their agency, families might not be doing everything in their power to get their children to school. The first misconception is that families underestimate the importance of the learning that occurs in the early grades. This problem can be exacerbated by factors such as distrust of schools or a lack of curriculum's cultural relevance for families from diverse backgrounds. Research shows that if people are explicitly told that something matters, their perception of it changes, and they value it more. The second misconception is that families of higher-absence students think their children have the same or better attendance than their children's peers. Targeting these two misconceptions has the potential to change families' beliefs and shift behavior around attendance.

# Methodology

The research team built upon previous research conducted by Dr. Todd Rogers, implementing an evidence-based intervention to harness the power of families to raise attendance. The intervention targeted the misbeliefs that families have about attendance with the goal of correcting the misunderstandings and reframing the importance of attendance. Families of students in the lowest 60% of attendance bands across 10 urban, suburban, and rural school districts in California received up to six mailed attendance updates.

**These personalized attendance nudges:**

- Included the student's attendance data
- Were written in the home language of the family
- Helped families understand the vital relationship between attendance and achievement, especially as it relates to year-over-year academic performance

**The impact of the intervention was evaluated through a randomized controlled trial (RCT).**

Partner districts provided data exports from their student information system to the research team. Based on that data, families of more than 42,000 students were randomly selected to receive a mailed intervention or to be in the control (no treatment) group. This method is the gold standard for evaluating efficacy under ESSA.

## Key Outcome

**The personalized attendance updates were effective at reducing absences by 7.7%, and in reducing chronic absenteeism by 14.9% in comparison to the control group.**

# Impact Discussion

This study shows that reframing families' misbeliefs and providing strategic, consistent updates about student attendance has the power to decrease absenteeism. **The intervention:**



- Was more effective for students with worse attendance
- Had a bigger effect for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families
- Had a larger impact for students from families whose home language is Spanish

The implementation is low lift, requiring minimal work from district partners other than providing data. The intervention provides evidence-based universal prevention and early intervention for students with higher levels of absenteeism. This study showed that the intervention was replicable and has a consistent impact across districts despite differences in urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Families want their children to succeed in school, and attendance is an area where families have significant agency. **Districts need to empower and partner with families so they can effectively support their children's attendance.**

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