



Evidence in Action

A K20 Center Research Brief

Enhancing School Attendance through Structured Mentoring Programs

*Jonathan Guryan, Sandra Christenson, Ashley Cureton, Ijun Lai, Jens Ludwig, Catherine Schwarz,
Emma Shirey, Mary Clair Turne
2020*

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism is a persistent challenge in urban school districts and is strongly linked to long-term outcomes such as dropout, academic failure, and reduced postsecondary opportunities. Prior research has shown that attendance problems often begin in elementary school and worsen during transitions to middle school, particularly for students facing poverty-related barriers. Traditional truancy enforcement approaches, such as attendance officers, have been widely reduced or eliminated, leaving schools with limited tools to proactively address absenteeism.

The authors identify a key gap in both policy and research: while many districts invest in attendance-related programs, very few initiatives have been rigorously evaluated using experimental methods. Drawing on theory and prior observational research about social capital and adult-student relationships, the study evaluates whether assigning students to a structured, school-based mentoring program can improve attendance and academic outcomes. The study focuses on the Check & Connect (C&C) program, a widely implemented but under-evaluated intervention designed to improve student engagement by increasing personalized adult support.

Methodology

Research Design:

The study used a large-scale randomized controlled trial to examine the causal impact of Check & Connect. Randomization occurred at multiple levels—school, grade, and student—allowing the researchers to estimate both direct effects on participating students and potential spillover effects on non-participating peers. Outcomes were examined using longitudinal administrative data.



Sample:

Participants included:

- Total students: Over 2,500 students across two cohorts
- Grade levels: Grades 1-7
- Eligibility: Students with 10-35 absences in the prior school year
- Setting: Chicago Public Schools, primarily serving high-poverty urban neighborhoods
- School characteristics: Free or reduced-price lunch rates ranged from approximately 71% to nearly 100%
- Students were racially and ethnically diverse, with a majority identifying as Black or Hispanic, and approximately 10% receiving special education services.

Intervention Descriptions:

Check & Connect is a structured, school-based mentoring intervention focused on increasing student engagement and reducing absenteeism. As implemented in this study, the program included the following components:

- **Mentor Assignment:** Each participating student was assigned a full-time mentor employed by a community-based social service agency (SGA Youth and Family Services), not by the school.
- **Monitoring (“Check”):** Mentors regularly monitored student attendance, grades, and behavioral referrals to identify early signs of disengagement.
- **Personalized Support (“Connect”):** Mentors provided individualized, responsive interventions tailored to the student’s needs, which could include problem-solving, advocacy, or connections to school and community resources.
- **Student Interaction:** Mentors conducted formal meetings with students one-on-one or in small groups and also engaged in frequent informal check-ins throughout the school day.
- **Family Engagement:** Mentors communicated regularly with parents or guardians through phone calls and, in some cases, home visits.
- **Supervision and Training:** Mentors received ongoing supervision, weekly meetings, and periodic professional development from Check & Connect consultants affiliated with the University of Minnesota.

The program followed a standardized manual but allowed mentors flexibility to adapt supports based on individual student circumstances.

Dosage:

The study provides partial but measurable dosage information:

- **Mentor-student formal meetings:**
 - Average of 5 formal meetings per month
- **Informal interactions:**



- Occurred frequently (e.g., lunchroom, hallways, recess), but not quantified in minutes
- Family contacts:
 - Approximately 2 contacts per month on average
- Duration:
 - Students received the intervention for two consecutive school years
 - Some students participated for up to four years, but primary analyses focus on two-year exposure.
- Calculated Dosage (based on reported data)
 - **Formal student sessions:**
 - Approximately **45-50 sessions per school year**
 - **90-100 formal sessions over two years**

Data Analysis:

Researchers analyzed outcomes using intent-to-treat (ITT) and treatment-on-the-treated (TOT) models, leveraging random assignment to estimate causal impacts. Administrative data were used to track attendance, grades, and standardized test scores over time. Models included baseline controls, and results were examined separately by grade level to identify differences by student age. [\[Guryan et...omized \(3\) | PDF\]](#)

Results

Attendance Outcomes

- Grades 5-7:
 - Students who participated in Check & Connect missed approximately 4.2 fewer days of school per year, a reduction of about 23% compared to similar peers.
- Grades 1-4:
 - No statistically significant improvements in attendance were detected.
- Duration Matters:
 - Attendance improvements were larger in the second year of participation, suggesting that relationship-building over time contributed to program effectiveness.

Academic Outcomes

- No significant effects were found on GPA, course failures, or standardized test scores for any grade level.
- Improvements in attendance alone did not translate into measurable gains in academic performance during the study period.

Spillover Effects

- The study found no detectable spillover effects on non-participating students in the same schools or grades.



Application into Practice

Check & Connect is best suited for schools seeking to reduce chronic absenteeism among upper-elementary and middle-grade students through sustained, relationship-based mentoring.

Actionable Implementation Steps

- Identify students with moderate to high prior absenteeism for targeted participation.
- Hire or partner with trained, dedicated mentors whose sole role is student engagement and monitoring.
- Plan for a multi-year commitment; effects were stronger after the first year.
- Schedule time for:
 - Regular mentor-student check-ins (approximately weekly)
 - Ongoing family communication
- Ensure mentors receive:
 - Ongoing supervision
 - Structured training on the Check & Connect model
- Integrate the program with broader attendance and instructional improvement efforts.

Work Cited

Guryan, J., Christenson, S., Cureton, A., Lai, I., Ludwig, J., Schwarz, C., Shirey, E., & Turner, M. C. (2020). *The effect of mentoring on school attendance and academic outcomes: A randomized evaluation of the Check & Connect program*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 40(3), 841-882. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22264>