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NEWS RELEASE

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Attendance Matters Project Finds That Small Interventions Can Have Big Impact on Chronic Absenteeism, Upends Traditional Ideas About Incentives

REDWOOD CITY, CALIF. – *Attendance Matters*, a year-long collaborative research study involving the San Mateo County Office of Education (SMCOE), researchers at Harvard University's Kennedy School and more than 30,000 students in 14 local school districts, showed that regular and specific communication with elementary school families about the importance of school attendance resulted in improved outcomes, especially for those students considered "chronically absent."

During the 2015–16 school year, *Attendance Matters* conducted four different studies using postcard mailings to test communication strategies regarding student attendance with families. Two of the studies—one focusing on grades K through five and one focusing on grades six through 12—showed significant, actionable results.

The project was designed to examine the best way to communicate with students and families about the importance of regular school attendance, with the ultimate goal of reducing chronic absenteeism—one of the four programmatic "pillars" of The Big Lift, a countywide literacy initiative that aims to improve the reading proficiency of the county's third graders. The studies were conducted as randomized controlled trials, making it possible to identify the impact of a given strategy.

The kindergarten through fifth grade study focused on improving direct communication to parents. Specifically, the study explored whether sending parents mailings that identified how many days their child had been absent and emphasized the importance of regular attendance would have an impact on student absences.

When asked about the use of postcards as opposed to digital messages, Harvard Professor Todd Rogers, who helped spearhead the project, said, "We hear from families that the postcards become social objects that have a shelf life in the home. Families put them on the refrigerator, show them to the student and others and leave them on the kitchen table to be reviewed and discussed. This longevity is critical because we do not know exactly when a student will be absent."

The results of the K–5 study were promising: Students in households receiving attendance mailings showed an eight percent reduction in overall absences with a 16 percent reduction in chronic absenteeism (defined as 18 or more absences per school year). The mailings also seemed most effective for students with the poorest attendance, as elementary school students with 10 absences attended school an average of 1.2 days more as a result of the mailings—

more than double the impact the mailings had on students with half the number of absences. The impact was also larger for key student subgroups, including for students who are English language learners.

The sixth through 12th grade study examined whether symbolic awards were more effective at improving attendance when the award was offered prospectively ("you *may* win an award") versus retrospectively ("you *have* won an award"). The mailings were sent directly to students who had received perfect attendance in at least one month during the fall of the 2015–16 school year.

The results of the awards study were surprising: Students who were offered a prospective award showed no improvements in attendance when compared to the control group. However, contrary to popular practice, students who received a retroactive award actually attended school less. Further analysis suggested that attendance is not motivated by symbolic awards, possibly because retrospective awards cause students to assume they are attending school at a higher rate than their peers.

Ultimately, *Attendance Matters* showed that low-cost, scalable interventions, such as personalized communications, can have a big impact on attendance. Across the 14 participating districts, students attended 3,486 more days of school, and the interventions decreased chronic absenteeism for the most at-risk student populations by 16 percent. A number of districts are also exploring ways to continue these interventions beyond the one-year term of the research project.

For more information about *Attendance Matters*, visit <http://www.smcoe.org/attendancematters>, or contact [Carly Robinson](#) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education or [Nancy Magee](#) at the San Mateo County Office of Education.

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