

Truancy Prevention Research and Best Practices

The research below is an excerpt from a longer report, written by Judy Touzin, a Rappaport fellow with the Office of the Child Advocate in Summer 2021 and shared with the JJPAD CBI Subcommittee, that informed the group's findings and recommendations to improve Massachusetts' CRA system.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Since the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) declared truancy prevention a national priority in 2003, the federal government has taken steps to increase state and school level ownership for student attendance. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 authorized all states to include at least one non-academic indicator as a measure of school quality or student success (SQSS).¹ This was the first time that federal education law explicitly mentioned chronic absence tracking. As a result, many states increased their sense of urgency around effective interventions and training to support attendance and prevent chronic absenteeism.² According to the U.S. Department of Education, thirty-six states, Washington, D.C. & Puerto Rico identified chronic absenteeism and absenteeism reduction as one of their core measures of school performance and improvement.^{3,4} The research literature has also grown in an effort to better understand and prevent truancy.⁵

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts defines a habitually truant child as “a school-aged child, not excused from attendance under the lawful and reasonable regulations of such child’s school, who *willfully* fails to attend school for more than 8 school days in a quarter” (emphasis added).⁶

Truancy is also classified as a “status offense” in forty states and the District of Columbia. A status offense is defined as “a noncriminal act that is considered a law violation only because of a youth’s status as a minor”.⁷ The remaining states have removed truancy from their status offense laws, treating it less as a behavior to be regulated or punished and more as a sign of a child and family in need of services and support. In Massachusetts, truancy is not considered a

¹ U.S. Dept. of Ed. (January 2019). *Chronic absenteeism in the nation’s schools*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#one>

² Rogers, Todd. (2019). [Afterword]. In Gottfried, M., & Hutt, E. *Absent from school: Understanding and addressing student absenteeism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press.

³ U.S. Dept. of Ed. (January 2019). *Chronic absenteeism in the nation’s schools*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#one>

⁴ Massachusetts is one of the 36 states that has adopted chronic absenteeism as a SQSS measure. See <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/attendance/> for more details.

⁵ See <https://dropoutprevention.org/> for additional resources, literature and reports on truancy and dropout prevention efforts.

⁶ See CRA Statute at <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXVII/Chapter119/Section39e>

⁷ OJJDP. (2015, September). Status Offenders. Retrieved from <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/mpg/literature-review/status-offenders.pdf>

law violation, although – through the Child Requiring Assistance process – it can still lead to a youth being brought before the Juvenile Court. (By contrast, at least one state – Connecticut – has completely removed the court’s jurisdiction over truancy matters.)⁸

Social Costs of Truancy

Research has identified a variety of concerns that can be associated with truancy and truant youth. For example, truancy is often correlated with poor academic performance and an increase in the likelihood of dropping out over time. Adolescents who are truant are also more likely to have mental health concerns and be engaged in substance use.⁹ Further, research shows that students who were chronically truant are also more likely to experience employment and economic hardships later in life such as increased rates of unemployment, working in lower-level positions and having lower earning potential.¹⁰

The costs of truancy extend beyond youth and families to their schools and broader communities. At the school level, truancy can result in a loss of funding because attendance is used as a marker for resource allocations. At the community level, the more students who engage in truancy and ultimately drop out, the higher the need for government spending on social services to help offset the employment and economic hardships described above.¹¹ Given the potentially far-reaching and long-lasting connections described above, it is important to consider the factors that drive truancy in the first place so that prevention and intervention measures can be as targeted and timely as possible.

Truancy Drivers

The reasons a child and/or family might engage in truancy are unique and specific to them. Similarly, the resources and practices within the school and broader community may help or hinder a family’s ability to be present in school every day. Figure 3 below reflects several key drivers at the child, family, school, and community level that may be contributing to the occurrence of truancy.^{12, 13, 14}

It is worth noting that the drivers that most directly contribute to truancy at one grade level may not be the key drivers at another. For example, studies have shown that chronic

⁸ See: <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Truancy/Truancy/How-To>

⁹ Keppens, G. & Spruyt, B. (2020) The impact of interventions to prevent truancy: A review of the research literature. *Studies in Educational Evaluation* (65) 2020.

¹⁰ Center for American Progress. (2015, August). *High Cost of Truancy*. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/document/260020573/The-High-Cost-of-Truancy>

¹¹ Maynard, B. et al. (2017). Truancy in the United States: Examining temporal trends and correlates by race, age, and gender. *Children and Youth Services Review* 81 (2017) 188–196

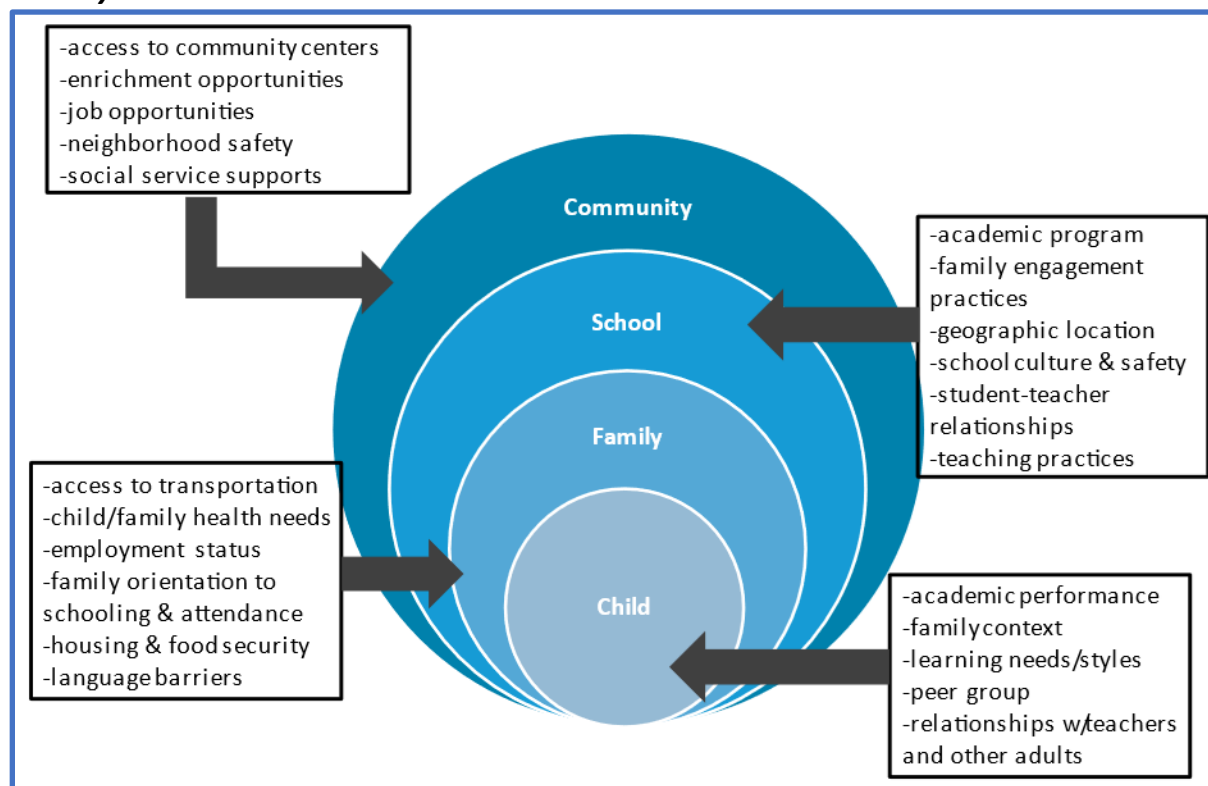
¹² Henry, K.L. & David H. Huizinga, D. H. (2007). School-related Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Truancy among Urban Youth Placed at Risk. *Primary Prevention* 28:505–519

¹³ Attendance Works. (n.d.). *The problem*. Retrieved July 22, 2021, from <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/>

¹⁴ Jacob, B.A. & Lovett, K. (2017, July 27). *Chronic absenteeism: An old problem in search of new answers*. Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chronic-absenteeism-an-old-problem-in-search-of-new-answers/>

absenteeism and truancy in the early elementary grades are more closely connected to family factors (i.e., job schedules that conflict with school start times; family health needs). Truancy in the middle and upper grades are also commonly linked to school-related factors such as ineffective academic supports, difficulty with peers and lack of a caring teacher-student relationships.¹⁵ These school-related challenges may serve to exacerbate concerns that are already present at the child and family level.

Figure 3
Truancy Drivers



Theoretical Perspectives & Responding to Truancy

As discussed above, truancy (and chronic absenteeism in general) exacts a cost on families, schools, and the broader community. Given that, what is the appropriate response to prevention and intervention? Studies have shown that at least two theoretical perspectives inform how communities answer that question: *rational choice theory* and *school bonding theory*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Jacob, B.A. & Lovett, K. (2017, July 27). *Chronic absenteeism: An old problem in search of new answers*. Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chronic-absenteeism-an-old-problem-in-search-of-new-answers/>

¹⁶ Keppens, G. & Spruyt, B. (2020) The impact of interventions to prevent truancy: A review of the research literature. *Studies in Educational Evaluation* (65) 2020.

The *rational choice perspective* posits that, “behavior can be influenced by raising the costs and/or benefits of actions...”¹⁷ Responses to truancy that fall under the rational choice approach focus almost exclusively on the child and the family. Practices often include school disciplinary responses such as detention and suspension, fines and legal prosecution of families, and children being taken to court. The primary limitation of this response is that it treats truancy as the primary problem to be addressed as opposed to viewing it as a *symptom* of a more significant concern. Further, studies show that the effects of interventions largely focused on rewarding or punishing families and youth who truant yield unconvincing results.¹⁸ This may be due in part to the fact that those who take this approach often fail to ask and uncover the *why* behind the truancy.

For example, a New York City based ‘zero tolerance’ program permitted police officers to make *direct* contact with students in school if they demonstrated behaviors of concern or were frequently engaged in truancy. A study found that students in grades 9-12 actually had *worse* attendance *after* the intervention. Their average percent of days attended decreased from 78.8% before the intervention down to 71.5% post intervention.¹⁹

The *school bonding perspective* (also referred to as “school engagement” and “student engagement” in the literature) broadens the focus on the child and family and includes *the school*. In this view, truancy is viewed as an important flag along the process of disengagement and attempts are made to get at the underlying causes behind the truancy before the child completely disconnects from school. Interventions rooted in the school bonding perspective often work to ensure that young people establish a relationship with at least one caring adult. Such interventions are also more likely to be longer term such that they become part of the fabric of supports made available to students.²⁰

A study of the Chicago High School Redesign initiative found that 11th graders who attended smaller schools were less likely to be absent than students attending larger schools serving a similar demographic. Another intervention, [Check & Connect](#), calls for regularly monitoring factors like attendance, performance, and involvement in class and school activities that might indicate a students’ level of engagement (the ‘check’). Insights gleaned from this monitoring are used to then develop individualized action plans that ‘connect’ youth to resources and supports to address an identified need. According to their site, “At the core of Check & Connect is a

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Brady, K., Balmer, S., & Phenix, D. (2007). School-police partnership effectiveness in urban schools: An analysis of New York City’s Impact Schools Initiative. *Education and Urban Society*, 39(4), 455-478.

²⁰ Ibid.

trusting relationship between the student and a caring, trained mentor who both advocates for and challenges the student to keep education salient.”²¹

While studies on the efficacy of Check and Connect have yielded mixed results, most demonstrate that program is impactful in reducing absences among students with emotional or behavioral concerns when compared to similar students who did not receive the support. Implementation duration and fidelity also factored into program effectiveness.²²

The school bonding perspective is part of a broader mindset approach to addressing chronic absenteeism. This critical mindset “...recognizes that students miss school for many understandable issues...for which a punitive response is not appropriate. But what helps is working with families...to fix the underlying problems that lead to absenteeism.”²³ From this standpoint, addressing truancy (as well as chronic absenteeism) can be perceived as the collective work of families, schools, courts, and other broader community. Given that, the most effective prevention and intervention measures leverage a multi-level approach. Multi-level interventions are important because they highlight the need for a strong partnership between the school and other stakeholders in order to better address the complex causes of truancy.²⁴

Table 2

Rational Choice & School Bonding Perspectives at a Glance

	Rational Choice Perspective	School Bonding Perspective
Focus	Family & child	Family, child, & school
View of truancy	Truancy is the primary concern and behavior to be addressed	Truancy is a symptom the primary concern(s) to be addressed
Approach	Punitive	Supportive & collaborative
Efficacy	less effective over time	more effective over time

Promising Practices

There are communities and organizations across the country that have worked to identify and implement effective strategies for preventing chronic absenteeism and reducing truancy (see Appendix A). What follows is a brief discussion of four practices that are regularly referenced in

²¹ See <https://checkandconnect.umn.edu/model/default.html>

²² Keppens, G. & Spruyt, B. (2020) The impact of interventions to prevent truancy: A review of the research literature. *Studies in Educational Evaluation* (65) 2020.

²³ Attendance Works. (2016, January 11). *What's the difference between chronic absence and truancy?* Retrieved from <https://www.attendanceworks.org/whats-the-difference-between-chronic-absence-and-truancy/>

²⁴ Keppens, G. & Spruyt, B. (2020) The impact of interventions to prevent truancy: A review of the research literature. *Studies in Educational Evaluation* (65) 2020.

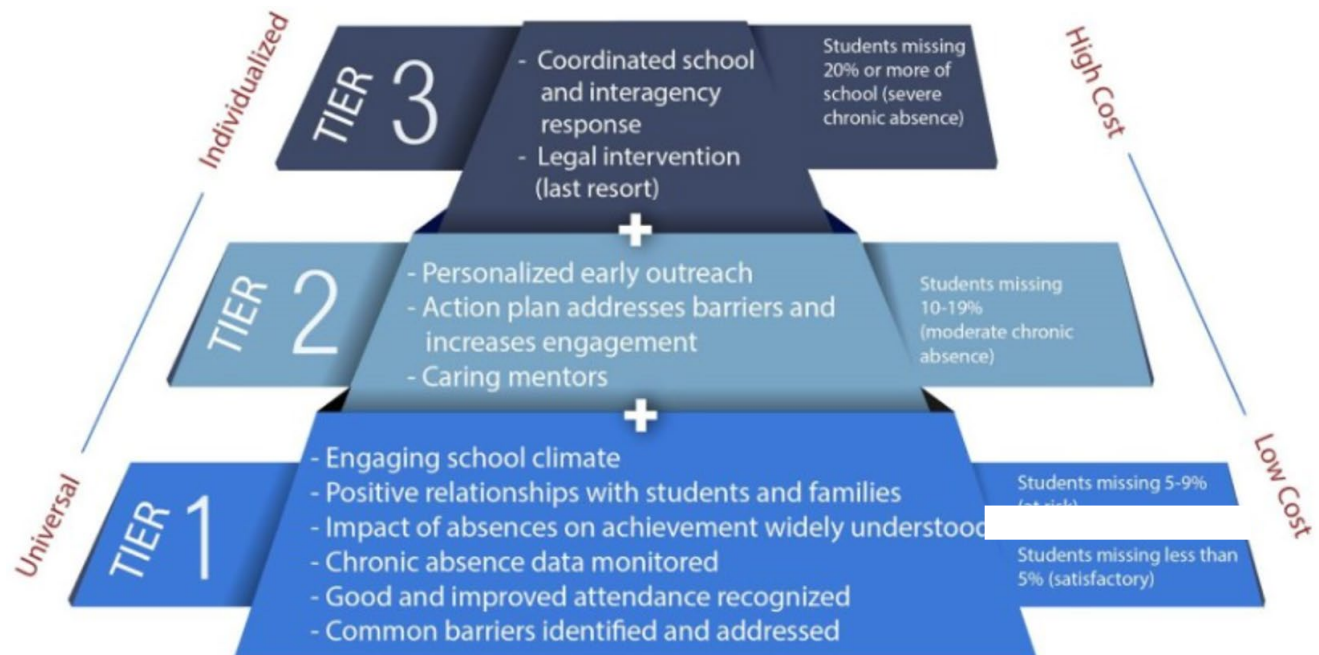
the literature as well as in conversations with national practitioners – multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), success planning, community collaboration, and simplified communication.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Figure 2 below highlights a few core practices at each level of an MTSS approach designed to prevent chronic absenteeism.²⁵

Figure 4

Preventing & Responding to Chronic Absenteeism with MTSS



Establishing positive supportive relationships with students and families is the bedrock of all the school's efforts, including truancy prevention. According to the Search Institute, there are five core elements that help adults establish meaningful relationships with young people in particular.²⁶ These include expressing care, challenging growth, and providing support (see Appendix A for complete list of elements and corresponding indicators). When student feels known, seen, safe, and supported, they are more likely to stay connected with school and view school-based personnel as a support system. Intervention at Tiers 2 and 3 is no substitute for this preventative work accomplished in Tier 1.

Attendance Teams are another key component in establishing a solid foundation at Tier 1 and for implementing interventions at Tiers 2 and 3. Teams are typically led by the principal or a designated school-based administrator. Principal presence is vital because it communicates that

²⁵ Attendance Works. (2020, February 4). *Three tiers framework to improve attendance*. Retrieved from <https://www.attendanceworks.org/three-tiers-to-improve-attendance/>

²⁶ Search Institute. *Developmental relationships framework*. Retrieved July 26, 2021, from <https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/>

the work is important enough to prioritize. In addition to administration, teams include key school-based personnel such as the guidance counselor, social worker, attendance clerk, and lead teachers.²⁷ In some instances, the team will include community partners or liaisons. In Community Schools throughout the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), these meetings are organized and facilitated by a site-based community school director, whose core role is to ensure families and youth have the supports they need to be in school every day. While the configuration of the team may look different from school to school, the core function remains the same – to maintain a laser like focus on attendance at the *individual* student level. This allows school teams to identify and respond to potential concerns *before* they become a chronic problem.

The attendance team's ability to achieve its purpose is linked to the efficacy of its systems and processes for working together. An effective attendance team:

- meets at a consistent time (ideally weekly)
- follows a clear agenda and protocol
- monitors and responds to detailed data
- develops and implements personalized and individualized plans (at Tiers 2 and 3)
- tracks interventions and response
- files petitions with the court *only* as a last resort²⁸

Questions to consider:

1. What is the existing school culture around attendance and being present every day?
2. To what extent is the school intentionally helping to build genuine caring relationships between students and personnel?
3. Does the school have an attendance team? If so, to what extent does it meet the effectiveness criteria noted above?

Success Planning

Harvard's EdRedesign Lab has been researching and promoting the use of student success plans for the past few years.²⁹ Success Plans are “dynamic tools for capturing children and youth's strengths, interests, and needs and *matching them with customized supports and*

²⁷ Attendance Works. (n.d.) *A principal-led team overseeing attendance*. Retrieved on July 26, 2021 from <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/mentoring-elementary-success-mentors/what-support-is-needed-from-schools/a-principal-led-team-overseeing-attendance/>

²⁸ Ibid. p. 11

²⁹ EdRedesign Lab. (2019, April). *Success Planning*. Retrieved from <https://edredesign.org/success-planning>.

opportunities—both in and out of school” (emphasis added).³⁰ Core to this approach is the belief that every student has a unique set of strengths, needs, and circumstances and as such stand to benefit from the support of a designated caring adult, also known as a “navigator.” Navigators build strong relationships with the children and youth they support. They help to ensure their needs are met, strengths are further developed and opportunities for growth and enrichment are explored.

As with the attendance team practice mentioned above, success plans and the process of success planning can look different from community to community. The figure below offers a snapshot of what this process looks like in a few cities across the country.³¹

Figure 5

Success Planning Across the Country

Unity Point, IL: Designated two weeks at the start of the school year for in-depth meetings between a teacher and each student and family to identify pressing issues
Nashville, TN: Developed a districtwide Navigator program and created a Navigator training and support guide
Highline, WA: Implemented Success Planning with an emphasis on whole child support (in and outside of school) and relationships
Louisville, KY: Partnered with Unite Us to launch a coordinated care network of health and social service providers
Oakland, CA: Partnered with Salesforce to build a student support tool being implemented in nearly half of district's schools during the 2020-2021 academic year
Salem, MA: Teachers contact each family to identify urgent needs and partner with City Connects to meet those needs

Keri Randolph of Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) helped launch their navigator program during the 2020-2021 school year. MNPS navigators reported that “...these deeper connections make their work feel more meaningful and satisfying and has changed their understanding of the challenges children and their families are facing.”³² Students also reported a sense of “feeling more empowered to advocate for themselves.”³³

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ EdRedesign Lab, By All Means Convening. (2021, May 21). *Putting relationships at the center of success planning*. [PowerPoint slides]. Kaltura. https://www.kaltura.com/index.php/extwidget/preview/partner_id/1633051/uiconf_id/39294851/entry_id/1_xemvg4ci/embed/dynamic?

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

To be sure, launching a success planning initiative requires time and commitment on the part of school personnel as well as new or established relationships with community partners that can help meet the needs of children and families outside of schools. Navigators need to be trained in cultivating trusting relationships and know when to connect their students with the appropriate supports to address academic, social, and mental health needs as well as additional social services. Knowing who to reach out to for what supports is connected to the third promising practice, community collaboration.

Community Collaboration

As shared above, factors that drive truancy exist at multiple levels (child, family, school, community). Given that, the most effective prevention and intervention measures leverage a multi-level approach. Multi-level interventions are important because they highlight the need for a strong partnership between the school and other stakeholders in order to better address the complex causes of truancy.³⁴

One such model is *Project START* (Stop Truancy And Recommend Treatment).³⁵ *Project START* was implemented in a large urban school district in the Northeast. The goal was to promote a collaborative relationship between schools, community organizations, social services, and courts. This approach is rooted in the belief that community-based intervention approaches involving collaboration among key stakeholders can more effectively prevent truancy than court-based approaches alone.^{36, 37}

In terms of program design, there were two key differences between Project START and traditional court-based interventions. First, children and families did not attend hearings in court. Rather, court interventions were held at the school. While schools are not a neutral context per se, they can often be experienced as less threatening and punitive than a court room. A second important distinction was that caseworkers were present during in-school interventions to support families in their ability to access and make use of community services. The goal of these collaborative meetings was to identify targeted strategies to overcome the unique challenges that were contributing to the child's truancy. Services were then aligned to the child and family's needs both inside and outside of the school context.

A study was conducted to evaluate the efficacy of the Project START program. It included a representative sample of 567 students across elementary, middle, and high school in the same

³⁴ Keppens, G. & Spruyt, B. (2020) The impact of interventions to prevent truancy: A review of the research literature. *Studies in Educational Evaluation* (65) 2020.

³⁵ Ibid. Also, Project START, the term *treatment* is used to represent any appropriate service or support aligned to the cause of truancy. It can refer to treatment for substance use or mental health needs if the case warrants it.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Fantuzzo, J; Grim, S; Hazan, H. (2005). Project Start: An evaluation of a community-wide school-based intervention to reduce truancy. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42 (6), 657-667.

large urban city. The study report yielded two important findings. First, students in the multidimensional program had a greater decrease in truancy than students in a one-dimensional court-based intervention. Truancy rates decreased from 23% to 13% for those in Project START and from 24% to 18% for those the court-based intervention. These decreases were statistically significant. Second, it is important to note that youth in both groups relapsed in the following year, though students previously in Project START relapsed to a lesser degree.³⁸

In addition to community-based programs like Project START, there are a growing number of national organizations that also encourage broader scale community collaboration efforts. One such organization is The Forum for Youth Investment (FYI). Founded in 1998, FYI is a national organization focused on ensuring young people are equipped with the tools to successfully complete school and ultimately thrive in work and in life.³⁹ FYI's Ecosystem for youth belonging, opportunity, and success, which is a part of the Readiness Projects initiative (see Figure 6), stresses that young people live and grow in a complex ecosystem. Schools, while critical, are but one part of this system. Safety, the provision of basic needs (like housing and health care), as well as the presence of community-based resources all factor into the lived experiences and opportunities afforded to children and youth. There must be basic coordination across *all* levels and sectors of the ecosystem to ensure young people are surrounded by the network of care and support they need to thrive.⁴⁰

Figure 6

Readiness Projects' Ecosystem for youth belonging, opportunity, and success



³⁸ Ibid.

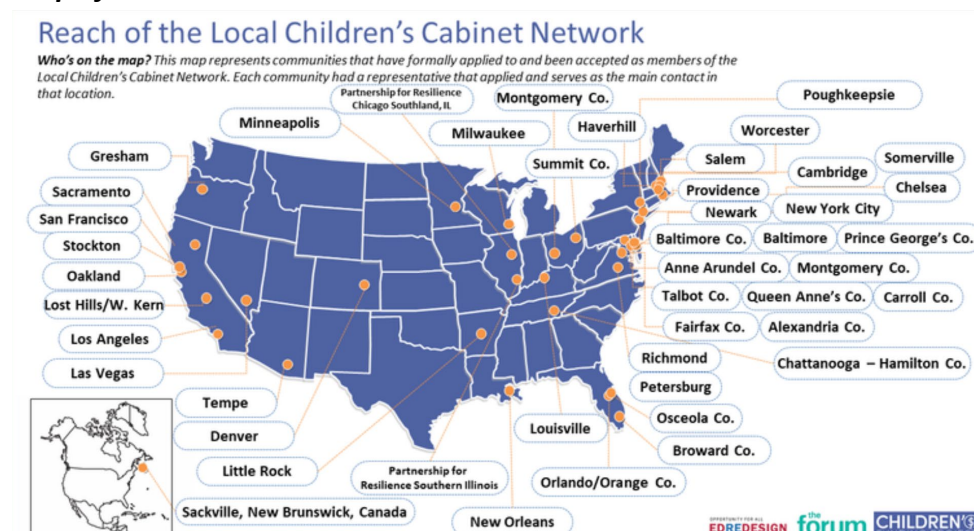
³⁹ See <https://forumfyi.org/> for more on the mission, vision, and work of the Forum for Youth Investment.

⁴⁰The Forum for Youth Investment. (2020, April). *About the Readiness Projects*. <https://forumfyi.org/the-readiness-projects/> (see figure in brochure linked [here](#))

A growing number of cities invested in establishing this coordinated approach have launched local Children's Cabinets in partnership with the Local Children's Cabinet Network (LCCN).⁴¹ These cabinets are "*collaborative action* bodies composed of agencies inside and outside of government, with responsibilities and *interests in seeing children thrive in school and in life*" (emphasis added).⁴² The LCCN supports local teams as they set vision, build investment, identify membership and work to align goals, strategies, and resources. To be sure, it takes collective will and investment to launch and sustain such cross-cutting partnerships, especially when many organizations are accustomed to operating in silos while focused on their respective agendas. However, when stakeholders align to better support children and families in their efforts to learn and thrive, the community is strengthened as a whole.⁴³

Figure 7

Map of U.S. cities with a local Children's Cabinet⁴⁴



Simplifying Communication

Several studies have shown that simplifying the communication that families receive about attendance can also help to reduce chronic absenteeism. Communication should convey a belief that families are vital and influential partners in their child's education and should equip them with the accurate and timely information they need to fulfill their role. Standard letters

⁴¹ Reville, P & Sacks, L. (2021). *Collaborative action for equity and opportunity. A practical guide for school and community leaders*. Harvard Education Press.

⁴² See <https://edredesign.org/local-childrens-cabinet-network> for more information about the LCCN and guidance on launching a local children's cabinet.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See <https://www.childrensfundingproject.org/resources-start>

however are typically too long, hard to understand, full of legal terms and can be perceived as threatening.^{45, 46}

In a randomized control trial (RCT) in California (N=131,312), the standard notice was 382 words long, written at a 10th grade reading level and included seven bullets detailing legal language on parental obligations and consequences for failure to improve attendance. Modified notices were written at a fifth grade reading level and had a primary message of fewer than 150 words. The state mandated legal language was included at the bottom in fine print. (See Appendix B & C for sample notices). This study and the modified notices targeted two biased beliefs held by parents of high absence students – total absences bias and relative absences bias.⁴⁷

This study found that sending modified notices that intentionally targeted key misbeliefs helped reduce total absences and the rate of chronic absenteeism by 0.07 days, which is roughly a 40% improvement compared to the standard notice. The most impactful modified notice (Condition D, in Appendix C) used 60% fewer words than the standard notice, emphasized the families' role in reducing and preventing absences, and reiterated the fact that absences can lead to poor academic performance.

Regarding impact across school levels, the combined results of the three conditions reduced absences by approximately 2.7% in high school students compared to 1.2% among elementary and middle school students.⁴⁸

A second RCT (N=28,080) was done in collaboration with a large school district in the northeast. The table below reflects the key research questions tested, the targeted parental belief and the treatment received (See Appendix D for sample treatment notices).⁴⁹

Table 3

Research Questions & Targeted Beliefs in RCT on Preventing Chronic Absenteeism

Research Question	Targeted Misbelief/Bias	Treatment Received
Does contacting families and encouraging them to improve their child's attendance	Parental self-efficacy	reminder treatment

⁴⁵ Lasky-Fink, J., Robinson, C., Chang, H., & Rogers, T. Using behavioral insights to improve school administrative communications: The case of truancy notifications. [Working Paper].

⁴⁶ Rogers, T., Feller, A. (2018). Reducing student absences at scale by targeting parents' misbeliefs. *Nature Human Behaviour* 2, 335–342

⁴⁷ Lasky-Fink, J., Robinson, C., Chang, H., & Rogers, T. Using behavioral insights to improve school administrative communications: The case of truancy notifications. [Working Paper].

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Rogers, T., Feller, A. (2018). Reducing student absences at scale by targeting parents' misbeliefs. *Nature Human Behaviour* 2, 335–342

reduce absenteeism?	belief	
Does communicating to families the total number of days their child missed reduce absences?	Total absences (accuracy)	total absences treatment
Does communicating to families the total number of days their child missed as compared to the absences of a typical student reduce absences?	relative absence	relative absence treatment

This study showed that providing *total absence* information was more effective at helping to reduce absences than communication that did not include the child's total number of absences. Further, while including the *relative absence* information helped give caregivers a more accurate sense of how their child's absences compared to the typical number of absences of other children, it did not necessarily have a big impact on attendance itself. Finally, when children who received the *total absences* or *relative absences* notification had siblings in the same household, the communication led to improvements for *all* the children in the household.⁵⁰

The simpler language *plus* communicating a belief in parental efficacy and the potential consequences on academic performance yielded the most improvement. **Simplifying communication in this way is a worthwhile intervention because it is a low (or no) cost effort and these studies show that improvements, though modest, are possible.** That said, the authors stress that simplification alone is insufficient. Rather, mail-based communication intervention should be implemented in tandem with more intensive supports that target the unique hardships that students, families, and communities face.

The various examples provided above confirm that schools and communities play an indispensable role in helping to prevent truancy. Schools that establish and sustain a safe and engaging school climate are better able to support their students and families. Attendance teams and success planning are mechanisms that can help ensure every student is known and supported. Further, engaging families and the broader community as partners helps schools to ensure their students have the resources they need in *and out* of school. While there is no one size fits all approach, diligently implementing the promising practices above may go a long way in helping to keep young people in school and on a path to thriving.

⁵⁰ Rogers, T., Feller, A. (2018). Reducing student absences at scale by targeting parents' misbeliefs. *Nature Human Behaviour* 2, 335–342

The following section discusses truancy and truancy prevention efforts across the state of Massachusetts specifically.

MASSACHUSETTS CONTEXT

In 2012, the Massachusetts Legislature signed the *Act Regarding Families and Children Engaged in Services* (FACES) – S.1963 into law. That statute served to reform the former Child in Need of Services (CHINS) petition and introduce the current Child Requiring Assistance (CRA) process. Of the many changes the FACES Act put in place, two are especially critical in the effort to prevent and reduce truancy across the Commonwealth. First, the statute called for the creation of Family Resource Centers (FRCs) throughout the state to serve as local support hubs for children and families. Second, the FACES act called on the Department of Elementary and Secondary education (DESE) to implement a truancy prevention program certification process to ensure schools have solid measures in place to prevent and respond to truancy.⁵¹

Bright Spots Across the Commonwealth

While there are several important steps the Commonwealth can take to improve their truancy prevention efforts, there are also many schools, districts, courts, and communities where solid partnerships and effective practices are helping to meet the needs of children and families. The Bright Spots below serve to acknowledge these communities and highlight examples of practices that can be adapted for implementation more broadly across the state.⁵²

BRIGHT SPOT 1: Mary Fonseca Elementary School⁵³

County: Bristol

Practice: Principal Alicia Lisi and her team have implemented a **tiered system of supports** (see Appendix F). This includes establishing a school wide culture that promotes a sense of belonging and reminding students and families of the importance of being in school every day. In addition, Principal Lisi hired a student support coordinator and a family outreach worker who speak the languages of families in her community. These team members help ensure the school gets to the “why” behind the absences.

In addition to bringing on staff, Lisi systematized the work of the attendance team. She regularly joins the meetings to reinforce the importance of monitoring and responding to student attendance. The team includes the attendance clerk, two school adjustment

⁵¹ Act Regarding Families and children engaged in services -S.1963

⁵² The list of bright spots across the Commonwealth come from interviews with practitioners in schools and Family Resource Centers.

⁵³ See <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/general/general.aspx?topNavId=1&leftNavId=100&orgcode=00950011&orgtypecode=6>

counselors, the student support coordinator, parent outreach worker, and the school nurse. A district attendance officer also joins to ensure Fonseca students and families have the supports they need. The table below reflects the impact these efforts have had over the past few years.

Table 7

Impact of Tiered Systems of Support at Fonseca Elementary

Attendance Indicator	2016-2017	2019-2020
Overall Attendance	91.7%	94.4%
Average # of days Absent	14	6
Absent 10 or more days	58.2%	19.5%
Chronically Absent (10% or more)	30.9%	13.1%

BRIGHT SPOT 2: Greenfield FRC⁵⁴

County: Franklin

Practice: The team at Greenfield FRC has worked hard to **foster a culture for community collaboration**. They are quick to explain that this is not unique to the FRC but rather “The Franklin County Way”. As a rural community, they learned a long time ago that their strength would be in their collaboration. They come together at least monthly to discuss challenges across the county, brainstorm solutions and share resources. Families have been able to depend on their network of supports over the years.

The team’s commitment to working side by side with others is also reflected in how they set out to establish their partnership with local schools. When reaching out to the superintendent and other district leaders was unfruitful, the school liaison and program manager started making themselves a visible presence and support right at the schools.

Impact: Over the years, Franklin County has been able to secure state grants that they would not have qualified for if they had applied as individual towns. In addition, their consistent presence in their school communities have allowed them to build trusting relationships with social workers, guidance counselors and other key school-based personnel, especially over the past year and a half.

Team Mantra: The mission “Any family, any need!” is a part of the FRC guidelines and the Greenfield FRC uses it as their mantra and model it every day.

⁵⁴ See <https://www.communityaction.us/family-center>

BRIGHT SPOT 3: Lowell Public Schools⁵⁵ & Lowell FRC⁵⁶

County: Middlesex

Practice (as described in their curriculum manual): A.T.T.E.N.D.S. (Absenteeism and Truancy Training to Engage, Nurture, and Develop Success) is a **curriculum** developed with the collaboration of the Lowell Public School District and the NFI Family Resource Center of Greater Lowell in response to the need to eliminate unnecessary chronic absences of students in the Lowell Public School District. The A.T.T.E.N.D.S. curriculum manual provides the instructor with clear, step-by-step guidance in carrying out each training module in a timely manner, taking into consideration the learning capacities of parents, guardians, and caregivers.

Table 8

Impact of A.T.T.E.N.D.S. Curriculum and other efforts at Lowell Public Schools

Attendance Indicator	2017-2018	2019-2020
Overall Attendance	93.9%	94%
Average # of days Absent	10.2	6.4
Absent 10 or more days	38%	19.5%
Chronically Absent (10% or more)	16.3%	17.4%

BRIGHT SPOT 4: Pre-CRA Conferencing with Schools, Courts, & Local FRCs

Counties: Barnstable, Bristol, Middlesex, & Worcester

Practice: Communities in each of the counties listed above have established some form of a pre-CRA filing meeting that brings together the school, courts, Family Resource Centers, and families to work to address the attendance concerns *before* a truancy CRA is filed. Examples include:

Lowell: Led by schools and the FRC, Lowell has **weekly Attendance Intervention Meetings (AIM)** to try to solve any truancy/failure to send issues prior to court intervention. AIM includes participation of school's Attendance Officer, Family Resource Center (FRC) School Liaison, Wayside, Department of Children and Families, Juvenile Court Clinician, and Probation. Some weeks families will attend the case review, other times the team does a

⁵⁵ See <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01600000&orgtypecode=5&leftNavId=16817&&fycode=2018>

⁵⁶ See <http://lowellfrc.org/>

“system review.” Lowell High School reports that in the month of August 2018, 66 students were invited to attend AIM. The meetings take place at the FRC—a “neutral” place (rather than the school).

While the Attendance Officer flags children who are CRA eligible, the Clerk Magistrate will refer the child to FRCs and this AIM group. They are trying to use CRAs as a last option.

Impact in Lowell: In the past 10+ years, Lowell has tackled its high dropout rate problem. This [2018 report](#) describes its dropout prevention action steps, including the District Attendance Intervention Plan and Attendance Improvement Model (AIM) in all schools. Dropout rates went from 7.5% in 2004-05 to 1.2% in 2016-17.

Bristol County: When schools want to file a CRA (for truancy), the Clerk Magistrate holds an informal meeting whenever possible with school representative to inquire about their truancy prevention program and the steps the school took to address this issue prior to going to court. Over the years, good relationships have been formed between the clerk and the schools.

Barnstable (Cape Cod): The “Keep Them Coming” program in Cape Cod brings together families, district attorneys, school personnel, and community-based orgs to ascertain why the child is missing schools and to work together to put a thoughtful intervention in place. In one example, a young man was chronically late to school. The school was prepared to file a CRA when the FRC recommended a Keep Them Coming meeting. Through one-on-one conversation with the student, he finally shared that he needed to work to help ensure his family was taken care of financially. The team was able to work with the school counselor to adjust his schedule so that he had study hall in the morning instead of the afternoon and even helped him earn work study credits for his job. This allowed him to work to help support his family while still getting to school in time to take his core classes.

Worcester: In Worcester’s “Fresh Start” meetings, families join the meeting along with the school adjustment counselor, the district rep or the district school adjustment counselor and the program director from the FRC. Similar to the examples above, the goal is to get to the “why” behind the absences and build a network of support that helps the child and family get back on track.

BRIGHT SPOT 5: [Taunton School District](#)⁵⁷

Counties: Bristol


⁵⁷ See <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/general/general.aspx?topNavId=1&leftNavId=100&orgcode=02930000&orgtypecode=5>

Practice: When a student is chronically absent or truant, district leadership coordinates with stakeholders to develop an **integrated care plan** to support the child and help get them back on track and coming to school. Everyone has a clear responsibility (child, family, teachers, school support staff) and everyone who interacts with the child gets a copy of the plan to ensure alignment and shared vision for the outcome. At Taunton they believe the “best student is a connected student” and they take steps to ensure every student feels cared for and like they belong. When necessary, they hold a pre-CRA filing meeting with the magistrate and view CRA filing as a last resort.

Impact: The District reports filing just one CRA in the previous school year.

Appendix A

Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework



**DEVELOPMENTAL
RELATIONSHIPS**

The Framework

Developmental relationships are the roots of thriving and resilience for young people, regardless of their background or circumstances. Through these relationships, young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. Just as trees rely on a system of roots to support and nourish them, young people need to experience developmental relationships in their families, schools, programs, and communities. However, too many young people miss these opportunities due to bias, prejudice, and systemic exclusion based on their race, ethnicity, income, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, or other differences. Ensuring that every young person experiences the developmental relationships they need is a vital challenge for the 21st century.

The Developmental Relationships Framework was developed by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN. 800-888-7828; www.searchinstitute.org

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EXPRESS CARE

Show me that I matter to you.

Be dependable
Be someone I can trust

Be warm
Show me you enjoy being with me

Listen
Really pay attention when we are together

Encourage
Praise me for my efforts and achievements

Believe in me
Make me feel known and valued



CHALLENGE GROWTH

Push me to keep getting better.

Expect my best
Expect me to live up to my potential

Hold me accountable
Insist I take responsibility for my actions

Stretch
Push me to go further

Reflect on failures
Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks



PROVIDE SUPPORT

Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

Navigate
Guide me through hard situations and systems

Advocate
Stand up for me when I need it

Empower
Build my confidence to take charge of my life

Set boundaries
Put limits in place that keep me on track



SHARE POWER

Treat me with respect and give me a say.

Respect me
Take me seriously and treat me fairly

Collaborate
Work with me to solve problems and reach goals

Include me
Involve me in decisions that affect me

Let me lead
Create opportunities for me to take action and lead



EXPAND POSSIBILITIES

Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.

Inspire
Inspire me to see possibilities for my future

Connect
Introduce me to people who can help me grow

Broaden horizons
Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places

Appendix B

Standard Communication Notice

Condition A (Control) Standard Notice

School Name
Address
City, State Zip

Date

Parent Name
Parent Address
RE: Student Name
City, State Zip

Student ID#: XXXXX

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Good attendance is required for academic excellence. [STATE] Education Code determines what types of absences are excused or unexcused. When a child is absent from school and/or tardy in excess of 30 minutes on three (3) occasions in one school year without a valid excuse, the law considers that child to be truant. The law and district policy requires all schools to notify parents when this occurs. The [DISTRICT] central office automatically sends these letters based on school records so that parents are aware of absences and can address these concerns.

School records indicate that your child was absent from school without a valid excuse on occasions, beginning with the following dates:

Thursday, September 12, 2015
Thursday, September 19, 2015
Thursday, September 27, 2015

Our goal is to partner with families to ensure that students are attending school every day. Although the following consequences may appear harsh we are mandated by Education Code Article 48260.5 to inform you of the following:

- That the parent or guardian is obligated to compel the attendance of the pupil at school.
- That parents or guardians who fail to meet these obligation may be guilty of an infraction and subject to prosecution pursuant to Article 6 (commencing with Section 48290) of Chapter 2 or Part 27.
- That alternative education programs are available in the district.
- That the parent or guardian has the right to meet with appropriate school personnel to discuss solutions to the pupil's truancy.
- That the pupil may be subject to prosecution under Education Code Section 48264.
- That the pupil may be subject to suspension, restriction, or delay of the pupil's driving privilege pursuant to Section 13202.7 of the Vehicle Code.
- That it is recommended that the parent or guardian accompany the pupil to school and attend classes with the pupil for one day.

Please recognize that we are required to monitor attendance and notify parents of potential problems with student attendance. If you have concerns about your child's attendance, or if you believe there is an error in this notice, contact the school at [PHONE NUMBER]. The designated attendance personnel will work with you to resolve this issue. We look forward to assisting you.

Sincerely,

Principal Signature

Principal Name

Appendix C

Modified Communication Notice-Condition D

Condition D **Add-up Notice**

We need your help. [STUDENT NAME]'s absences from school are concerning, **and your partnership is critical. Students who miss just one or two days of school each month can fall seriously behind.**

[STUDENT NAME] is now "truant" because [SHE/HE] missed school (or was more than 30 minutes late) without a valid excuse on:

Thursday, September 12, 2015

Thursday, September 19, 2015

Thursday, September 27, 2015

Being absent can lead to doing poorly in school. Students who miss many days of school are more likely to:

- Fail their classes
- Drop out from high school
- Have poor relationships with parents and teachers

We are required by [STATE] law to send you this letter and to warn you of the consequences of additional unexcused absences (see sidebar).

Please remember that every absence matters **and just a couple days each month adds up. You are key to improving [STUDENT NAME]'s attendance.**

Sincerely,
Principal X

Truancy- [STATE] Education Code School administrators determine what types of absences are excused or unexcused based on state law and on the facts of the pupil's circumstances. When a child is absent from school and/or tardy in excess of 30 minutes on three (3) occasions in one school year without a valid excuse, the law considers that child to be truant. Education Code Section 48260.5 requires us to inform you of the following:

- That the parent or guardian is obligated to compel the attendance of the pupil at school.
- That parents or guardians who fail to meet these obligations may be guilty of an infraction and subject to prosecution pursuant to Article 6 (commencing with Section 48290) of Chapter 2 or Part 27.
- That alternative education programs are available in the district.
- That the parent or guardian has the right to meet with appropriate school personnel to discuss solutions to the pupil's truancy.
- That the pupil may be subject to prosecution under Education Code Section 48264.
- That the pupil may be subject to suspension, restriction, or delay of the pupil's driving privilege pursuant to Section 13202.7 of the Vehicle Code.
- That it is recommended that the parent or guardian accompany the pupil to school and attend classes with the pupil for one day.

If you have concerns about your child's attendance or if you believe our records are inaccurate contact the school at [PHONE NUMBER].

Appendix D

Sample Treatment Notices

Reducing student absences at scale by targeting parents' misbeliefs.

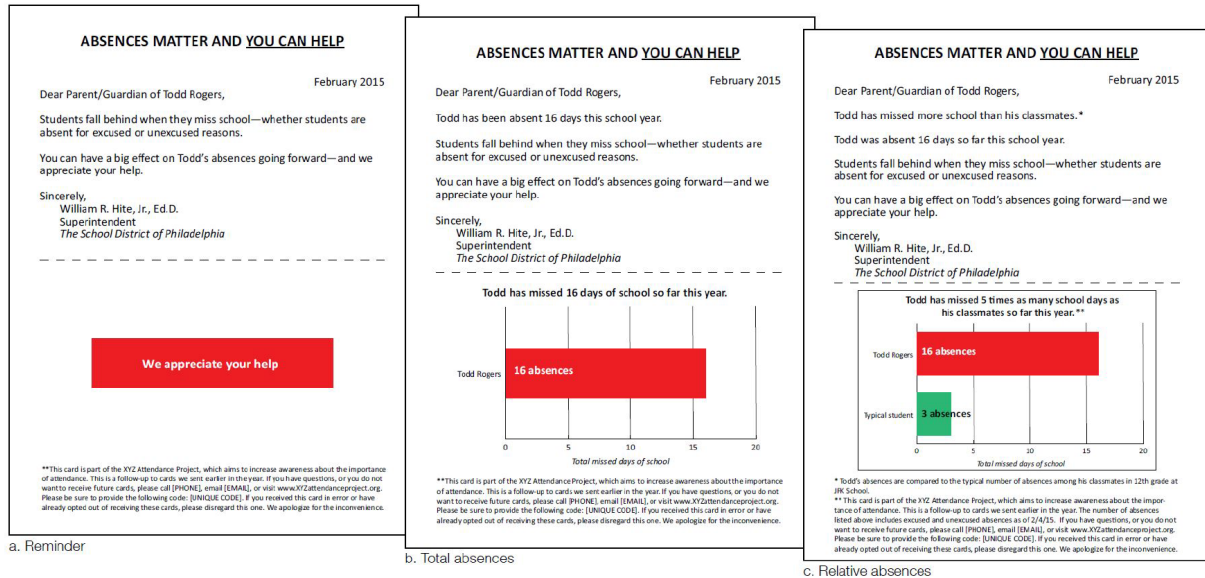


Figure 1. Sample mailings from each treatment condition. The *Reminder* treatment (a) reminds parents of the importance of absences and of their ability to influence them. The *Total Absences* treatment (b) builds on (a) and adds information about students' total absences. The *Relative Absences* treatment (c) builds on (b) and adds information about the modal number of absences among focal students' classmates. Focal students were randomly assigned to one of these three treatment conditions or a control group (N=6,994 Control; 7,041 Reminder; 7,037 Total Absences; 7,008 Relative Absences). See SOM for more information on the randomization strategy.