

# Engaging parents through technology improves academic outcomes

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Back in 2012, I was sitting in the main office of a high school near downtown Los Angeles when a mother came in to speak with the guidance counselor. She was concerned; she had not heard from the school in a week about how her son was doing in his classes. Sure, every evening she'd ask him what he did that day and whether he had done his homework. But every evening she would get the same response: "school is fine" and, "I've done my homework."

The counselor quickly pulled up the family's contact information on the computer and turned the screen towards the mother so she could see it. "That's my son's cell phone number!" she exclaimed. It turns out, her son had managed to get his phone number into the Student Information System, and while he was skipping classes for a week, all the messages intended to alert his mother about his absences went directly to him instead of her.

## **"Many parents overestimate their child's academic performance due to a lack of accurate information."**

How did his mother know something was amiss? Prior to her son changing the phone number, she had been receiving text messages about her child's missed assignments and grades every week. I collaborated with the student's school to develop and test this intervention via a randomized controlled trial. In fact, I gathered the assignment information from teacher gradebooks and sent out the text messages to 242 parents by hand each week.

The results were exciting. Students' grades and math test scores improved significantly (in scientific words by 0.20 standard deviations), and class absences and missed assignments dropped by 25%. Classroom marks for work habits and cooperation in the classroom improved as well.

Since 2012, I have been working to scale this intervention using low-cost technology. My colleague Eric Chan and I partnered text-messaging software with a digital gradebook to send automated text messages to parents about their child's assignments, absences, and low grades. We sent over 30,000 messages to hundreds of families in 22 middle and high schools during the 2013-2014 school year.

Again, the results were striking. Students whose parents received text messages were 39% less likely to fail a course. They attended roughly 50 more classes, their GPAs improved, and district-level dropout rates decreased. Low-performing students and high school students showed the largest improvements.

Moreover, the intervention was cheap. The total cost to send 30,000 text messages was \$63. If the district had to purchase the gradebook system and receive the training to use it, this was an additional \$7 per student.

## **“These findings reinforce promising evidence about how timely, actionable information can engage parents and improve student performance at a low cost.”**

Why was this texting intervention effective? First, many parents overestimate their child’s academic performance due to a lack of accurate information. For example, only 45% of parents thought their child had not turned in an assignment. In truth, *more than 70%* of students had missing work.

Second, school-to-parent communication is often infrequent: roughly 45% of parents said they hear from their child’s school less than once every three months. Lastly, while many parents do not or cannot check their child’s grades online, most families own a cell-phone, so they would be able to check readily.

While texting parents about their child’s performance is only one piece of the puzzle, these findings reinforce promising evidence about how timely, actionable information can engage parents and improve student performance at a low cost.

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