

Letter for Initial District Outreach



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION SCIENCES

January 11, 2017

Dear [Name of District Representative],

We are seeking up to four districts from across the country to partner with us on one of our new research studies, which will focus on improving student attendance in elementary schools. Your district may be an excellent candidate and, if selected, would help pilot an innovative intervention that uses text messaging to inform and engage with parents about the importance of consistent attendance.

Why is this study important?

Attendance is critically important for students' academic and lifelong success. Research shows that students who miss 10 percent or more of school in the early grades are significantly less likely than their peers to read on grade level by grade 3, putting them at risk for later academic problems. Preventing absenteeism early on may be more effective and less costly than intervening with older students, helping to avoid consequences of cumulative chronic absenteeism over the years.

What are the benefits of participating in this project?

By partnering with us, your district will learn whether some types of low-cost messaging strategies are effective in improving student attendance and, if so, how your district might make use of such text messaging strategies in the future. Importantly, participating districts will receive the intervention during the 2017-18 school year at no cost.

If your district decides to participate in the study, school, school staff, and parent/guardian participation will be voluntary, and all data requested will be kept private and will be used only for this study and related research. Information collected for this study comes under the confidentiality and data protection requirements of the Institute of Education Sciences. All information from this study will be kept confidential as required by the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (Title I, Part E, Section 183). Responses to this data collection will be used only for statistical purposes. Personally identifiable information about individual respondents will not be reported. The study team will not provide information that identifies you, your school, or your district to anyone outside the study team, except as required by law.

On behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, I encourage you to consider participating as we work together to build better evidence on how best to battle chronic absenteeism. Please contact Dr. Muna Shami (mshami@air.org) or Dr. Marlene Darwin (mdarwin@air.org) at the American Institutes for Research (who is helping us conduct this study) to learn more.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "M. Bachman", with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Meredith Bachman, Ph.D.
Research Scientist
Institute of Education Sciences
U. S. Department of Education
(202) 245-7494

Study Description

Attendance Messaging Project (AMP)



Study Purpose

School attendance is critical for children's academic and lifelong success. Students who are chronically absent (i.e., miss 10 percent or more of school days) have a substantially higher risk than their non-chronically absent peers of experiencing negative outcomes, including poorer academic performance, increased likelihood for dropping out of high school, drug and alcohol use, and crime.

Chronic absenteeism in the early grades is especially troublesome. Low attendance in these grades is linked with poor reading and mathematics achievement in grade 3 and predicts absenteeism in middle and high school. Preventing absenteeism early on may be more effective and less costly than intervening with older students, helping to avoid consequences of cumulative chronic absenteeism over the years.

This study will test an innovative, low-cost text messaging intervention for informing and engaging with parents to address elementary school absenteeism.

Role of Participating Districts

The project will take place in 3-4 districts, each with at least 10 participating elementary schools that have high levels of chronic absenteeism (i.e., 15 percent or more of their students missing 10 or more percent of school per year).

Within each school, students will be assigned by lottery to have their parents receive the study's text messages, or to receive the standard notifications provided by the district (what we call the "business-as-usual" condition). The messaging will start in October 2017.

The text messages will be sent to parents or guardians, not students. The text messaging intervention has two stages; the first stage will take place in fall 2017 and the second stage in spring 2018.

The first stage will involve weekly informational messages about the importance of regular attendance, tips to address common reasons for absences, and same-day notifications to parents when a child is absent. The first stage will compare and contrast two strategies for informing parents:

- *Positively framed information, with tips* focusing on informing parents about the benefits of regular attendance.
- *Negatively framed information, with tips* focusing on informing parents about the negative consequences of absenteeism.

The second stage will compare and contrast two additional messaging strategies that are more tailored and targeted for parents whose children missed more than 10 percent of instructional days during the fall semester, despite first-stage messaging:

- *Parent outreach through two-way text messaging* helps school or district staff to initiate one-on-one communication with parents to link them to resources and supports.
- *Parent commitment messaging* that provides attendance goal setting messaging and monthly feedback on meeting the attendance goal.

This study will be conducted in partnership with participating districts. Using a lottery will allow us to compare the effects of the different informational strategies on attendance rates and student achievement. These results will inform the district (and others) whether and for whom low-cost text messaging can be used to improve attendance.

Access to district data, including student absences, test scores, and parent contact information, will be needed to successfully conduct the study. The following data will also need to be collected:

- One parent survey focusing on parent engagement and their experiences with the text messages (approximately 10 minutes, spring 2018)
- A brief log to document parent outreach activities by school or district staff members who will be trained to implement the two-way communication strategy (approximately 10 minutes, spring 2018)

Timeline

Summer 2017: Set up and test the text messaging system

September 2017: Assign families to different conditions via lottery

October 2017: Begin first-stage text messaging strategies

December 2017: Collect and analyze attendance data to identify which families were “responsive” and which were not

January 2018: Assign “non-responsive” families to amplified text messaging strategies

April 2018: Conduct parent survey and collect parent outreach logs

June 2018: Collect final extant data

Benefits of Participation

The study provides participating districts and schools an opportunity to pilot an innovative parent text messaging system to improve attendance. The study will provide the intervention to participating districts at no cost during the 2017-18 school year.

Criteria for Participation

Participating districts should:

- Have 10 or more elementary schools with high levels of absenteeism (i.e., more than 15 percent of students chronically absent)
- Be willing to work with the designated text messaging provider to set up the system
- Be able to share attendance and other relevant data to the study team
- Agree to comply with the study design, including the lotteries that will assign families to receive the different messaging strategies

For Additional Information

For more information about how to participate in the study, please contact the outreach leads: Dr. Muna Shami mshami@air.org (202.403.6903) or Dr. Marlene Darwin mdarwin@air.org (202.403.5395).