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ABSTRACT

The Early Truancy Prevention Program (ETPP) is an intervention that places elementary school teachers at the helm of truancy prevention. A university-based research team developed the ETPP with elementary school teachers, principals, district-level administrators, and social workers. Components include: 1) Teachers visit each student’s home; 2) Teachers receive an iPhone to facilitate home-school communication; 3) Teachers identify students’ barriers to attendance and implement individualized interventions; and 4) Teachers document efforts in the online Attendance Information System (AIS).

The ETPP was implemented and refined over a three-year period, with a small randomized controlled trial in the fourth year. This paper describes the need for such an intervention and how the intervention was developed, its components, and its implementation. Feedback from participating teachers is also presented.

Keywords: Truancy prevention, early truancy, school attendance, teacher home visiting, parent teacher relationship.

Contact:
Professor Philip J. Cook
pcook@duke.edu
INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Education’s 2016 report on chronic absenteeism explains that “education can only fulfill its promise as the great equalizer...when we work to ensure that students are in school every day.” Yet nationwide, more than 7 million students – or 16 percent of all K-12 students – are chronically absent from school each year, meaning they miss at least 15 days for any reason.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, presented an opportunity to address the nationwide problem by requiring all states to include chronic absence in their school report cards. As a result, 36 states and the District of Columbia are using chronic absence as an accountability metric and school systems nationwide are ramping up efforts to identify and implement proven strategies aimed at reducing absenteeism.

There has been a growing recognition that chronic absenteeism in the primary grades is a precursor and quite possibly a cause of subsequent absenteeism and eventual dropout, as well as other negative outcomes. However, cost effective programs designed to improve early attendance have not been documented. In fact, there are no programs that have met the high evidentiary standards of the What Works Clearinghouse maintained by the U.S. Department of Education.

In response to this important need, our research team has developed the Early Truancy Prevention Program (ETPP) and field tested it in a public school system in North Carolina. An impact analysis using data from a pilot experiment in five elementary schools has shown promising results in reducing absenteeism in the first and second grade. Here we discuss the need for such a program, its development over a four-year period, and its implementation.

The ETPP is unique in recognizing and supporting teachers’ natural leadership role in improving attendance and fostering school engagement by students and parents. It builds on the following two observations. First, in primary school, students spend most of their day with a single teacher, who over the course of the year is well positioned to develop a close relationship with each of their students and their parents. Second, primary-school students, compared with adolescents, have relatively little autonomy; whether the child attends school regularly depends mostly on the parents.

Thus the ETPP seeks to leverage the teachers’ position to improve attendance by fostering improved communication with parents and equipping teachers with information needed to develop effective interventions for students who begin accumulating absences.
Specific components of the ETPP include:

1. Universal teacher home visiting to provide teachers with information about students’ home life and establish a productive working relationship between parents and teachers. Teachers were paid $40 for each visit and expected to make the visits on their own time;

2. A smart phone for each teacher with a cellular plan sufficient to accommodate frequent communication with parents by text, e-mail, or voice, as well as providing a mobile device to access online materials;

3. Weekly attendance data to give teachers information needed to identify students with emerging attendance problems;

4. An online Attendance Information System that guides the teacher’s assessment of the main barriers to attendance for each student, as well as providing suggested interventions for removing barriers and a convenient method of keeping track of each target case; and

5. Consultation with staff to ensure that teachers are taking full advantage of the available resources in the school system and community, as well as coordinating with the truancy-court program and other established social-work programs.

These five components are readily classified into the three-tiered service delivery approach, with “universal, targeted, and intensive interventions,” described by Kearney and Graczyk (2014, p. 3). The first two components (home visit, smart phones) are Tier 1 universal, whereas the next two (monitoring and intervening with students at an early stage of chronic absenteeism) are Tier 2 targeted. The fifth component provides teachers with the Tier 3 intensive option when necessary. It should be noted that although the ETPP bundles all five components and was evaluated as such, the first two – universal home visits and smart phones – could be implemented on their own. We begin the discussion of the development and implementation of the ETPP with evidence on the need for a program to reduce primary-school absenteeism.
PART I: IDENTIFYING THE NEED FOR TRUANCY PREVENTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

To motivate the launch of a program to improve attendance in primary school, we analyzed attendance data from first and second graders. A majority of students within the school system that we studied are either African American (half) or Hispanic (one quarter), and most qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The average attendance rate is slightly lower than the state average.

Still, it is true that a majority of the primary school children in this school district have good attendance records, with fewer than six absences over the course of the year. A relatively small group of students (about 4 percent) miss 20 or more days of school, four full weeks, and by the recent federal definition, exhibit “chronic absenteeism.” Figure 1 provides a detailed breakdown of absences among first and second graders for the 2010-11 school year, the year that we began this research.

Figure 1. Percent of first and second graders with a given number of absences, 2010-11 (N=5,121)

1 The data come from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center at the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction annually provides the data center with information from schools and students across the state. The data center processes the data to remove individual identifiers and provides the data to researchers who can do customized and tailored analyses to answer questions relevant for programs, practices and policies. Information on tardies was not available in more recent years.
A student’s attendance record in any one year is closely associated with other measures of school engagement. Frequent absences are often coupled with a pattern of arriving late to school – “tardies.” For first and second graders in 2006-07, the prevalence of frequent tardies increased steadily with the frequency of absences. While 11 percent of those with good attendance records had 10 or more tardies, 39 percent of those with 20 or more absences had the same amount. It is also true that attendance patterns are persistent from year to year. For example, the correlation between absences in 2011-12 and in the previous school year was 59 percent for third graders. About 45 percent of first and second graders with 10 or more absences in the 2010-11, again had 10 or more in 2011-12, compared with just 10 percent of students who had good attendance in the previous year.

Unsurprisingly, frequent absences are associated with academic problems and failure to complete the grade. The percentage of primary students who were retained in grade in 2010-11 ranged from 2.4 percent (for students with few absences) up to 5.9 percent (for students with 20 or more absences) (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Percent of first and second graders retained in grade between 2010-11 and 2011-12 by absenteeism in 2010-11 (N=4,579)

Our statistical analysis of the school district’s data thus provided evidence that a relatively small group of students are frequently absent, a pattern that tends to persist from year to year and is coupled with frequent tardies. The statistics on grade retention are suggestive of the common-sense conclusion that students who miss a lot of school are at risk for failure. While none of these findings are surprising, and indeed have been documented for other times and places, they do help establish a case for investing in early truancy prevention if an effective program can be identified.
PART II: DEVELOPING THE PROGRAM: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

The ETPP intervention model was developed over three years through an iterative process. The research team worked closely with the participating school district throughout the development process as well as during the pilot experiment in year four.

A guiding premise of our development approach is that ongoing collaboration between researchers and educational professionals from the earliest stages will enhance its potential for adoption and dissemination within schools (Atkins, Graczyk, Frazier, & Abdul-Adil, 2003; Weisz, Sandler, Durlak, & Anton, 2005). We engaged school personnel including district administrators, social workers, and teachers in the processes of planning, implementing, and evaluating our program. This close collaboration with the school district enhanced the program’s fit within existing school practices. We also involved other relevant community stakeholders, namely truancy court officials and Board of Education members.

Researchers solicited feedback from officials and participating teachers across a range of topics and issues. Participating teachers provided feedback about their implementation of the intervention model and the effectiveness of each intervention component. Administrators assisted with the overall design as well as the identification of proximate causes of elementary truancy and promising intervention strategies. Social workers provided feedback on the proximate causes of truancy and described current strategies utilized to address truancy. Feedback was obtained systematically through a variety of methods including: surveys and group sessions with participating teachers, individual meetings with principals, teachers, district administrators and other stakeholders, and a focus group with school district social workers. The research team also spent significant time collaborating with district-level officials to design data collection methods and to better understand the school district’s transition to the PowerSchools data system. The research team used this feedback, along with intervention implementation rates and student outcome data, to improve the ETPP intervention model.

INTERVENTION LOGIC MODEL

Teachers play a critical role in students’ academic outcomes, but they are frequently overlooked as a resource in the effort to reduce truancy. Primary school teachers, in particular, have considerable influence over the academic trajectories of their students. There is substantial evidence, including a
prospective inquiry (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000), that home-school communication, school engagement, and teacher relationships with parents and children are important predictors of student outcomes (Goodman, 2014; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Lareau, 1987; Reid, 2008a). The ETPP is designed to enhance the teacher’s role in these respects, with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement and likelihood of graduation, in part by improving elementary school attendance.

An important difference between truancy by elementary school students and that of older students is that elementary school students have little autonomy; truancy for this group is directly traceable to their parents’ choices. Those choices will be partly influenced by the parent’s level of school engagement, defined as the value that parents place on education, their judgment about the importance of school attendance during the elementary school years, and their endorsement of their child’s school and teacher. Those choices will also be influenced by parents’ ability to cope with the day-to-day challenges of getting their child to school, including creating a successful morning routine and dealing with transportation problems. The ETPP positions the teacher to work effectively with parents in overcoming these challenges to attendance. Figure 3 presents the logic model in schematic form.

**Figure 3. Logic Model of the Early Truancy Prevention Project**
As depicted in the logic model, the ETPP is designed to equip elementary school teachers with everything they need to serve as effective early responders to students’ emerging attendance problems. At the beginning of the new school year, teachers visit the homes of each student to help establish a well-informed and trusting relationship with parents, and to facilitate communication.

Teachers are also equipped with a smart phone to facilitate communication (via voice, email, and text) throughout the school year. Thereafter, teachers receive weekly alerts notifying them of students who are accumulating a problematic number of absences, and the teacher contacts the parents of any student who has missed three or more days in the previous month. After assessing the situation, the teacher decides whether to intervene, and if so, what intervention may be effective in improving subsequent attendance.

Thus, there are two channels through which ETPP may affect attendance. First, a better relationship and increased communication between parents and teachers may improve parents’ and students’ “school engagement.” The second channel through which the ETPP may affect attendance is through the interventions devised and implemented by the teacher for students who are beginning to accumulate a problematic number of absences. Teachers, in collaboration with families, identify barriers to attendance and create interventions or “action plans” to remove these barriers.

THE TYPOLOGY OF EARLY TRUANCY: A PROBLEM-SOLVING FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE EARLY INTERVENTION EFFORTS

The Typology of Attendance Barriers was created by the research team as a tool to guide teachers as they identify barriers to attendance and plan appropriate child-, family-, or school-focused interventions. A substantial literature has identified numerous risk-factors for truancy including low socio-economic status (SES), low parental education, single-parent status, minority status, parental mental illness, substance abuse and child maltreatment (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Casas-Gil & Navarro-Guzman, 2002; Hunt & Hopko, 2009; Reid, 2008b; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001).

Unfortunately, these root causes of truancy are typically beyond the scope of school-based intervention efforts. However, these causes are often mediated by day-to-day parent and child behavior patterns that can be influenced by schools. Therefore, the ETPP takes a problem-solving approach and empowers teachers to identify barriers to school attendance that can be solved through individualized interventions despite the presence of deeper root causes of truancy.
In developing a plan of action, it is essential that teachers understand the attendance barriers that need to be addressed. After establishing positive relationships with families, teachers can then engage them about the barriers to attendance that they may be experiencing. In most cases, there will be one or more specific impediments to regular attendance that the teacher can identify and seek to remedy in collaboration with the family.

During year one, interviews with participating principals and teachers were conducted to better understand the barriers to attendance faced by families. Responses were categorized into a “typology of attendance barriers” that could be used to explain absenteeism among elementary students and to guide intervention efforts. In year two, the typology was further refined based on participant feedback. In year three, the typology was shared with district-level social workers during a group feedback session. During this session, social workers reviewed the typology individually, and then, with a moderator from the research team in each small group, participants discussed attendance barriers they have observed in their work and identified a number of barriers that were omitted from the original list. Final revisions to the typology were completed during year four based on data collected during the small randomized, controlled trial.
In the Typology of Attendance Barriers, barriers are categorized into six domains:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HEALTH PROBLEMS</td>
<td>• Chronic illness, routine illness colds, flu, lice etc., injury or physical disability, medical appointments during the school day and emotional/behavioral problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARENT ACCOMMODATES CHILD’S RESISTANCE TO ATTENDING</td>
<td>• School anxiety (&quot;stomach aches&quot; etc.) or other reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARENT’S CHOICE</td>
<td>• Child is kept home to care for a younger sibling, accompany a parent as a translator, attend a family event such as a funeral or vacation trip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISORGANIZED HOUSEHOLD</td>
<td>• Child may miss school simply due to lack of a morning routine for getting up, dressed, and fed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Inadequate parenting in this respect may be due to difficult work schedules, substance abuse, mental health issues, homelessness, and frequent address changes or alternating custody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSPORTATION</td>
<td>• Bus service may not be an option if the child is suspended from the bus or is reluctant to ride the bus for some reason.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transportation may also be an issue if the child lives out of the district.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUSPENSION / OTHER</td>
<td>• This category is used for students who are absent after being suspended from school or for other reasons not included in the prior categories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• For example, some families report concerns about neighborhood violence that prevents their child from walking to school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ETPP is not the only truancy program to utilize such a tool to identify at-risk students (Rhodes, Thomas, Lemieux, Cain, & Guin, 2010). However, the Typology of Attendance Barriers differs from other tools by focusing on problem-solving strategies, rather than root causes of truancy. In addition, it can be used to guide intervention efforts in schools without a comprehensive truancy prevention program, or even by an individual teacher committed to improving student attendance in his or her classroom.
PART III: THE FIVE COMPONENTS OF THE ETPP

1) UNIVERSAL HOME VISITS AS A STARTING POINT

The normal routine in our system’s elementary schools is to notify parents in cases of frequent unexcused absences. While social workers were informed about students with six or more absences, professional intervention was unusual until the student had much more than that, at which point the student and parents might be scheduled for truancy court. Some principals devised their own responses, including one who sent out a van to pick up children who had not arrived on the bus. But generally Tier 2 (targeted prevention) interventions were lacking. The ETPP was designed in part to fill that gap, positioning the teachers to act effectively in this domain by providing them with a useful tool – the smart phone – and the Attendance Information System. Successful interventions require a good working relationship with parents, which was facilitated by the initial home visit and sustained by the ease of communication offered by the smart phone.

Although home visiting programs for early childhood have earned widespread support (Olds, Henderson, Tatelbaum, & Chamberlin, 1986), teacher home visiting is much less common. Even in kindergarten, where kindergarten transition practices are almost universal, only four percent of kindergarten teachers report that they conduct home visits (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). Although teachers may conduct home visits from time to time, they usually do so on their own time and without compensation (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). In addition, such visits are often an attempt to reach disengaged families who cannot be reached any other way or to educate parents to improve their parenting skills, rather than to build positive relationships and to learn about the child and family with the parent as the expert.

In the ETPP, teachers were trained systematically through a half-day workshop and ongoing support to conduct a 30-minute home visit for each of their students at the beginning of the school year. The goal of this home visit was to establish effective home-school collaborations and teacher-child relationships in support of positive student outcomes and school attendance.

The home visit model was adapted from the Kindergarten Home Visit Project, a novel kindergarten transition intervention program found to be efficacious at improving home-school relationships and student outcomes through a randomized controlled trial with 44 teachers and 928 students in 19 elementary schools by two members of the ETPP research team (Schulting, 2009).

The structure of the manualized home visit is flexible to allow for the diverse needs of each family.
However, the overarching goals of the home visits are to: 1) develop a trusting and collaborative relationship with the child and family; 2) learn about the child and family by listening to the parent as the expert; 3) identify child and family strengths and resources to support student success; and 4) talk with parents about the importance of attendance, discuss any family- or child-level barriers to attendance, describe the targeted intervention program and agree on collaborative responses if a truancy problem occurs later in the year.

In the ETPP, participating teachers received $40 for each completed home visit with funding for support staff also provided. Teachers had the option to bring someone with them, ideally another adult at school with a connection to the child or family. For example, teachers would sometimes bring the paraprofessional or assistant teacher assigned to their classroom. When parents were not fluent in English, the teachers could enlist an interpreter. Initially, the research team considered recruiting Spanish-speaking students from the local university. However, teachers preferred to bring school staff, such as the ESL teacher. Translators assisted during the actual home visit, and often also contacted families in advance to schedule the visit. Teachers who found scheduling to be too time consuming had the option of utilizing a home visit scheduler. Schedulers were paid $2 per completed home visit scheduled.

2) ENHANCING HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION WITH iPHONES

After home visiting, teachers reported increased comfort communicating with parents. However, they reported ongoing challenges contacting families via phone. Through surveys and discussion group sessions in year three, teachers in our sample reported that there was insufficient access to phones at their school sites. For example, at the extreme, teachers at one school reported that they did not have phones in their classrooms and the entire teaching staff shared three land-line phones, located in the main office, nurse’s office, and teacher’s lounge. With only three phones to be shared among all instructional staff, teachers typically opted to use their own cell phones to contact families if they felt it necessary to make a call. However, many teachers reported that this situation was not ideal as teachers did not like giving out their personal cell phone numbers and they often went over their cell phone minutes and data plan limits resulting in extra charges. Given the importance of home-school communication in general, and particularly within the context of the ETPP intervention model, it was essential that teachers have reliable phone access to use in contacting families.

In response to these findings, we modified the intervention model to include the provision of an iPhone for each teacher. For the randomized controlled trial in year four, participating teachers
received an iPhone 4 with unlimited talk and text for use during the school year, from August until June. As it turned out, the frequency of contact between parents and teacher was increased overall and texting became the preferred mode for both teachers and parents.

3/4) WEEKLY DATA COLLECTION / ATTENDANCE INFORMATION SYSTEM

In addition to the use of iPhones to support home-school communication, the ETPP also leveraged this technology by creating an online attendance information system (AIS). AIS addresses a significant barrier to effective truancy prevention, namely, the timely provision of attendance reports to teachers, giving them the information they need to identify emerging attendance problems, to assess reasons for absenteeism, to guide interventions, and to track the impact of interventions. The irony is that teachers, who collect and report student attendance data daily, do not receive reports from these data that could help them identify which of their students are becoming chronically truant. Teachers rely on memory, as they are not prompted or held accountable for student attendance. Therefore, an important goal in the development of this system was to enable teachers themselves to document and track students who were accumulating absenses and tardies, the reasons students were absent, their truancy prevention and intervention efforts, and student and family responses to these efforts.

Students with emerging attendance issues, called “target students,” were identified each week by the research team and ‘flagged’ in the AIS. Teachers also received a bi-weekly list of target students who required additional follow up from the teacher. The AIS was designed to guide teachers’ intervention efforts by providing prompts to identify relevant barriers to attendance and the types of intervention that might be appropriate. The prompts focus on the proximal problems in the typology of early truancy, not the more systemic or deep-seated problems that may in some sense be the ultimate cause of absenteeism.

After receiving the list of target students, the first step was for teachers to contact families (usually by text message) to determine why the student had been absent. Teacher contact with families and identified attendance barriers were entered into AIS. The online system also allowed teachers to document implementation and student outcomes, and it was formatted for easy viewing from an iPhone to facilitate use among teachers.
Identification of Target Students

The criteria for identifying target students evolved over the four-year implementation of the ETPP. Initially, the target student identification model was closely aligned with the school district’s existing attendance protocol, but was revised in the fourth year, as explained below. From the beginning, the ETPP protocol differed from the school’s in one important respect – the treatment of excused absences.

While schools differentiate between excused and unexcused absences, for purposes of intervention in the ETPP all absences were considered problematic. It is our belief that a child with a high number of absences, excused or unexcused, would benefit from increased home-school communication and collaboration to decrease the number of absences and ensure that missed academic work has been satisfactorily made up. For example, one child may have 10 unexcused absences and another may have 10 excused absences due to illness; however, both children have missed 10 days of school and will need to get caught up on missed instruction and learning. Both students may benefit from specific interventions at the school- or classroom-level to decrease the chance of future absences.

In the initial protocol, for students with three absences teachers called the family to determine why the child was absent and to encourage the parent to send in an excuse note. If the reasons given for the absences were concerning, teachers could elect to put the student on the target list and begin preventive interventions. After six absences, the child was automatically considered a target student. Teachers were alerted again once a child had 10 absences. Tardies were counted somewhat differently. Discussions with school principals indicated that some administrators considered three tardies as equal to one absence. The ETPP adopted this approach when counting tardies accumulated by students.

This method aligned with district policy and was easily understood and implemented by participating teachers. However, it lacked a method for determining when a student should be removed from the target list. Since the protocol was based on using cumulative absences or tardies, students could meet criteria for being target students all year based on their attendance patterns in the first months of school. Therefore, the research team revised the approach. Currently, the target student identification model only considers attendance over the past four weeks. Each absence is worth a ‘point’ and each tardy is worth one-third of a point. Points are tabulated at week’s end using the prior four weeks of attendance data. Target students are those who have accumulated three points in the past four weeks. This identification model allows intervention to focus on recent or ongoing attendance issues, rather than reflect absences that happened earlier in the school year.
As noted, arriving late to school, even by a few minutes, is considered to be problematic. Schools document and report tardies and parents can be sent to truancy court if their child is excessively tardy. Interestingly, and somewhat inexplicably, missing instructional time at the other end of the school day does not prompt the same level of concern. While teachers report that students frequently leave school a few minutes to a few hours early, this type of attendance pattern is not monitored or documented closely, if at all. Therefore, there was no attendance data collected on early pick-ups that could be used by the ETPP to formally identify these students as target students.

However, teachers participating in the ETPP were encouraged to contact families and to put students on the target list when they observed a pattern of early pick-ups from school.

5) CONSULTATION

After identifying attendance barriers and entering them into the AIS, teachers were encouraged to consult with school personnel or other professionals as needed. Staff was also encouraged to consult with teachers to ensure they were taking full advantage of the available resources in the school system and community as well as coordinating with the truancy-court program and other established social work programs.

In the ETPP model, teachers initiate a cascade of interventions for students and families that are divided into three phases of increasing intensity.

**Phase 1: Information sharing and relationship building**

This initial phase of the ETPP is universal and includes relationship building with all students and families through home visiting as well as enhanced home-school communication in person and with the iPhone. Teachers also exchange information with families about attendance. For example, in the course of home visits teachers discuss the importance of attendance, inquire about any possible attendance barriers, and share information about attendance procedures. Teachers may send an introductory attendance letter to all families to share information such as the time school starts and ends, the importance of attendance and on-time arrival, school attendance policies, and bus policies. Teachers may also ask for parents’ commitment to ensure their child attends school and arrives on-time. In addition, teachers discuss the importance of attendance and on-time arrival with all students and they work to create a welcoming classroom environment to motivate student attendance.
Phase 2: Targeted Interventions and Consultation

Despite the preventive and proactive measures taken in phase 1; some students are inevitably absent from school. In Phase 2, teachers work directly with target students and families to address emerging attendance issues. When students have been identified as target students, teachers contact target students and families to identify barriers to attendance. Accurate identification of barriers is critical, because this information guides the type of targeted interventions selected by the teacher. If the child is living in a homeless shelter and has no transportation, the appropriate interventions are quite different than if the child is anxious and avoiding school, moving back and forth between divorced parents, or needed at home to translate during doctor appointments for a family member.

Once barriers have been identified, teachers initiate targeted interventions in collaboration with students and families; they may also consult with school personnel or other professionals as needed. Initial interventions typically include a meeting with the family either at school or during a second home visit. Teachers share concern about the frequent absences or tardies, describe the impact it has on student outcomes, explain compulsory attendance laws if necessary, and work with families to establish a specific intervention “action plan” that addresses the barriers.

In some instances, these conversations alone may resolve the issue. For example, if the parents did not realize their child had numerous tardies because they misunderstood the time that students should arrive at school, then this conversation with the teacher is sufficient to resolve the situation. More typically, this initial contact with the family is a time for teachers to better understand the barriers to attendance that may be present for a particular child and make an intervention plan with the family.

Transportation issues are a frequently identified barrier to attendance. ETPP teachers worked with families to address transportation issues in a variety of ways. For example, during a home visit teachers may realize that students live near one another and could carpool, even if the families may not know each other. Teachers have learned that a family is homeless and helped them access the special transportation services available for homeless students. One ETPP school created a “late van” that would pick up children if they missed the bus. Another student was avoiding and frequently missing the bus due to anxiety. After talking with the family, the teacher consulted with the social worker and bus driver, and with the appointment of a “bus buddy” she was able to take the bus successfully.
Phase 3: Referrals to Services and Supports

After teachers communicate with families and implement targeted interventions, if attendance problems continue the teachers refer students to other professionals, services and supports in the school and community. Based on family needs, teachers may refer families to the transportation office, the student assistance team, the social worker or school counselor, or truancy court. Based on an understanding of the issues affecting a family, the school social worker may also opt to refer the family to community-based services or supports.

Implementation Context

In 2013-2014, the ETPP model was implemented in five high-poverty, public elementary schools in a mid-sized, urban school district in North Carolina. The student population in this school district is racially diverse (50 percent African American, 25 percent Hispanic, with most of the remainder non-Hispanic white) and a majority of students are from low-income families, with 65 percent qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Within school randomization occurred at the grade level with first and second grade classrooms randomly assigned to intervention or control conditions at each school. Twenty classrooms were randomly assigned to the intervention group, and 21 classrooms served as controls. Outcome data was collected including student-level attendance records in addition to teacher-reports of program implementation, home-school communication, and satisfaction with the program. Anecdotal and descriptive results will be reported here based on teacher feedback surveys and interviews, with detailed quantitative analyses of outcomes reported elsewhere (Cook, Dodge, Gifford, & Schulting, 2017).
PART IV: DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

Intervention teachers participated in a half-day training in August, 2013. At this training, teachers received an iPhone, participated in discussion and role-plays in preparation for home visiting, practiced using the online Attendance Information System (AIS) and learned the targeted student identification and targeted intervention protocol. Teacher home visiting began shortly thereafter, once students had been assigned to teacher classrooms. Targeted interventions were initiated as students met the target student identification criteria threshold of four absences in the past four weeks.

HOME VISITING AND HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Teacher home visits were conducted from late August through November 1. Home visit completion rates differed among classrooms, ranging from 52 percent to 100 percent. The overall home visit completion rate was 73.5 percent with 303 out of 412 students receiving a home visit from their teacher. Teacher feedback about home visiting was very positive. A majority of teachers (88%) reported that home visiting was “useful” or “very useful” in learning about the child and family; 94 percent reported that home visits had a positive impact on their relationship with students; and 100 percent reported that the home visit was enjoyable, had a positive impact on their relationships with parents and families and that they felt more comfortable communicating with parents after the home visit. Teacher comments about home visiting help tell the story – for example:

Building a relationship with parents is key [to preventing early truancy]. It was amazing to go to the home. It breaks down barriers and parents understand more about the teacher’s personality. It allows for open communication and dialogue [...] and they [the parents] are able to work with you as a partnership.

Another teacher reported that the effort she put into home visiting in the fall had a positive impact on the on home-school relationships throughout the school year:

I thought the home visits were beneficial and it makes your year a lot easier. They [parents] get to see you’re each a person and that you’re human. With the home visits it helped for the whole year. It helped build a certain bond with parents and students. It made it easier and it helped you ask questions you wouldn’t normally ask. It helps you be able to talk to the parent about the child.
HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

Teacher feedback about the iPhones was also decidedly positive. Many teachers reported that home-school communication increased not only due to home visiting and improved relationships, but also due to the increased ease of communication facilitated by the iPhone. Eighty-nine percent of intervention teachers report that the iPhone increased communication with students’ families, with 77 percent of teachers reporting that the iPhone increased home-school communication “a lot.” Teachers also reported increased use of texting, with intervention teachers over twice as likely to text families as compared to control teachers (70.7% vs. 32.8%). One intervention teacher described the importance of home-school communication and parents’ willingness to text in this way:

The greatest asset was the phone. I never gave parents my phone number before. I can text parents and they can call and text me also. Grandmas text me, too! I don’t have any attendance issues with kids whose parents can access me easily.

Parent-initiated contact with the teacher also increased which has been identified as a predictor of positive student outcomes by Kohl et al. (2000). Parent-initiated contact via text was more prevalent in the intervention group (58 percent of intervention parents vs. 26 percent of control parents). One teacher commented, “There are parents who wouldn’t call you or answer your call, but they would respond to a text much faster.” Another teacher describes the benefits of texting on home-school communication in this way:

I enjoy the partnership I have built with my families. We have strong consistent communication. I really like that. The cell phone is also very helpful. I text parents almost every day. Parents seem much more willing to text than talk and this gives me a wonderful written record of what we discussed.

In addition to increased parent-initiated texting, intervention teachers also report that parents are more likely to initiate in-person contact (9 percent vs. 4.4 percent), and phone communication (7.4 percent vs. 3.4 percent). Overall, these findings indicate that home visiting efforts paired with the iPhone increased both parent and teacher comfort in their relationship and frequency of home-school communication.
TARGETED INTERVENTIONS

Enhancing home-school communication quality and frequency assisted teachers in taking the lead to prevent early truancy. As described above, teachers report improved relationships and communication with families as a factor that enhanced their ability to address emerging attendance issues. Teachers also reported taking the initiative to contact families about attendance more than they had prior to their involvement in the Early Truancy Prevention Project. This sentiment was summarized by one teacher this way:

I see the impact it makes when I call or contact or ask if everything is okay. I feel like before I relied on the office to do it. It [ETPP] made me more aware that I can help influence or try to influence their attendance and promptness to school”

Teachers report implementing a variety of targeted intervention strategies to address emerging truancy among their students. The most common strategy was to initiate a discussion with parents or caregivers about attendance and barriers to attendance. Intervention teachers report using this strategy with two-thirds of their students, compared to just one-third of control students. For example, one teacher described calling the parents to share data about the frequency of the students’ absences, tardies and early pick-ups. The parents did not realize the student was missing that much school and they did not realize the impact it was having on the students’ academic performance. Once this information was shared with the parents, the students’ attendance improved.

Intervention teachers were also more likely to work directly with students to address attendance issues. Intervention teachers reported working directly with 53 percent of their students on attendance issues compared to 34 percent of students in control classrooms. Intervention teachers also reported collaborating with families and students to implement a wide range of additional interventions, specifically selected to address students’ attendance barriers. One teacher described a student who was experiencing a number of attendance barriers. He was living with his grandmother, and because her house was outside of the school district, he lacked bus transportation to school. The student did not have enough clothing and the grandmother would keep him home with her or bring him to her doctor’s appointments during the school day. The teacher reported that this students’ attendance improved due to communication with the grandmother, as well as collaboration with the social worker to address transportation issues and the family’s need for clothing and food. The teacher reports, “I feel like everything we did worked out really well for him.”

Another teacher described how a student’s uncontrolled asthma affected her attendance. The teacher
learned about the asthma during the home visit and was concerned that the student was missing a lot of school for asthma symptoms and did not have an inhaler to use at school. With teacher encouragement, the mother got an inhaler to keep at school, and the student’s attendance improved.

Conscientious teachers are inclined to do what they can to help their students succeed in school. The ETPP builds on that commitment, providing tools and information required to act effectively and early enough to prevent more serious problems.

**COSTS AND BENEFITS**

The ETPP was developed and piloted in a mid-sized urban school district with a largely poor and minority student population. The evidence on its effectiveness is quite compelling, although a final verdict will have to wait on larger scale testing in varied settings. In the pilot evaluation, our analysis found an approximate 10 percent reduction in prevalence of 4+, 6+, and 10+ absences over the school year. (The point estimates for these three outcomes are quite uniform.) Two of these effects are statistically significantly different from zero.

The program has been fully documented. Training materials are in the public domain at the following site: [http://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/project/truancy-prevention-project/](http://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/project/truancy-prevention-project/).

For districts considering adoption of part or all of this program, it is an attractive feature that the financial cost and time imposition on teachers are both rather modest. The smart phone contract was just $750 per teacher per year, or about $30 per student. The home visits obviously take time, perhaps an extra 25 hours during the month of September for which the teachers are compensated $40 for each visit. Principals could find a way to relieve those teachers of some other responsibilities (e.g., bus and cafeteria duty) during that month. The additional work required to communicate with parents and school officials about target students does not add much of a burden to what conscientious teachers are already carrying. In our survey of treatment-group teachers, most indicated that the time demands of participation were not heavy. The greater satisfaction teachers indicated resulting from a better connection to parents may serve as compensation.

The “bottom line” in this school system is that there appears to be better communication between teachers and parents, and improved attendance. Since early absenteeism is a precursor for continuing disengagement and eventual dropout, it is plausible that the ETPP may serve to improve graduation rates.
References


