HARVARD
MAGAZINE

May–June 2018

The power of a postcard: Trimming truancy

By Jonathan Shaw

Illustration by Jason Ford

COULD A SIMPLE POSTCARD, properly deployed, make a measurable impact on student absenteeism from school? The answer is yes. "Reports of the death of mail are greatly exaggerated," quips Todd Rogers. A professor of public policy at Harvard Kennedy School, Rogers runs a lab that develops high-impact interventions to improve educational outcomes. As a former political strategist, he once applied skills at the intersection of behavioral science and social psychology, learned during his Harvard doctoral studies, to get voters to the polls (the work is described in Sasha Issenberg's *Victory Lab*). But eight years ago, he dropped politics, and turned his focus instead to education. "I wanted to help kids succeed."

He returned to Harvard to focus specifically on mobilizing family support for students. "A handful of experiments showed these crazy effect sizes," he says, because "when you give parents useful information, they act on it." The Student Social Support (S3) R&D lab was born to "use behavioral insights to develop scalable interventions that mobilize the social network around students" to support achievement. An ideal intervention, he says, occupies a sweet spot at the center of a Venn diagram that maps the intersection of three overlapping circles of expertise: insights into human decision-making; an understanding of key problems in education; and mechanisms for reaching scale without imposing new burdens on teachers and administrators. "It is hard to nail all three," he explains.

Rogers is currently running an experiment that leverages preexisting relationships among 3,000 K-12 students and mentors nominated by their parents (grandparents or coaches, for example) to increase grades and test scores. The mentors receive weekly letters that might read, "Hi, these are the classes Caroline is taking, ask her what are her favorite subjects and why." Early results in Britain testing a similar approach (but using text messages) to help students earn a high-school equivalency diploma have been very promising, he reports. Another project pushes administrative data about grades, class-skipping, and test scores—information that teachers already record—out to parents via text-messaging in order to lift grades. In an experiment with 7,000 families in Washington, D.C., when parents were automatically enrolled in the program, 96 percent of them stayed in, and the effect on student achievement was "very large," say Rogers. Even better, "parents want more information afterward." In other words, "Parents don't know what they don't know. When they get actionable information, they act on it. That improves student achievement, and then they want more."

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