

Can Texting Parents Improve Attendance in Elementary School? A Test of an Adaptive Messaging Strategy

A Publication of the National Center for Education Evaluation at IES

Chronic absence is a nationwide problem, even among young students. Those with poor attendance are more likely to face challenges later in school and in life. This study tested four versions of an adaptive text messaging strategy to see which, if any, would reduce chronic absence - defined as, missing 10 percent or more of school days - among 26,000 elementary school students. During the fall of the study year, families randomly assigned to one of the text messaging groups received “basic” messaging, which consisted of low-cost, low-burden weekly reminders about the importance of attendance and same-day notifications when their children missed school. In the spring, messages were “adapted”: parents of students with few absences continued with the basic messaging, while parents of students who were frequently absent in the fall received additional intensified messaging. The study compared two approaches to basic messaging and two approaches to intensified messaging, to learn how a texting strategy might work best. Students in the messaging groups were compared to students whose parents received no messages to rigorously assess whether the messaging improved attendance and achievement.

Key Findings

- **All four versions of the adaptive text messaging strategy reduced chronic absence.** The messaging lowered the expected chronic absence rate by 2 to 7 percentage points, with the larger reduction for students with a prior history of high absence.
- **The two approaches to basic messaging were similarly effective at reducing chronic absence, but one approach to intensified messaging was better than the other for certain students.** The basic messaging focused on either the benefits of attending school or the consequences of being absent - both approaches were equally effective. But for those who received intensified messaging and had a prior history of high absence, having school staff directly text parents reduced chronic absence rates in the spring more than the other more automated intensified approach.
- **The text messaging strategy did not improve achievement.** The reading and mathematics achievement of students in Grades 3 through 5 was similar for students whose parents did and did not receive text messages during the year the text messaging was under way.

