



NATIONAL CENTER FOR
Rural Education
Research Networks

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

Improve Attendance with Personalized Messages

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

This How-To Guide is designed for school staff who want to try out personalized messaging to improve attendance in their districts. During the 2020–21 academic year, the National Center for Rural Education Research Networks (NCRERN) partnered with eight rural districts in New York and Ohio to pilot test personalized messaging in Grades K–12. Over the course of the academic year, the personalized messaging decreased absences by 2.4% in participating districts.¹

The personalized messages—sent via email, text message, robocall, or letters by mail—are a low-effort, low-cost strategy designed to improve attendance by providing families and caregivers with transparent, real-time information about their student’s cumulative absences each month. This intervention draws on an extensive body of research that suggests that outreach to families and caregivers about their students’ attendance patterns can help reduce absenteeism.

The National Center for Rural Education Research Networks (NCRERN) was founded to expand the use of evidence-based decision-making in rural education. NCRERN partners with networks of rural school districts to generate and evaluate strategies for improving student outcomes. This guide is part of a How-To series that describe how to implement interventions found to be effective in rural settings. For more information visit: www.ncrern.org.

This step-by-step guide includes an overview of the messaging intervention, considerations for planning to roll out the messages in your district, tips for successful implementation, and message templates that can be adapted for use in your district. Personalized messaging can be used in conjunction with other attendance improvement strategies or as a standalone intervention.

Intervention Overview: What is Personalized Messaging?

What? Personalized attendance messaging is a low-effort, low-cost intervention refined in collaboration by researchers and rural educators. The messages provide personalized information about a student's total number of absences each month. Districts designed the messages to address a common root cause for why their students frequently missed school: caregivers may simply be unaware of how many total days of school their student has missed.

Who? The personalized messages are sent by a school staff member directly to families and caregivers. The messages include information for caregivers about how to contact the school if they need support to address barriers to their student's attendance. Personalized messaging aims to engage and empower families and caregivers as partners in their students' education by providing transparent, real-time information about attendance patterns.

How? The personalized messages can be sent via text message, email, robocall, and/or letters by mail. The mode of communication can be selected based on your district's unique context and caregivers' preferred outreach method.

When? The first message is sent approximate one month after the start of the academic year; subsequent messages are sent every 4 to 6 weeks with updated attendance information.

Why? Research has found that each day in school matters for student academic outcomes. The good news is that we know absenteeism is a solvable problem and that even low-effort interventions can improve outcomes for students. The personalized messaging intervention draws on an extensive body of research that suggests that outreach to families and caregivers about their students' attendance patterns can help reduce absenteeism.

Based on a randomized controlled trial across eight NCRERN partner districts, we estimate that personalized messaging reduced absences by about 2.4% compared to the control group.² The pilot included 7,656 students over a period of 18 weeks.

Core Components: What goes into a personalized attendance message?

Personalized messaging is intended to make families and caregivers aware of how many days of school their student has missed, which can be particularly important if the student has missed more days than average compared to peers, or if the student has been exhibiting patterns of chronic absenteeism and therefore may need additional support to get back on track. As such, the personalized messages should include the following core components:

- 1 **Personalization:** Some personalization, including the student's name, in the message to set the message apart from generic communications.
- 2 **Attendance status:** A summary of the total number of days absent during a four-to-six-week period.
- 3 **Importance of attendance:** A reminder about the importance and value of the student being present in school.
- 4 **Invitation to connect:** Encouragement for caregivers to connect with staff at your school to strategize about how to best support student needs.

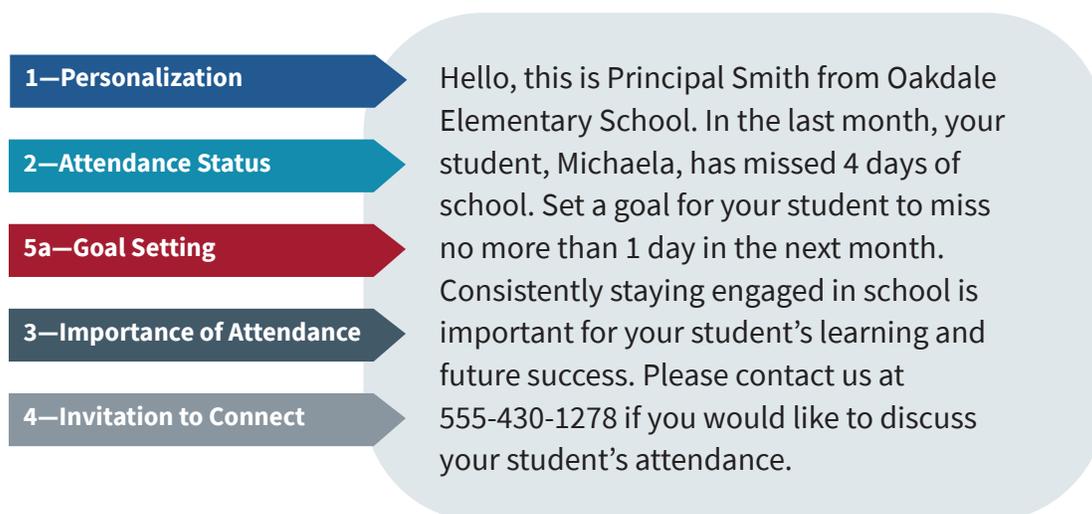
You may also opt to include one or more optional components to provide additional context to your communication:

- 5 **Optional components:**
 - 5a. **Goal setting:** A realistic attendance goal for students to work toward in the month ahead.
 - 5b. **Average school- or district-wide attendance:** Information about the average number of absences at your school to contextualize an individual student's attendance rate.

Detailed message templates are included at the end of this brief. Use or adapt these templates for your own context. Templates may need to be adjusted based on mode by which messages are sent (text, email, robocall, or letter).

Turn the page for an example message.

EXAMPLE PERSONALIZED MESSAGE:



Implementing Personalized Messaging in Your School

Want to try personalized messaging in your school? The checklist below outlines key considerations and steps for implementing the personalized messaging intervention in your district.

Step 1: Determine if personalized messages are a good fit for your district

- Consider the root causes of absenteeism in your district.** What factors contribute to students’ absenteeism? To what extent are caregivers in your district aware of the number of days their student misses? Do caregivers have a sense of how many absences is too many? When possible, speak directly with caregivers to gather this information. You may also consult with district staff who have frequent interaction with caregivers and families.
- Assess staff capacity.** While the personalized messages are intended to be a low-burden intervention, it will require some initial planning and set up, as well as a few hours each month to send the messages and respond to questions from caregivers.

Step 2: Make a plan for implementation

- Determine who will receive messages.** The personalized messages have been tested with families and caregivers for students in Grades K–12. Messages can be sent to caregivers across your entire district for students in all grades, or to caregivers for students in a specific grade or school.
- Select mode of communication.** Personalized messages can be sent via automated phone calls, text messages, emails, paper letters through USPS mail, or a combination of the above options. When selecting communication mode, consider:
 - *What caregiver contact information do you have that is most reliable?*
 - *How do families and caregivers prefer to receive school or district communications?*
 - *Does your current messaging platform (SIS or otherwise) have the capability to send a personalized message?*
- Create a schedule for sending the messages.** Messages should be sent approximately every 4 to 6 weeks. The timeline can be adjusted based on your district’s school calendar, beginnings/ends of marking periods, and vacation schedules. Map out a timeline from the beginning of the academic year to the end; aim to send at least six personalized messages over the course of the year. As you develop a schedule, consider:
 - *On what day of the week will messages be sent? Be mindful of other planned communications from the district that may overwhelm families and caregivers or cause messages to get overlooked.*
 - *What time of day will messages be sent? Will there be a staff member available to respond to questions or outreach from families prompted by the messages?*
- Identify staff member(s) responsible for sending messages.** Staff should be trained on how to send the messages, as well as how to field questions from caregivers. Have staff member(s) set up a recurring calendar reminder to send messages each month and set aside time to respond to caregiver inquiries.

- Consider the input of families and caregivers.** When possible, seek input and suggestions from families and caregivers about how and when to communicate.
- Create an internal communication plan.** Who should caregivers contact at your school or district for support? Will the caregiver reach out to their student's teacher directly? Will they contact the office staff, counselors, social worker, or administrators? Will this point of contact look different for each building? How can you tie the personalized messages to the other attendance initiatives in your district? Work to create a holistic approach across attendance initiatives.

Step 3: Launch your personalized messages!

- Set up your personalized message templates.** Finalize the content of your personalized message. You may also want to craft an alternative message for students with very few or no absences that acknowledges their strong attendance record and encourages them to keep it up.
- Test your messaging system.** Quality check the data (e.g., cumulative attendance calculation) and contact information that will be pulled into the personalized message through your system. Ensure there are no issues with the data and messages you will be sending to families.
- Share the initiative with all stakeholders.** Before sending the first message, let all caregivers know they will be receiving an additional message about their student's attendance this school year. You could post this on social media, the school's website, or other common platforms caregivers are accustomed to receiving notifications through.
- Plan for messages for special circumstances.** Given the COVID-19 pandemic, we encourage you to add language into your attendance messages clarifying that students should not come to school if they are ill.
- Press send on your first personalized message!** The first message should be sent as early in the school year as possible, around the 4th week of the school year.

Endnotes

1 Based on a randomized controlled trial in eight partner districts, we estimate that the pilot intervention reduced absences by about 2.4% compared to absences in the control group. We have 83% certainty that this effect is larger than 0. For more information on study results, see the “Improving Rural Attendance: Testing the Impact of Interventions” brief. Results were calculated using Bayesian methodology.

2 This method allows us to estimate the probability that a given intervention has an effect greater than a practically meaningful threshold. The criteria for the size of the impact and the certainty (how sure we are that the impact is real and not a statistical fluke) are set based on the effort and resources needed to implement an intervention. When we’re looking at a relatively easy-to-implement intervention, such as personalized messaging, we want to have at least 80% certainty that the effect of the intervention reduced absences by any amount greater than zero. When interventions are more demanding, we want to have at least 90% certainty that the intervention reduced absences by 5% or more. If something was not very costly, it would be considered worth it if it led to any improvement at all and we do not need to be as confident in the estimate. In contrast, if a new strategy required a considerable number of resources, we would want to see a meaningful impact and have a higher bar for being sure that the effect is not a statistical anomaly.

Have questions or need help?

The NCRERN team would be happy to answer questions districts may have about implementing the personalized messaging intervention in their district. Please send your questions to ncrern@gse.harvard.edu.

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Sample Personalized Message Templates

Sample Messages for Automated Phone Calls or Text Messages

*Example 1: Initial message for students with 2 or more absences + Goal Setting
(Sent approximately 1 month after start of school)*

Hello, this is [NAME/ROLE] from [SCHOOL/DISTRICT NAME]. Consistently staying engaged in school is important for your student's learning and future success. Since the beginning of the school year, your student, [STUDENT FIRST NAME], has missed [# OF ABSENCES SINCE START DATE] days of school. Set a goal for your student to miss no more than [GOAL # OF DAYS] in the next month. Please contact us at [XXX-XXX-XXXX] if you would like to discuss your student's attendance.

Example 2: Recurring message for students with 2 or more absences + Average Attendance (Sent every 4 to 6 weeks)

Hello, this is [NAME/ROLE] from [SCHOOL/DISTRICT NAME]. In the last month, your student, [STUDENT FIRST NAME], has missed [# OF ABSENCES] days of school. The average number of days missed during this time-frame at [SCHOOL/DISTRICT NAME] is [SCHOOL/DISTRICT AVERAGE # ABSENCES SINCE LAST MESSAGE] days. Consistently staying engaged in school is important for your student's learning and future success. Please contact us at [CONTACT INFORMATION] if you would like to discuss your student's attendance.

*Example 3: Recurring message for students with 0 or 1 absences
(Sent every 4 to 6 weeks)*

Hello, this is [NAME/ROLE] from [SCHOOL/DISTRICT NAME]. I want to personally thank [STUDENT FIRST NAME] for attending school every day in the last month! We are so proud of [STUDENT FIRST NAME] for working so hard and participating in learning. As we know, staying engaged in school is important for your child's learning and future success. Thank you for supporting and encouraging [STUDENT FIRST NAME].



Sample Messages for Email or Paper Letter USPS Message

Dear Caregiver of [STUDENT FIRST NAME],

This letter is to inform you of your student's school attendance. Consistent engagement in school is the key to your student's learning and future success. Since the beginning of the school year, your student, [STUDENT FIRST NAME], has missed # days of school. The average number of days missed by a student across the [SCHOOL/DISTRICT] is [AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS].

Please contact the [ELEMENTARY/MIDDLE/HIGH] school at [###-###-####] if you have any questions or need support with your student's school attendance. We care about educating your student and keeping you, your family, and our community safe and healthy. We have principals, secretaries, school counselors, and social workers ready to provide assistance. Thank you for partnering with us in your student's education.



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