

# Research Brief

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

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

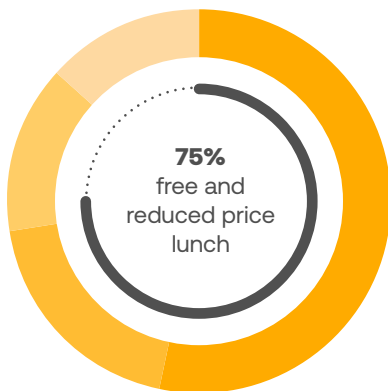
Rogers, T., Feller, A. Reducing student absences at scale by targeting parents' misbeliefs. *Nat Hum Behav* 2, 335–342 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0328-1>

# Executive Summary

Rates of student absenteeism are strikingly high in the United States. 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 to address absenteeism in a large, urban district. In mailing absence reports to the families of high absence students, they implemented a scalable, cost-effective intervention that reduced absenteeism overall by 6% and reduced chronic absenteeism by 10% across all grade levels and demographics.

## Research At A Glance

### A Large, East Coast, Urban District



**54%** Black/African American

**19%** Hispanic/Latino

**14%** White

**13%** Other



**40,000+**  
students



**Participating  
grades:  
K-12**



**10% reduction**  
in chronic absenteeism across grade  
levels and demographics



**Strong Evidence**  
Under ESSA

# 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, urban, low-income 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 them to attend school to receive positive evaluations and better funding; and society needs an educated citizenry.

**While attendance is becoming an increasingly more important 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 of high absence students. The first is that families think their student has missed fewer days of school than they actually have. The second is that these families believe their student has 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 absence reports that informed parents of the total number of absences their student had, and in some cases, also the number of absences compared to the average classmate.** This intervention is potent for a couple main reasons. Families are invested in their child’s well-being. They can also reward or correct their children. Thus, informing families about their child’s attendance record can help change the 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 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 no-data, simple 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 the 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 in four students qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

## Impact

Students whose families received any of these three reports experienced reduced absenteeism. The personalized reports—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. Students within the household where a family received these reports 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 that did not. Based on this comparison, the intervention was effective at reducing absences across all genders, races, and grade levels. **It reduced absences by 6% and reduced chronic absenteeism by 10% overall.**

# 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 K–12 years. Students, schools, districts, and society are negatively impacted by high rates of absenteeism.

This intervention is low-lift for districts, cost effective, and proven to reduce **chronic absenteeism by 10% overall within a large urban district**. While 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. Informing families about their student’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. Attendance is an area where families have significant agency. **Districts need to empower and partner with families so that they can effectively support their student’s attendance.**



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For more information about this brief, please contact [info@everydaylabs.com](mailto:info@everydaylabs.com).

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