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Afterword

This volume arrives at a critical time for American education. The Every Student Succeeds Act has resulted in a majority of states using absenteeism reduction as one of their core measures of school performance and improvement. This has created urgency for effective interventions to reduce absenteeism at scale and cost effectively. The contributors to this volume have reviewed and suggested several such promising intervention strategies. Here we highlight a handful of additional promising absence research projects that underscore the value and importance of using randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to inform the development of absence-reduction plans.

One such RCT was conducted by Rogers and Feller with the School District of Philadelphia (SDP).¹ They assessed the impact of an absence-reduction

intervention modeled after the Home Energy Reports sent regularly to millions of homes around the world.² The RCT included parents of 28,080 K-12 students at risk of high absenteeism. These parents were randomly assigned to a control group or one of three treatment conditions that each received an average of four mail-based treatments. Treatments sent to the *reminder* condition emphasized the importance of attendance and the consequences of absences. Treatments sent to the *total absences* condition included the same content as those sent in the reminder condition with the addition of a graphic display of the total number of absences the student had accumulated so far in the school year. Treatments sent to parents in the *comparison* condition included the same content as those sent in the total absences condition with the addition of a graphic display of how their child's absences compared to their typical classmate.

The intervention reduced chronic absenteeism by 11 percent for students whose parents were assigned to the

total absences and the comparison conditions. The absence-reducing effects were consistent across grades, races, genders, and socioeconomic statuses, and it also spilled over to other non-targeted siblings living in the same household. Consistent with an asset-based approach to family engagement, the intervention was useful to parents. They reported showing it to others in their homes and were more accurate about both their child's absences and the absences of their child's classmates. These personalized, mail-based attendance reports reduced absenteeism at a cost of \$5-10 per net day generated. This intervention and impact has subsequently been replicated in a published RCT with 10,967 K-5 students across ten districts in California (and several times by In Class Today, the organization we cofounded to help districts around the US implement the intervention at scale.³

Just as RCTs can teach which interventions work cost-effectively, they can also teach which (unexpectedly) do not. Robinson, Gallus, Lee, and

Rogers studied an intervention involving giving awards to high school students for perfect attendance (N=15,329).⁴ Students who had a perfect month of attendance during the preceding semester were randomly assigned to a control condition or one of two treatments. Those assigned to the retrospective award condition received a high-quality embossed placard congratulating them for having had at least one month of perfect attendance, while those assigned to the prospective award condition received a letter informing them that they would receive the same award if they had a perfect month of attendance in the subsequent semester. The researchers predicted that students in both the retrospective award and prospective award conditions would have fewer absences in the subsequent month than those in the control condition. To their surprise, those in the prospective award condition showed no absence reduction relative to control, while absences among those in the retrospective award condition increased by 8 percent in the month after

awards were received. Subsequent survey experiments suggest that these awards may have inadvertently signaled to students that they had attended school more than their peers and more than their schools expected them to attend, potentially causing the unintended absence increase. This experiment studied a specific and stylized kind of award: unexpected, purely symbolic, and of no economic value. Other kinds of awards may be beneficial, but these experimental results suggest that educators should think carefully about what unintended signals are being sent when they offer students attendance awards.

We note two other important recent RCTs on absenteeism. In the first, Balu, Porter, and Gunton found that sending weekly automated personalized SMS text messages to high school parents of students in New York City Public Schools about their children's attendance had no statistically reliable effect on subsequent attendance (N=3,957).⁵ This was surprising given the apparent promise of SMS-based interventions

in K-12 education.⁶ However, in contrast to the intervention described by Smythe-Leistico and Page, in this study there were no school-affiliated individuals personally sending the SMS messages; the messages were automated.⁷ It is likely that the perceived interpersonal element of Smythe-Leistico and Page's intervention increased its potency. Unless an SMS message prompts a specific and immediate action (e.g., complete a missing homework assignment tonight) or has a strong interpersonal accountability element, it may be at risk of entering and exiting attention before it can be acted on.

The second noteworthy recent RCT is by Guryan and colleagues, who report the only RCT of which we are aware that examines the impact of attendance-focused mentors (N=765).⁸ They found that mentors decreased absences by around three days among students in grades 5-7 but had no detectable effect on absenteeism in the other grades studied. Since the mentors cost around \$1,500 per student, the researchers estimate that the

intervention cost around \$500 per net day generated among students in grades 5-7. We note that this is 50--100 times more expensive per net day generated than the mail-based, personalized absence reports described above and is significantly more time- and labor-intensive to implement.⁹

As the scholars in this volume demonstrate, absenteeism often results from deep personal and structural challenges facing students, families, and communities. As such, districtwide or even national-level absence reduction will require multiple effective interventions woven together over time. There is no single panacea; rather, districts will need comprehensive attendance plans that incorporate varied interventions that are supported by rigorous evidence. Some interventions, in particular, can be implemented cost-effectively at scale relatively quickly, such as the intervention built around attendance reports.¹⁰

Interventions like this are not substitutes for more intensive interventions but, rather, complements

that could free schools and educators to direct their scarce resources toward more intensive and comprehensive efforts. We look forward to more (and more effective) interventions that empower and support all stakeholders to reduce student absenteeism in the future. The contributions in this book underscore the need for those interventions and clarify what the path toward their development may look like.

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¹T. Rogers and A. Feller, "Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents' Misbeliefs," *Nature Human Behaviour* 2, (2018): 335-432.

² See H. Allcott, "Social Norms and Energy Conservation," *Journal of Public Economics* 95, nos. 9-10 (2011): 1082-95; H. Allcott and T. Rogers, "The Short-Run and Long-Run Effects of Behavioral Interventions: Experimental Evidence from Energy Conservation," *American Economic Review* 104, no. 10 (2014): 3003-37.

³ C. Robinson, M. Lee, E. Dearing, and T. Rogers, "Reducing Student Absenteeism in the Early Grades by Targeting Parental Beliefs," *American Educational Research Journal* (2018): doi:10.3102/0002831218772274.

⁴ C. Robinson, J. Gallus, M. Lee, and T. Rogers, (Under review) "The Demotivating Effect (and Unintended Message) of Retrospective Awards."

⁵ R. Balu, K. Porter, and B. Gunton, "Can Informing Parents Help High School Students Show Up for School?" MDRC, 2016, https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/NewVisionsRCT_2016_Brief.pdf.

⁶ See, for example, K. Smythe-Leistico and L. Page, "Connect-Text: Leveraging Text-Message Communication to Mitigate Chronic Absenteeism and Improve Parental Engagement in the Earliest Years of Schooling," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 23, nos. 1-2 (2018): 139-52; P. Bergman, "Parent-Child Information Frictions and Human Capital Investment: Evidence from a Field Experiment" (Working Paper Series No. 5391, CESifo, 2015), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2622034; P. Bergman and E. W. Chan, "Leveraging technology to engage parents at scale: Evidence from a randomized controlled trial" (Working Paper Series No. 6493, CESifo, 2017), <http://www.columbia.edu/~psb2101/ParentRCT.pdf>; P. Bergman, J. Lasky-Fink, and T. Rogers, (Under review) "Simplification and Defaults Affect Adoption and Impact of Technology, but Decision Makers Do Not Realize This," https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/todd_rogers/files/simplification_defaults_affect_adoption.pdf.

⁷ Smythe-Leistico and Page, "Connect Text."

⁸ There is also promising research on a mentoring program in NYC that estimates a larger effect on reducing absenteeism, though is not an RCT. See R. Balfanz and V. Byrnes, "Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism: Impact of the NYC Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism and School Attendance and Its Implications for Other Cities," Johns Hopkins School of Education, Baltimore, 2013). Guryan et al. "The Effect of Mentoring on School Attendance and Academic Outcomes: A Randomized Evaluation of the Check & Connect Program" (Working Paper Series WP-16-18, Northwestern Institute for Policy Research, 2017),

<https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/publications/docs/workingpapers/2016/WP-16-18.pdf>.

⁹ Rogers and Feller, "Reducing Student Absences at Scale."

¹⁰ Ibid.; Robinson et al., "Reducing Student Absences in the Early Grades."