



# The underutilized potential of teacher-to-parent communication: Evidence from a field experiment



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## ABSTRACT

Parental involvement is correlated with student performance, though the causal relationship is less well established. This experiment examined an intervention that delivered weekly one-sentence individualized messages from teachers to the parents of high school students in a credit recovery program. Messages decreased the percentage of students who failed to earn course credit from 15.8% to 9.3%—a 41% reduction. This reduction resulted primarily from preventing drop-outs, rather than from reducing failure or dismissal rates. The intervention shaped the content of parent-child conversations with messages emphasizing what students could improve, versus what students were doing well, producing the largest effects. We estimate the cost of this intervention per additional student credit earned to be less than one-tenth the typical cost per credit earned for the district. These findings underscore the value of educational policies that encourage and facilitate teacher-to-parent communication to empower parental involvement in their children's education.

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## 1. Introduction

Students typically spend only 25% of their waking hours in school. Accordingly, out-of-school factors account for the vast majority of differences in educational achievement in the United States (Altonji & Mansfield, 2010; Coleman et al., 1996; Goldhaber & Brewer, 1997). We posit that policymakers and educators may be underinvesting in strategies to leverage one of the largest out-of-school influences on students' academic success: their parents. The positive relationship between parental involvement in their children's education and students' success in school is widely documented in the research literature (Barnard, 2004; Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012; Fan & Chen, 2001; Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Todd & Wolpin, 2007). When Americans are asked about the most

important priorities for improving student achievement, they consistently cite increased parental support as a top priority (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011; Time Magazine, 2010).

At the same time, evidence suggests that schools are failing to fully engage parents and provide them with information about what their children are learning and how they are performing in school. Only four out of every ten families with school-age children in the U.S. report receiving a phone call specifically about their child from a school administrator or teacher in the preceding year (Noel, Stark, Redford, & Zukerberg, 2013). Among secondary school parents, 66% do not agree that teachers keep them informed about classroom activities, events and requirements (National School Public Relations Association, 2011). Fewer than one in four parents can name a basic milestone that their child should have learned in school over the previous year (Public Agenda, 2012).

In this paper, we examine the effects of a light-touch communication intervention aimed at increasing parents' efforts and effectiveness at supporting their child's success

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in school. Each week we sent parents brief individualized messages from teachers about their child's performance in school. Although the positive association between parental involvement and student success is well established, we know far less about the causal mechanisms behind this relationship. Our work is among only a handful of experimental studies to document a direct causal relationship between parent–child interactions and student performance in school. Our research design also allows us to get inside the black box of communication between schools, parents, and students to examine how the frequency and content of those interactions matter.

The present study builds on several recent experimental evaluations of interventions designed to strengthen parental involvement in their child's education through increased communication. Kraft and Dougherty (2013) found that frequent teacher-to-parent phone calls, a time-intensive bi-directional intervention, increased student engagement as measured by homework completion, in-class behavior, and in-class participation during a summer school program ( $n = 140$ ). Bergman (2012) found that sending parents SMS text messages when their child was missing assignments resulted in significant gains in GPA, tests scores, and measures of student engagement ( $n = 306$ ). This intervention required no extra effort on the part of teachers, but also failed to leverage their unique knowledge about students. Harackiewicz, Rozek, Hulleman, and Hyde (2012) studied the effect of informing parents about the career value of taking classes in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) for high school students. Their experiment involved mailing parents two brochures and offering access to an informational website and found that the treatment increased the number of STEM classes that students took ( $n = 188$ ). Although these studies are limited to relatively small samples, taken together they suggest that educators have information to convey to parents that could motivate them to act, and that parents can affect students' educational behaviors and success when they receive information from educators.

We extend this literature by exploring how parent–child interactions can increase student performance. Specifically, we examine the effect of delivering weekly messages written by teachers about each student's performance and behavior in school on the likelihood students passed their classes. We also explore how this effect differs based on the type of message teachers were instructed to write. We accomplish this by conducting a field experiment during a credit recovery program in a large urban school district. The summer program offered high school students the opportunity to earn credits in up to two different courses they had failed during the previous academic year. We randomly assigned the parents of participating students to one of three experimental conditions: some parents received information about what their students were doing well and should continue doing (positive); others received information about what their students needed to improve upon (improvement); and a third group served as the control.

We find that weekly teacher-to-parent communication in the form of messages sent to parents from teachers increased the probability a student earned credit for each class they took by 6.5 percentage points. Given a control group passing rate of 84.2%, this represents a 41% reduction in students fail-

ing to earn course credit. We find that most of this aggregate effect is driven by students in the improvement condition. Students who received messages that focused on what they needed to improve in class were almost 9 percentage points more likely to earn course credit, although we do not have the power to distinguish this estimate from the 4.5 percentage point increase we observe for students in the positive treatment condition. These increases in passing rates can be attributed almost exclusively to preventing students from dropping out of the credit recovery program, rather than by reducing failure or dismissal rates.

Exploratory analyses suggest that the treatments did not substantially increase the frequency of conversations between students and their parents about school, but instead changed the content of these conversations; the student–parent conversations were informed by the teacher-to-parent messages. We find suggestive evidence that the sizable increase in passing rates among students in the improvement condition is the result of parents speaking with their children about what they needed to improve in school. Students whose parents received messages from teachers judged their own school performance as substantially lower than that of those in the control group. Additionally, a descriptive analysis of the content of teachers' messages reveals that improvement messages were overwhelmingly "actionable", slightly longer, and more likely to address things outside of class that parents could monitor such as making up missing assignments and studying. Finally, a back of the envelope cost–benefit analysis suggests that this teacher-to-parent communication program compares very favorably to other educational interventions. These findings illustrate the potential of developing policies to substantially increase parental involvement in their children's education.

In the following sections, we describe our research design and the data we collected. Next, we present our empirical strategy and findings. We conclude with a discussion of our results and their implications for policy and future research.

## 2. Context and research design

### 2.1. Site

We examined the effects of weekly teacher-to-parent messages sent to the parents of high-school students during a traditional summer school program offered by a large urban school district in the Northeastern United States. The large majority of the district's students are minorities, predominantly Hispanic and African-American, and come from low-income families. Each summer the district offers students a variety of academic and enrichment programs. We partnered with the director and coordinators of the district's high school credit recovery program to learn about whether and how teacher-to-parent communications could improve student success in the summer program. Alternative programs for high school students included an on-line credit recovery program and programs specifically for English language learners and special education students.

The credit recovery program offered high school students the opportunity to earn credits in different courses they had previously failed. High school students from across the district enrolled in the program operated on one large

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