

Reducing absenteeism in preschool by informing parents about school activities: Experimental evidence from Rio de Janeiro

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Studies show that chronic absenteeism is as prevalent in early childhood as it is in middle and high school (Balfanz and Byrnes 2012; Connolly and Olson 2012; Dubay et al. 2013). High absenteeism in the early years is particularly concerning because truancy in preschool and kindergarten is associated with lower student performance and attendance in later grades (Chang & Romero, 2008; Ehrlich et al., 2014). Moreover, chronic absenteeism in this stage is also highly inefficient for governments as the costs of early childhood programs are high.

In early grades, families have a larger influence on school attendance than in later grades. Because attendance in early childhood programs is voluntary, some parents perceive the role of preschools as childcare rather than a place where their children learn diverse skills (Dubay and Holla 2015; Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015). Prior research suggests that parental misbeliefs about the importance of early education for their child's future is one of the factors leading to chronic absenteeism in the early years (Chen & Rice, 2015). This suggests that efforts to improve preschool attendance should target parental beliefs about the value of early education.

Recent research has used behavioral insights to alter parent behavior and increase student attendance. One strand of the literature has achieved improvements in attendance through information nudges that alert parents to the total absences of their child and how these compare to that of their peers (Rogers & Feller, 2018; Bergman, 2017; Rogers et al., 2017). Another strand of literature attempts to alter parental behavior and ultimately decrease student absenteeism by building awareness of the importance of attendance. To that end, Robinson and colleagues (2017) randomly selected households to receive mail-based communications that emphasized the value of daily attendance in the early grades and provided parents with accurate information on how many school days their child had missed. The mailings improve parental beliefs about the value of early schooling and decreased chronic absenteeism by 15%. However, little is known how parents' beliefs and attitudes towards attendance in the early years are influenced by what is taught in their child's preschool.

In response to this gap in the absenteeism literature, we examine the impact of a parent-focused intervention on student attendance in preschool. More specifically, we test whether informing parents about classroom activities on a weekly basis improves their beliefs about the role of preschool and increases student attendance. Text messages are structured to emphasize both the benefits (gain frame) of participating in the classroom activities and the costs (loss frame) of missing these activities. The intervention is conducted with 548 preschools in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We randomly assigned schools to three treatment groups: a) a group in which teachers enter their lesson plan onto a platform on a weekly basis; b) a group in which teachers

report their lesson plan and their lesson plan is sent to parents via SMS on a weekly basis; and c) a control group in which teachers do not report their lesson plan and parents are not informed about the preschool activities. Our main research question is whether the text-messaging intervention decreases student absenteeism in preschool. We also assess whether treated parents value preschool more and whether the effect of the intervention varies according to the content of the text messages—for example, we can see if parents are more likely to bring their child to school if their teachers plan to do activities focused on cognitive development rather than socioemotional skills.

The intervention started August 2019 and will last for three months. In the baseline survey, 62 percent of the parents reported that their child missed at least one day of preschool in the week prior the survey—12 percent said that their child was absent for three days or more. Not surprisingly, absenteeism rates are higher among lower income students. Moreover, 25 percent of the parents viewed preschools as day care centers. The results of the intervention will be available before the Conference.

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