

Study finds new program reduces absenteeism in primary schools

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A pilot program reduced absenteeism in elementary schools by an

average of 10 percent, according to a new study by Duke researchers. Chronic absenteeism is linked to poor grades, low test scores and eventually, dropping out of high school.

While most truancy prevention efforts focus on middle and [high school](#) students, the Early Truancy Prevention Program concentrates on first- and second-grade students. The pilot was field-tested at five schools in a mid-sized North Carolina school district. This is among the first programs for primary school students that has been effective in improving absenteeism rates.

"This program offers a feasible and effective method for improving communication between teacher and parents, and as one important result improving attendance," said principal investigator Philip Cook, a professor emeritus at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy. "We believe that this result is especially important for at-risk children, helping establish a positive connection to school that we expect to pay dividends throughout their education career."

The study appears online in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*.

Children from disadvantaged homes have higher rates of chronic absenteeism, which may contribute to lower [test scores](#). Also, high school drop-outs tend to have more absences as early as first grade. Reducing chronic absenteeism in the primary grades could improve school engagement, academic performance, and perhaps high school graduation rates.

Given the close relationship between primary school students and their teachers, the prevention program has teachers take the lead in helping reduce absences. The program was designed by the university-based research team and staff from a North Carolina school system.

To establish a good working relationship with parents, participating teachers were asked to visit the homes of all of their students. Each teacher was given a smart phone with a paid plan to allow frequent communications between parent and teacher.

Teachers were provided with attendance data to identify students with attendance problems, and with an online system to help teachers assess barriers to attendance, such as health issues, parental needs or transportation problems. The online system included suggestions for remedies. Also, consultations with staff helped teachers take full advantage of school and community resources to address attendance problems.

In the pilot program, 20 teachers were in the treatment group and 20 were in the control group. Teachers in the treatment group reported that home visits had positive impacts on their relationships with both parents and students. In the treatment group, almost 40 percent more parents initiated contacts with teachers by text, phone and in person.

Treatment group teachers also reported being satisfied with the program's intervention elements.

The program cost about \$150 per [student](#), which included the purchase of smart phones and some additional [teacher](#) compensation for the additional time required for home visits.

The study found strong evidence that the [pilot program](#) was effective in reducing [absenteeism](#) among students who missed six or more days. It is among the first primary [school](#) interventions to do so.

More information: Philip J. Cook et al, A new program to prevent primary school absenteeism: Results of a pilot study in five schools, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2017). [DOI:](#)

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