

Research Brief

Reducing Student Absences
at Scale by Targeting Parents'
Misbeliefs: A Summary of
Research

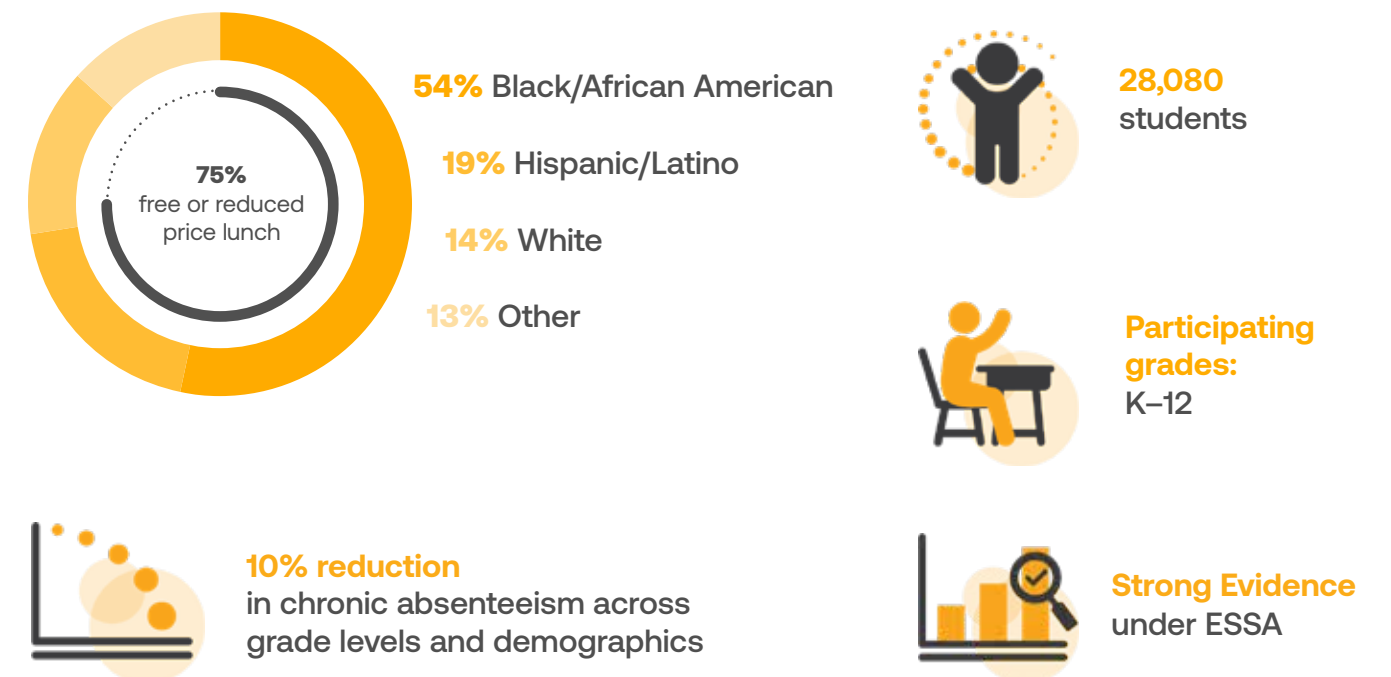
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Executive Summary

Rates of student absenteeism are strikingly high in the United States. Yet despite the importance of attendance, there is a dearth of evidence-based interventions to address absenteeism. The existing proven interventions, such as mentoring for high-absence students, are costly and challenging to scale. Dr. Todd Rogers, a behavioral scientist and professor of public policy at Harvard University, worked alongside a team of researchers to develop a behavioral-science-informed mail-based intervention called a “nudge” to address absenteeism in a large urban district. By mailing attendance nudges to the families of high-absence students, they implemented a scalable, cost-effective intervention that reduced overall absenteeism by 6% and chronic absenteeism by 10% across all grade levels and demographics.

Research at a Glance

A Large East Coast Urban District



This research brief is a summary of original research published in *Nature Human Behaviour*:

Rogers, T., Feller, A. (2018). Reducing student absences at scale by targeting parents' misbeliefs. *Nature Human Behaviour*, Vol. 2, pp. 335–342.

Background

Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of the school year, is pervasive. Nationwide, more than 10% of public school students are chronically absent each year. Absenteeism is a particularly big problem in large, low-income urban districts. Additionally, **attendance matters for everyone. It predicts a variety of outcomes, including:**

- Academic performance
- High school graduation rates
- Alcohol and drug use
- Criminality
- Risk of negative outcomes later in life

Students need to attend school regularly to avoid adverse life outcomes, schools and districts need students to attend school to receive positive evaluations and better funding, and society needs an educated citizenry.

Though attendance is becoming an increasingly emphasized area of focus for school districts around the country, it can be a difficult challenge to address. Students can be absent for a variety of reasons. This intervention was developed to target two common misbeliefs of families with high-absence students. The first is that families think their children have missed fewer days of school than they actually have. The second is that these families believe their children have missed the same number of days (or fewer) than the average student.

The research team developed a “personalized information intervention” to target these misconceptions. **They created attendance nudges that informed parents of the total number of absences their children had, and in some cases, the number of absences compared to the average classmate.** This intervention is potent because families are invested in their children’s well-being, and they can reward or correct them. Thus, informing families about their children’s attendance record can help change student behavior.



Methodology

The intervention’s impact was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial (RCT), the gold standard evaluation method for Strong Evidence under ESSA. Following RCT protocol, the families of 40,326 eligible students were randomly assigned into two statistically equivalent groups. One group was assigned to receive five rounds of personalized intervention by mail in addition to the supports they were already receiving. The other group continued receiving the same supports with no additional intervention. The intervention group received one of the following:

- A simple no-data reminder that attendance is important
- A report that specified the total number of days the student missed
- A report that specified the total number of days the student missed, and their relative absences compared to classmates

Each report also contained a piece of information about the importance of attendance and/or the role of the family in supporting strong attendance. The goal was to correct family misconceptions surrounding attendance. Demographically, the majority of students in the partner district were Black/African American, followed by Latino/Hispanic, and then white. Nearly three out of four students qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

Impact

Students whose families received any of these three attendance nudges experienced reduced absenteeism. The personalized nudges—including specific data about the student’s attendance—were significantly more effective than the simple reminder letter. There were also notable spillover effects for the families who received the personalized mailings: siblings within a household that received these nudges about one student also missed fewer days of school.

The impact was determined by comparing the average absences of the group that received the mailing and those who did not. Based on this comparison, the intervention was effective at reducing absences across all genders, races, and grade levels. **It reduced overall absences by 6% and chronic absenteeism by 10%.**

Impact Discussion

Research shows that students with higher rates of absenteeism face worse life outcomes. Detrimental effects of absenteeism are not limited to school performance, but persist beyond the K–12 years. Students, schools, districts, and society are harmed by high rates of absenteeism.

This intervention is low-lift for districts, cost effective, and proven to reduce **chronic absenteeism by 10% within a large urban district**. Though it is not intended to replace intensive support for severely absent students, it can provide a foundation of support for all students at risk of or experiencing high absenteeism rates. Chronic absenteeism is a complex problem that requires multiple interventions, but informing families about their children’s absences, and empowering them to take action to support regular attendance, is a critical first step to reducing absenteeism at scale.

When families are treated as assets to support attendance, outcomes improve for everyone. 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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