Reduce Absences in Early Grades with Personalized Postcards

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR DISTRICTS

Two Proving Ground* district partners piloted a postcard intervention targeted at reaching parents of early-grade students during the 2018–19 school year.

The purpose of these postcards was to reduce absenteeism by addressing parental misconceptions about the cumulative number of student absences and the academic content missed in pre-kindergarten through second grade. Over the course of a school year, we found that an early-grades postcard reduced absences by 7.9% across the districts.

↓7.9%

Over the course of a school year, postcards to parents of early-grades students reduced absences by 7.9% across the districts.

*Proving Ground works with education organizations—including school districts, state education agencies, and charter management organizations—to identify and test interventions designed to address their most pressing challenges. All results are the product of rigorous randomized experiments.This guide is part of a series designed to share lessons that Proving Ground's Network has learned about interventions piloted by its member districts to decrease chronic absenteeism. To learn more about the interventions or the Proving Ground Network, please visit **provingground.cepr.harvard.edu**.

The Intervention: Early-Grades Postcards

THEORY OF ACTION

Early-grades postcards were short mailers containing key content for parents about their student's absences. The postcards were designed to improve attendance in early grades by addressing three misconceptions that parents of young students may hold and then creating content to specifically address each misconception. The postcards were also designed to engage parents. They did this both by containing handwritten content directly from the teacher and being sent in real time as absences occurred.

Underappreciation of the value of instruction in early grades	Information about lessons the student missed when absent (1)
Underestimate the consequences of absences on academic progress	A color-coded guide to help parents understand how the absences impact their child's academic progress (3)
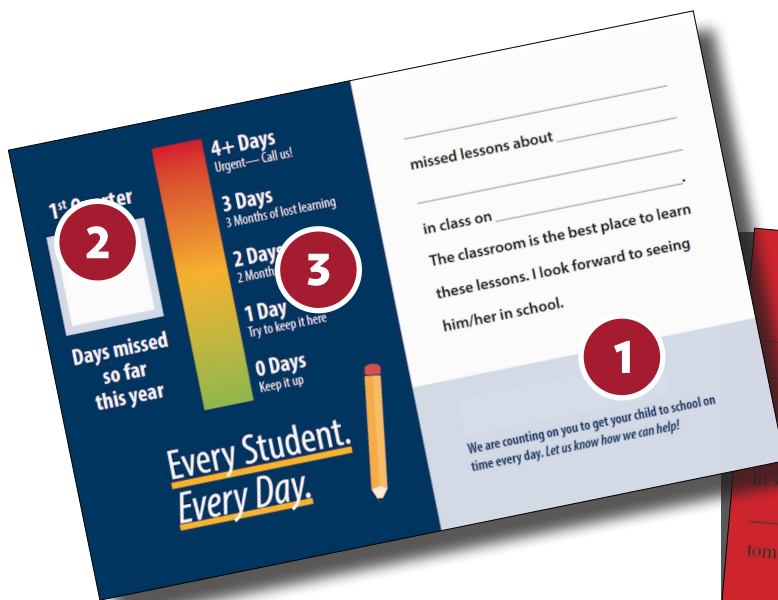
The postcards contained content to address each misconception and were designed to engage parents through frequency and personalization.
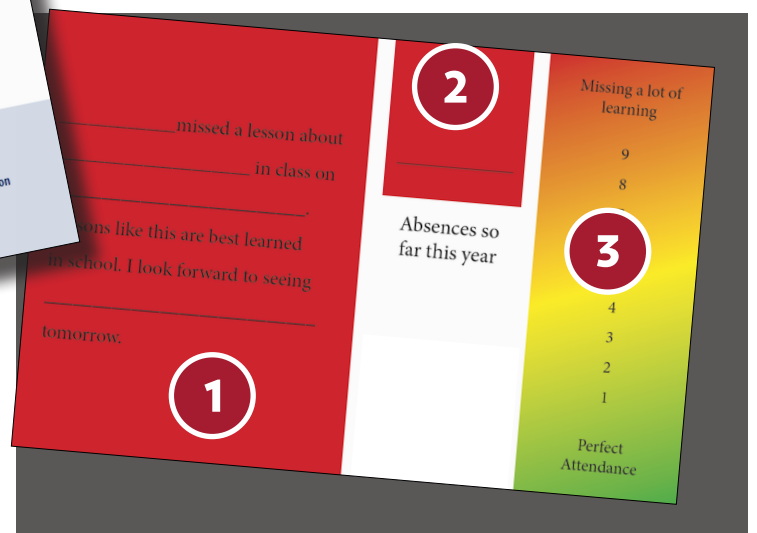
Why We Pilot

By piloting—delivering an intervention to a portion of target audience rather than every student in it—Proving Ground can better determine whether a strategy is having a positive impact on students' outcomes. Many ideas that sound good on paper may not benefit students in practice, so piloting an intervention allows a district to determine which innovative ideas truly make a difference. Piloting also limits the risk of trying new interventions and allows schools to learn about implementation challenges and make changes before delivering new interventions to all students.

IMPLEMENTATION AT-A-GLANCE

Although the theory of action was consistent across districts, each district tailored implementation to match their own context. For example, in one district, the teachers filled out the postcards at the end of each week and the district mailed them to students' homes. Alternately, in the other, the central office provided blank postcards for teachers to complete. At the end of each day, the teachers would fill out postcards for all the students who were absent that day. The next day that the student was present, the teacher would put the postcard(s) in the student's backpack to take home. Teachers tracked how many postcards they completed and which students received them, as well as the time they spent each day filling out the postcards.

While the pilots were both rolled out to a subset of early-grade classrooms or schools, there were several key areas where implementation differed:

	District A	District B
Delivery	Regular Mail	Student's backpack
Frequency	Weekly	Daily
Printing & Postage Cost	Total ($0.14/postcard for printing in-house + $0.35 for bulk mail postage)	Total ($0.16/postcard for printing with contractor)
Time Cost	Teachers spent about 15 minutes/week populating the postcard	Teachers spent about 1 hour/week populating the postcards
Design	Color-coded guide customized for each quarter	Color-coded guide static for the entire year
Results	7.7% reduction in absences	8.0% reduction in absences

The Results

Based on randomized controlled trials in the two partner districts, we estimate that the pilot intervention **reduced absences by about 7.9%** compared to absences in the control group (8.0% at one district and 7.7% at the other). This is equal to gaining roughly 6,883 instructional days over the course of the year. To implement the randomized controlled trials, partners randomly assigned either schools or classrooms to the postcard intervention. By comparing absences among the group assigned to the intervention with absences among those not assigned to the intervention, we were able to estimate the impact. Our estimates also adjusted for student characteristics, prior absences, and the precision of our information.[1] The pilot included 5,602 students over a period of 13 weeks. Based on the positive results of the pilots, after their conclusion, both districts scaled up the intervention to all students in the participating grades.

+6,883

Pilot districts gained roughly 6,883 instructional days over the course of the school year.

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[1] These results were calculated using Bayesian methodology. Our Bayesian methods are more conservative than traditional frequentist analysis because less precise estimates of the treatment effects are shrunk back towards zero. For more detailed information on the analytic approach and model, please see our technical appendix at **provingground.cepr.harvard.edu/resources**.

Sending Early-Grade Postcards
IN YOUR DISTRICT

KEY STEPS

Based on lessons learned with our partners, we've outlined some of the key steps to consider when both creating the postcard and designing the intervention itself.

Planning your intervention

☐ **Consider the root causes of absenteeism in your district**: The first step is to decide if postcards are the right intervention for your district. Consider: Are absence rates high in early grades? Does it seem plausible that parents are unaware of the increased academic content covered day-to-day in kindergarten and first grade? Is it plausible that parents are unaware of the cumulative number of days their children have missed?

☐ **Determine audience**: Based on your assessment of the root causes, you can determine the grade(s) you want to target. We found the postcards to be successful for grades PK-2 but did not test the efficacy in later grades.

☐ **Establish budget**: You must decide whether you can set aside the budget for postage and printing, as well as making room in teachers' schedules to complete the postcards.

☐ **Define timeline**: This is also crucial to establish up front because it helps to set attainable goals, make the process transparent, break down specific responsibilities and steps, and ensure there is accountability for all the different components of intervention planning and implementation.

☐ **Determine if you want to pilot the intervention**: We strongly recommend piloting new interventions so you can learn about potential challenges and address them before delivering interventions to all students. Designing a pilot so you can analyze *impact* can be challenging. If you'd like help designing and evaluating a pilot to determine its impact in your school or district, please contact us at **provingground@gse.harvard.edu**.

Creating the postcard

☐ **Develop content for postcards**: Draft a few options for content that are informed by the root cause of absenteeism that you identified (e.g., if parents may be unaware of cumulative absences, be sure to include a space to fill this in). Given the amount of space available on a postcard, we have found that it is useful to keep the text limited to 2-3 sentences and a graphic to clearly highlight the number of absences.

☐ **Design postcards**: The Proving Ground partners worked with stakeholders within their districts to come up with the best design for their communities. As a result, each district's postcard had a unique way of displaying the information around absences. The postcards can be designed using design software, such as InDesign; or Microsoft products such as Word, PowerPoint, and Publisher. The most important component is ensuring the sizing and spacing will work for a standard postcard (generally around 4" x 6"). Also, keep in mind that these postcards will need to be folded to ensure the student information is not visible in the mail.

☐ **Prototype both language and design**: Invite families and internal stakeholders, such as teachers, to small focus groups and ask them to react to the ideas you present. For instance, the parents in one district emphasized the importance of color printing to distinguish the postcards from the district's other communications. In another, teachers made slight edits to the language used in the postcard so it aligned more with how they discuss absences with parents. Utilize this feedback to finalize the content and look and feel. Note: you can prototype your postcard options using sketches or rough drafts.

☐ **Translate**: Ensure you leave time and budget (if needed) to translate the postcard into all necessary languages.

☐ **Decide on a delivery mode**: The way the postcards are delivered impacts the final design. Using mail requires that the postcards be folded to protect the student's private information and avoid accidental disclosure, plus will require space dedicated to postage and address information.

☐ **Design the production process**: In both districts, administrative staff populated the attendance data in schools before teachers handwrote the students' name and content missed. To help make time for this in one district, principals reduced the length of a weekly grade-level meeting by 15 minutes so teachers could fill out the cards. This was key to minimizing the burden on teachers.

☐ **Print postcards**: Get postcards printed and buy postage/arrange for mailing, if needed.

Preparing for implementation

☐ **Engage internal stakeholders early and often**: Engaging stakeholders early in the process has numerous benefits. When planning who to involve, consider the following:

　　☐ School staff　☐ Unions　☐ Principals　☐ Teachers　☐ School office staff

☐ **Create an external communication plan**: Determine how you will communicate about these postcards to families and how you will prepare staff to answer inquiries from families.

☐ **Establish an implementation monitoring plan**: Determine how you will monitor implementation to ensure the postcards are reaching parents and are accurate. Note that this should be designed to minimize the burden on staff and avoid turning these into a compliance exercise. Our partners used an audit system to capture implementation information with limited effort. They asked the teacher or office administrator (whoever was filling out the

postcards) to complete a brief survey each time they sent out the postcards that asked their school, the date, and the number of postcards sent on the reported date.

☐ **Train staff on execution**: Train staff members on the process you have established for sending and auditing the postcards.

After implementation

☐ **Schedule debrief meetings or send a post-implementation survey**: Learn more about the challenges and positive outcomes by eliciting feedback from teachers and other staff crucial to implementation. Determine what resources were needed to implement the intervention in reality (both time and money) and identify process improvements.

KEY DECISIONS

Each partner implemented their postcard pilots slightly differently based on their unique contexts. Here are several points our partners considered as they faced key decisions:

How will postcards get to students?

○ **By mail**: This can be a more direct option to get to parents, if addresses are up-to-date and accurate. This will also require the purchase of postage and securing additional staff time to address and send out the postcards.

○ **Directly home with students (in backpacks)**: This eliminates the need for accurate addresses and is less costly, but requires teacher engagement (to ensure the postcards go into the backpacks) and may be less likely to reach parents.

Who will print the postcards?

○ **In-house**: If your district has the capacity to print postcards in-house, this can be a cheaper and more convenient option, but may require specific technical knowledge of formatting a postcard and printing using particular paper/sizing.

○ **External service**: External printers are often more expensive and take more time to produce the postcards, so make sure to account for this when budgeting and creating the timeline.

Who will the postcard come from?

○ **Office staff**: Office staff may have more capacity to fill out and track the postcards, but they will not have the same knowledge around the missed lessons and familiarity with the parents.

○ **Teachers**: Teachers have a better understanding of the lessons that were missed and may be more familiar to the parents, but they may not have the time to fill out the postcards.

How often will you send the postcards?

○ **Daily**: This could allow families to be updated more frequently about their child's absences, but it requires more staff time.

○ **Weekly**: This option would require some accounting by the staff member that fills out the postcards to determine which students were out on which days.

At what point in the school year will you start?

○ **First week of school**: If families begin to receive postcards in the initial weeks of school, their expectations regarding student attendance will be set sooner. However, if student rosters are incorrect or fluctuating early in the school year, you risk sending the cards from the wrong teachers, with the wrong number of absences, or to students who were actually present (but just in a different school or classroom).

○ **Later in the first month of school**: In order to avoid any issues with fluctuating student rosters, you could postpone implementation until after the first few weeks of the year.

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ABOUT PROVING GROUND

An initiative of the Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR) at Harvard University, Proving Ground seeks to make evidence-gathering and use a routine part of how education agencies conduct their daily work. Proving Ground brings together a network of education organizations to collaborate in solving shared challenges and supports the network with data analysis, strategic advice, hands-on assistance, and peer networking opportunities. Through our continuous improvement framework, Proving Ground helps partners understand the pressing challenges they face; rapidly identify potential solutions that align with those challenges; and test evidence-based solutions that work for their students, families, and schools. We empower partners to address challenges in their own context while benefiting from lessons learned across the network.

CONTACT US

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