


# Exploring Implementation of Attendance Supports to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism in the Providence Public School District



REL Northeast & Islands studied Providence Public School District's implementation of attendance supports to reduce students' chronic absenteeism. This brief is intended to support district administrators and school leaders who are interested in understanding how attendance supports are implemented and how implementation relates to changes in chronic absenteeism.

## Why study chronic absenteeism?

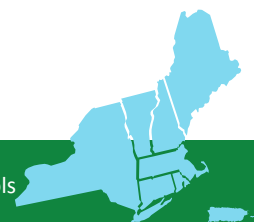
Schools across the United States are increasingly paying attention to their students' attendance rates. Students who are chronically absent miss 10 percent or more of instructional days over the course of a school year. A report by the U.S. Department of Education (2016) identified chronic absenteeism as a hidden educational crisis: more than 16 percent of students across the United States were chronically absent in the 2015/16 school year.<sup>1</sup> High absenteeism rates are associated with lower student academic achievement and higher dropout rates.<sup>2</sup>

To reduce rising rates of chronic absenteeism, Providence Public School District (PPSD) amended their Student Attendance Policy in 2018 to require schools to track and address chronic absenteeism. Although PPCD encouraged schools to use a variety of attendance supports, the chronic absenteeism rate remained above 30 percent, on average, in the past few years.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, however, the chronic absenteeism rate decreased in some schools. Having a better understanding of the attendance supports most commonly implemented by schools in which chronic absenteeism decreased will help districts develop new recommendations for how schools can use existing resources efficiently to reduce chronic absenteeism.

1 U.S. Department of Education (2016).

2 Gottfried (2014); Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog (2007).

3 Cigna, J. (2017).

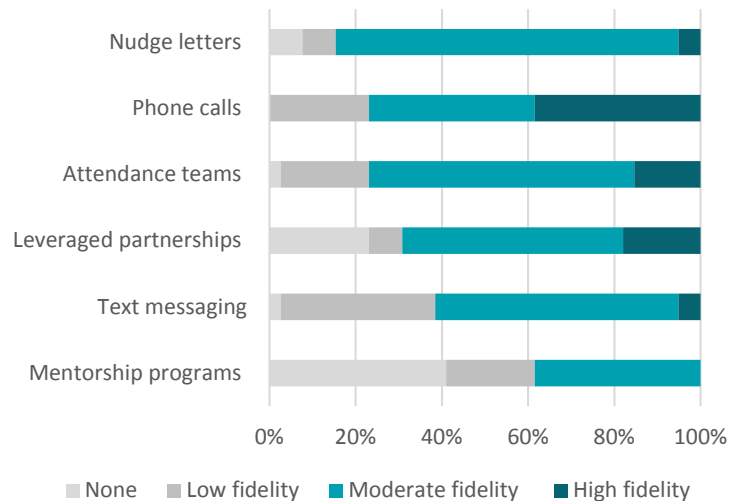


# Which types of attendance supports are being implemented with fidelity?

PPSD encourages schools to use a variety of attendance supports that include nudge letters, phone calls, attendance teams, leveraged partnerships, text messaging, mentorship programs, and parent engagement specialists (see Key Terms box for definitions).

To gain a better understanding of how often each support is being deployed with fidelity (a measure of how closely implementation matches intended use), PPSD developed criteria to characterize schools' use of each type of attendance support into three levels of fidelity (low, moderate, and high). This study examined schools' use of attendance supports and dove more deeply into the implementation of one support: text messaging to parents and guardians.

The percentage of schools implementing attendance supports with **moderate fidelity** or **high fidelity** was highest for nudge letters, phone calls, and attendance teams.



Note: The sample is 39 schools. Parent engagement specialists do not appear in the figure because fidelity was assumed to be high. Source: Authors' analysis of attendance support data from Providence Public School District, 2018/19.

## Key Terms: Types of Attendance Supports



**Nudge letters.** Letters, mailed home to families, that contain information about student absences.



**Phone calls.** Phone calls to parents and guardians about student absences, made by either school staff or an automated system.



**Attendance team.** A group comprising several school staff and the school principal, who meet to analyze and understand attendance data.



**Leveraged partnerships.** Strategic collaborations between schools and community organizations to support attendance.



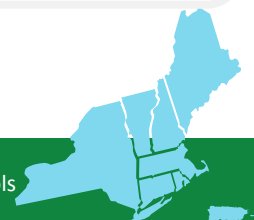
**Text messaging.** An engagement tool for school administrators or educators to send text messages to parents and guardians. The platform provides parents and guardians with the option of having texts translated to and from one of more than 80 languages.



**Mentorship program.** A program in which caring adults take an interest in the needs of a student at risk for continued chronic absenteeism.



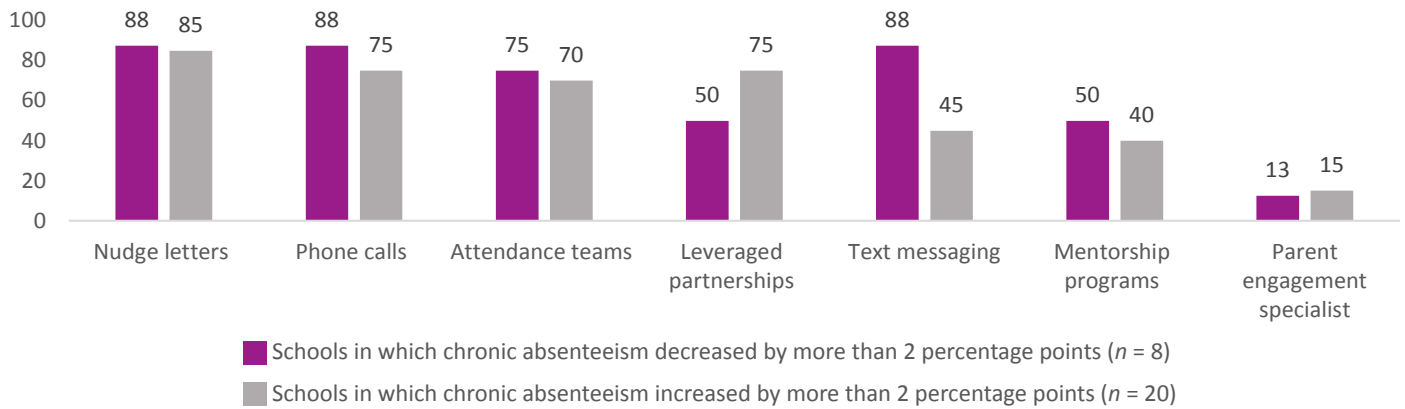
**Parent engagement specialists.** District employees who are assigned to schools to build administrator and educator capacity in developing strong relationships with parents and guardians.



**FINDING 1** Schools in which **chronic absenteeism decreased** between 2017/18 and 2018/19 implemented phone calls, text messaging, and mentorship programs with moderate or high fidelity especially more frequently than schools in which **chronic absenteeism increased**; all differences were greater than 5 percentage points.

The largest difference between schools in which chronic absenteeism **decreased** and schools in which it **increased** was in the implementation of text messaging (88 percent versus 45 percent implementing with moderate or high fidelity).

*Percent of schools implementing with moderate or high fidelity*

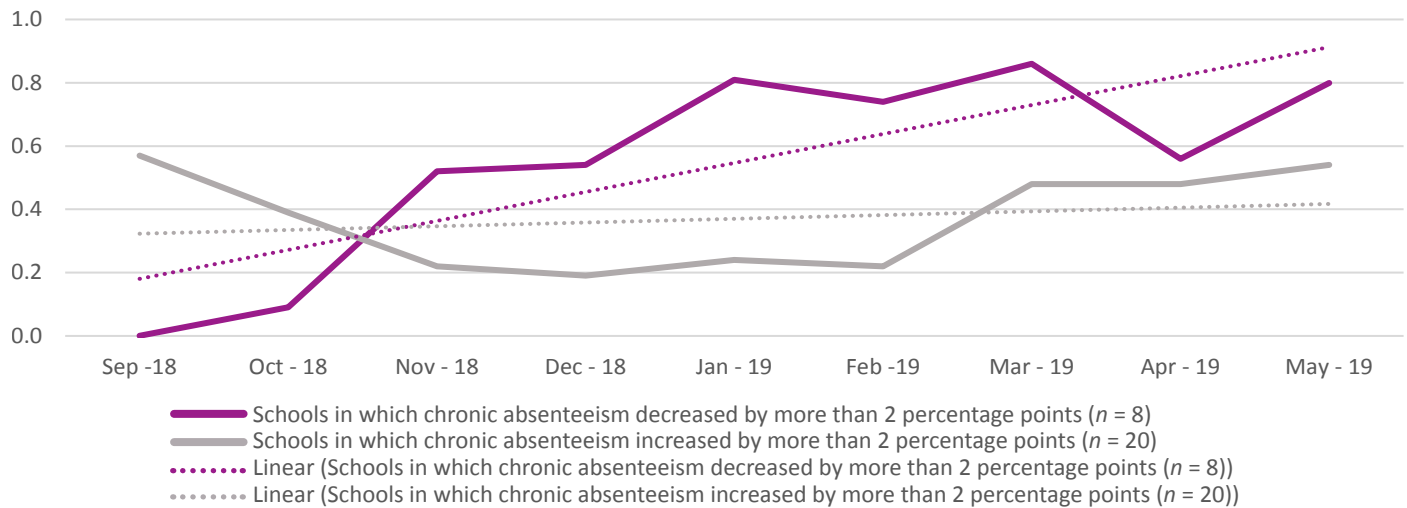


Note: Data on implementation of attendance supports are for the 2018/19 school year. Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Providence Public School District, 2017/18 and 2018/19.



**FINDING 2** During the 2018/19 school year the use of attendance-related text messaging increased more quickly in schools in which **chronic absenteeism decreased** between 2017/18 and 2018/19 than in schools in which **chronic absenteeism increased**.

*Attendance-related text messages sent per month per student*



Source: Authors’ analysis of attendance support and school absenteeism data from the Providence Public School District, 2017/18 and 2018/19.

Schools in which chronic absenteeism decreased went from sending fewer than 10 attendance-related text messages per 100 students to 86 such messages per 100 students between October 2018 and March 2019. In contrast, schools in which chronic absenteeism increased went from sending 39 attendance-related text messages per 100 students to only 50 such messages per 100 students over the same period.

## Implications

**District and school leaders can use these findings to strategically select attendance supports that are tailored to their specific school context and needs of their students and families.** For example, these results suggest that schools with high percentages of multilingual learner students might see text messaging, which allows messages to be translated to and from parents’ and guardians’ preferred language, as an especially efficient tool for communicating with parents and guardians who speak languages other than English in the home.

**District and school leaders might further explore why schools use particular attendance supports to decrease chronic absenteeism and why different supports may be more appropriate for certain schools.** Schools that recorded decreased chronic absenteeism showed different patterns in attendance support implementation than did schools that recorded increases in chronic absenteeism. It will be important to better understand why certain types of schools implement specific attendance supports, and which combinations of supports lead to reductions in chronic absenteeism given school characteristics and context.



# Data sources, sample, methods, and limitations

**Data sources.** PPSD provided data coded from school administrator interviews on the implementation of each type of attendance support. The data were coded according to a set of fidelity metrics to assess whether each type of attendance support was implemented with low, moderate, or high fidelity. PPSD also provided an administrative records file for PPSD schools containing aggregated school-level annual chronic absenteeism rates, monthly absenteeism rates, average daily attendance rates for schools, and school-level student demographic characteristics. PPSD also provided a data file exported from its text-messaging platform that contained the timing and content of every text message that schools sent to families. The study team used a set of screening criteria developed in partnership with PPSD to process these data to identify messages that were attendance related.

**Sample.** The study sample included 39 PPSD schools—22 elementary schools and 17 secondary schools (7 middle schools and 10 high schools)—and their student populations during the 2017/18 and 2018/19 school years. The analytic sample is smaller than the population of PPSD schools because four schools that district leaders identified as special case or charter schools were excluded.

**Methodology.** The study team calculated frequencies, percentages, difference scores, and means as appropriate. To present a synthesis indicating which attendance supports were being used by schools in which chronic absenteeism decreased, the study team compared rates for the 2017/18 school year with rates from the 2018/19 school year and calculated the difference. To characterize schools' use of text messaging, the study team calculated descriptive measures to represent mean levels of overall and of attendance-related text messaging per student.

**Limitations.** These analyses are intended neither to evaluate the effectiveness of individual attendance supports nor to advance a causal explanation of the relationship between the implementation of these supports and changes in schools' chronic absenteeism rates. However, descriptive differences between schools in which chronic absenteeism decreased and schools in which it did not might highlight some patterns worthy of further exploration.

## References

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