# Research Brief

Using Behavioral Insights to
Improve School Administrative
Communications: The Case of
Truancy Notifications

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**EveryDay** Labs™

# Executive Summary

Attendance predicts academic success. Reading and math proficiency, class grades, and high school graduation rates are all negatively impacted by absenteeism. Truancy, defined as missing class without a valid excuse, is one of the factors that increases absenteeism rates. States often require that schools communicate with families when their student is truant. As a result, schools generally send mailed letters to families to inform them of their student's truancy. While absenteeism is a complex problem that requires a multitude of interventions, one intervention aimed at improving notifications of truancy, discussed in this brief, resulted in a modest reduction in absenteeism. **Harnessing various behavioral insights, the research team developed truancy notifications that were 40% more effective at reducing absences.**

## Research At A Glance

## A Large Urban District in CA

**84%**
free and
reduced price
lunch
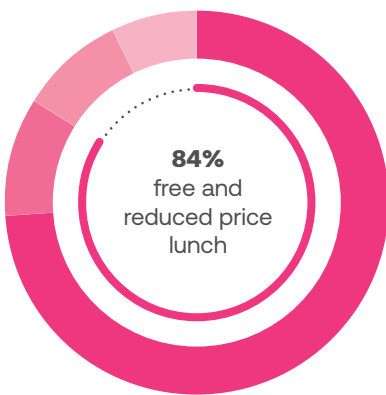
**74%** Hispanic/Latino

**10%** White

**9%** Black/African American

**7%** Other

**131,000+**
students

**40%
increase**
in effectiveness

Students with an average of
**5 unexcused absences**

**2% reduction**
in absenteeism

Sample demographics varied from overall district demographics.

# Background

Due to the increasingly recognized relationship between attendance and student outcomes, attendance improvement initiatives have become more prevalent. Absenteeism is already broadly tied to district accountability evaluations. In fact, 36 states and the District of Columbia use absenteeism as a metric to evaluate district performance.

Truancy notifications are one way in which districts communicate with families about the importance of attendance, in both an effort to comply with state laws and hopefully reduce absenteeism. The language in truancy notifications commonly suggests a deficit view of families, with emphasis on the family liability for the student's absences and a punitive tone. The notifications are frequently long and difficult to read with complex legal language; families have reported perceiving these letters as threatening. Moreover, there is almost no evidence on improving notifications of truancy, despite their widespread use.

This randomized field experiment examines the impact of sending optimized truancy notifications, shifting from punitive to supportive messages. Using behavioral science insights, the research team, including Jessica Lasky-Fink, Carly D. Robinson, Hedy Chang, and Todd Rogers, developed truancy notifications that focus on families as assets to improving their student's attendance. The notifications addressed a few main barriers to family action around attendance:

- Individuals have limited time and limited attention
- 40% of American adults have limited literacy
- People will take action if they believe the action will affect change
- Families do not understand the cumulative effects of missing a day of school

The research team developed six versions of a modified truancy notification, each designed to address one or more of the aforementioned barriers. **By addressing these barriers, the team hoped to reduce subsequent absenteeism for students whose families received truancy notifications.**

# Methodology

**The field experiment took place in a large, urban public school district and involved the families of 131,312 students.** In this study, students were defined as "truant" per the state definition, which states that a student is truant if she/he/they is "30 minutes tardy or more without a valid excuse, or absent without a valid excuse, three times or more" during the school year. Over four months, truant students' families were randomly assigned to receive either the standard notifications of truancy (control group) or one of the six optimized truancy notifications (treatment group).

**The standard notifications:**

- Contained 382 words
- Contained seven bullet points of legally mandated language
- Were written at a tenth-grade reading level
- Focused on punitive consequences for students and families

**The research team's optimized notifications:**

- Contained 150 or fewer words
- Were written at a fifth-grade reading level
- Shifted the legally mandated language into small font as a sidebar
- Focused on families as positive partners in supporting student attendance
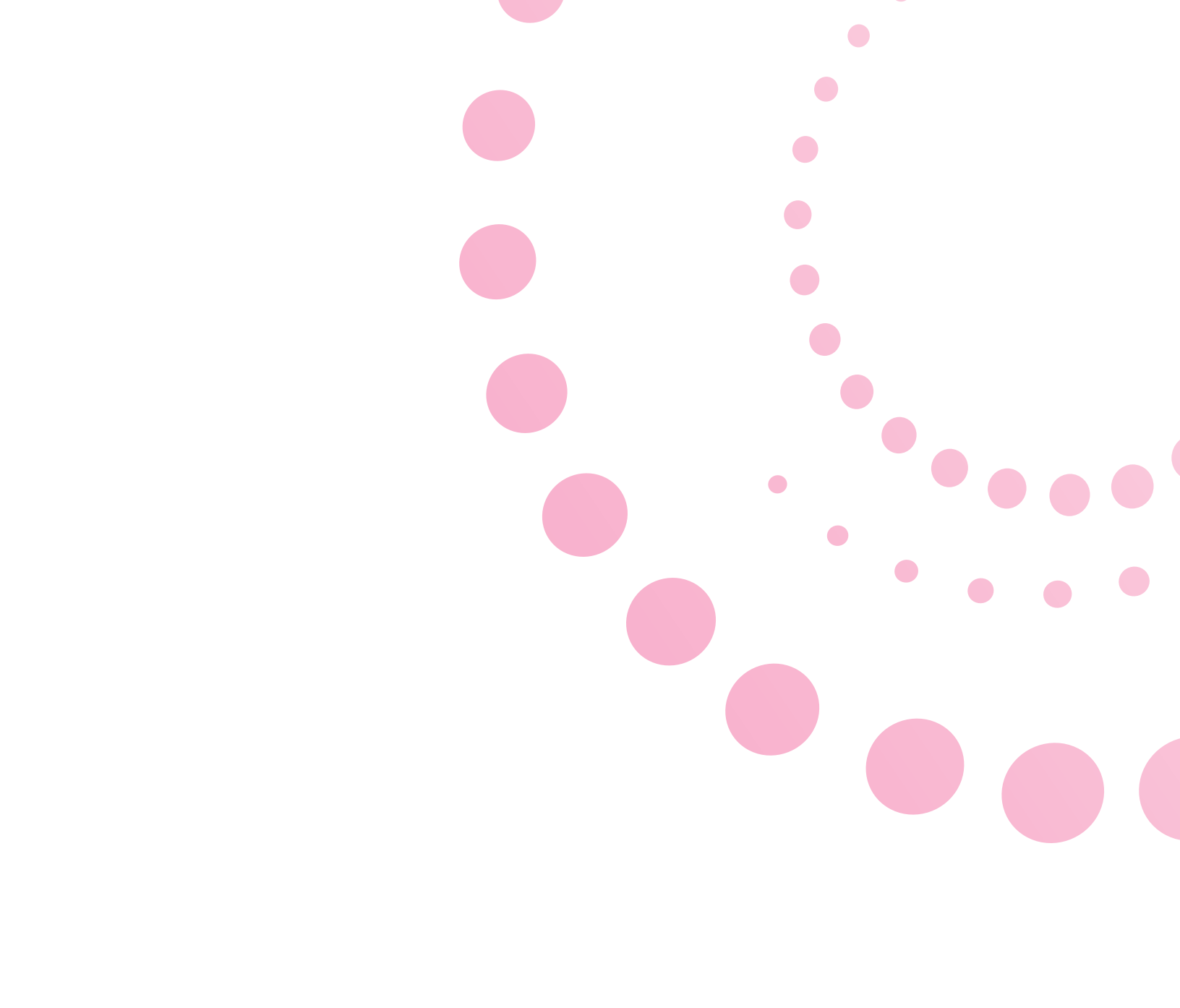
Nothing changed within the district regarding how students were identified as truant, or how truancy notices were generated and mailed. The only difference was the content of the notification itself.

## Impact

The most effective version of the notification contained simplified language, emphasized the power of families to impact attendance positively, and noted that absences "add up" and lead to students falling behind. The most effective version reduced absences by 2% in the following month. **Compared to the standard notification, the most effective optimized notification was 40% more effective at reducing absences.**

# Impact Discussion

Optimized truancy notifications present a low cost, scalable intervention that harnesses behavioral insights to improve communication effectiveness. While a 2% reduction in absenteeism is a modest improvement, a state-wide implementation could mean tens of thousands of additional days that students attend school. Though improving truancy notifications should not be a standalone absenteeism intervention, it is an easy and almost costless way to improve attendance modestly. **Absenteeism is complex and requires a comprehensive approach. Shifting from dense, punitive language to simple, restorative language can make an immediate impact on students and families.**

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