



Boosting Attendance and Reducing Suspensions with TalkingPoints

*Findings from a Two-Year Implementation in a
Large Urban District*

SUMMARY

TalkingPoints is a research-based platform designed to improve student outcomes by building purposeful school-family partnerships. This study examines the impact of TalkingPoints usage on student outcomes, including attendance, behavior, and achievement, relative to a control group, in a large urban school district.

Results demonstrate that when educators engage families with positive, consistent, and inclusive communication, student outcomes improve. TalkingPoints usage was associated with significant gains in attendance and reductions in suspensions, including among historically underserved students.

Attendance Gains: TalkingPoints High School students gained 3 extra weeks of learning time per year compared to peers.



KEY FINDINGS

Students with TalkingPoints usage demonstrated a 12% increase in high school attendance, equating to about three additional weeks of learning time per year compared to the control group. In early and middle grades, TalkingPoints students had a 43% lower suspension rate compared to their peers in the control group.

↑ **12%** Improved attendance in high school compared to control

↓ **43%** Reduced suspensions in early & middle grades compared to control

Family-school communication grew more positive over time, aligning with family engagement best practices. **Importantly, students who received more positive messages had stronger outcomes, including higher average daily attendance and lower suspension rates.** These results highlight TalkingPoints' potential to activate family-school partnerships that boost outcomes for all students.

INTRODUCTION

Decades of research show that strong family engagement is one of the most powerful predictors of student success. When families and educators build trusting partnerships focused on learning, schools often see improvements in student attendance, achievement, behavior, and well-being.^{1,2} Studies show that strong, trusting family-school partnerships can meaningfully reduce absenteeism³ and suspensions.⁴ However, chronic absenteeism is high nationwide, underscoring the need for deep, purposeful, and enduring collaboration between schools and families. Proactive, personalized, and learning-focused two-way communication, including texting interventions, can be especially effective for improving attendance and strengthening the trusting partnerships between families and schools that support greater student success.^{5,6,7}

THE CHALLENGE

The research is clear—better attendance, behavior, and learning come from trusting family-school partnerships, not just more messages. In large, multilingual districts, it's hard to build those relationships across hundreds of classrooms with limited educator time. One-way, problem-only notices leave families on the sidelines. **Without accessible, two-way dialogue that centers strengths, builds trust, and invites collaboration, schools miss early signals and chances to co-solve issues before they escalate.**

The challenge is finding a scalable system that embeds partnership into daily practice, enabling educators to have frequent, positive, inclusive communication with every family.

TALKINGPOINTS' APPROACH

TalkingPoints is a family engagement platform designed to bolster student outcomes by making it easy for schools to build strong, trust-based family-school partnerships. The platform removes barriers that have historically excluded some families, offering two-way communication in 150+ languages, text and app-based messaging, and embedded best practice guidance for educators. By enabling consistent, positive, and inclusive communication, TalkingPoints helps schools foster relationships that build trust, strengthen school culture, and address student needs before challenges escalate.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study examined the usage and impact of TalkingPoints in a large urban school district. The district serves roughly 50,000 diverse students across approximately 120 PreK-12 schools.



TALKINGPOINTS IMPLEMENTATION

Teachers and school staff use TalkingPoints through a web or mobile app to send two-way messages to families, individually or in groups, with built-in two-way translation in 150+ languages. They use the platform to share updates, gather feedback via translated polls, send images or videos with translated captions, and access best-practice message templates, tips, and scheduling tools to save time and strengthen family partnerships.

Families receive messages by default as simple text messages on any phone; no apps, downloads, or Wi-Fi required. Those who prefer can use the free TalkingPoints for Families app, which offers additional support like text-to-speech, speech-to-text, embedded education glossaries, and “Help Me Understand” tools that clarify message content and context—all in their home language.

The district adopted TalkingPoints in the 2020-21 school year, making the platform available to all schools and staff. While access was district-wide, educators and families had flexibility in how and when they engaged with it, allowing for adoption aligned to local needs.

METHODS

Design

The study period includes the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, the two years following the district-wide TalkingPoints implementation. To enable us to compare outcomes before and after implementation while controlling for baseline performance, we used 2018-19 as the baseline year and 2021-22 as the endline year. This timeframe was selected both to capture the period of rollout and avoid years in which data may have been disrupted by COVID-19.

The study used a quasi-experimental design (QED) to estimate the effects of TalkingPoints usage on student outcomes, including attendance, behavior, and achievement, relative to a control group.

Student Sample

The student sample included 33,987 PreK-12 students with outcome data available at both baseline (2018-19) and endline (2021-22).



KEY FINDINGS

The student sample reflected the diversity of the district:

45%

identified as
Hispanic/Latino

8%

identified as Asian
American and
Pacific Islander

1%

identified as
Native American
or mixed/other

12%

identified as White

38%

identified as Black

In addition, 25% of students had an Individualized Education Program (IEP), 35% were English learners (ELs), and 79% were identified as economically disadvantaged.

Students were assigned to the treatment group if they had TalkingPoints messages associated with them during the study period (2020-21 or 2021-22 school years). Students were assigned to the control group if they had no TalkingPoints usage. Students with usage prior to the study period were excluded. This resulted in 24,055 students in the treatment group and 7,208 in the control group.

Data Sources

We combined student-level administrative data provided by the school district with usage data collected by the TalkingPoints platform. The district provided attendance data (average daily attendance for grades PreK-12), behavior data (number of suspensions per student in grades K-12), and achievement data from state standardized assessments (grades 3-12).

For each student, we calculated three indicators of TalkingPoints usage:



whether the student had any TalkingPoints messages associated with them during the study period



the number of weeks with at least one message



the average number of messages per week

Only messages exchanged between educators and families were included; school- and district-wide announcements were excluded.

Analytic Approach

We applied propensity score matching (PSM) to pair students in the treatment group with comparable students in the control group. Using PSM, we matched students based on baseline outcomes, race/ethnicity, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, English learner (EL) status, and IEP status.

After matching, we ran weighted regression analyses to estimate the average treatment effects (ATE) of TalkingPoints across outcomes. We analyzed each grade level and outcome separately.

The PSM process did not achieve covariate balance for all groups, indicating that treatment and control students were not always equivalent on key characteristics. For these groups, results should be interpreted as correlational rather than causal. Where covariate balance was achieved, findings represent quasi-experimental evidence of causal impact. To ensure a conservative interpretation, this report presents all results as correlational rather than causal.

Message Content and Tone

To better understand the content and tone of educator-family communication, we analyzed the messages exchanged during the study period. We coded each message for sentiment, classifying it as positive if it conveyed affirming, supportive, or encouraging communication, distinct from neutral or negative messages. For each student, we calculated the proportion of positive messages they received.

We also drew a random sample of messages and categorized them by topic into four groups: logistics, academics, attendance, and behavior. For each student, we calculated the proportion of their messages related to each topic.

This approach allowed us to track shifts in message content and tone over time and to explore potential associations between these patterns and student outcomes. Finally, we conducted exploratory analyses to examine whether a higher proportion of positive messages correlated with stronger outcomes.

RESULTS

Overall, TalkingPoints was associated with statistically significant improvements in both attendance and behavior, including among historically underserved students. Results also point to an important shift toward more positive educator-family communication, a family engagement best practice. **The proportion of positive messages was significantly related to stronger outcomes, including better attendance and fewer suspensions.** Impacts on academic outcomes were limited.

TalkingPoints Usage

By the second year of district-wide implementation, 100% of schools and nearly 75% of families were using TalkingPoints, reflecting strong uptake across the district. In the first year, 88% of messages focused on logistics and 7% on academics. By the second year, that balance had shifted: only 73% of messages focused on logistics, while 16% addressed academics, attendance, and behavior – topics tied directly to student outcomes. In addition, the proportion of educator messages categorized as positive increased from 55% in year one to 62% in year two, indicating an important shift toward more positive communication.

The content and tone of family-educator communication improved over time, consistent with family engagement best practices.

Exploratory analyses suggest tone matters: students who received a higher proportion of positive messages had slightly higher average daily attendance (small positive relationship, $r = .09$) and slightly lower suspension rates (small negative relationship, $r = -.03$). Both findings were statistically significant ($p < .05$), meaning they're unlikely to be due to chance. These are modest effects for any one student, but at scale they can add up, and they point to the value of positive, supportive educator-family communication.

Attendance

TalkingPoints was associated with statistically significant improvements in attendance among high school students. On average, these effects reflect a 12-percentage-point increase in attendance, relative to the control group, which is equivalent to nearly three additional weeks of learning time per year.

Subgroup analyses revealed significant attendance gains for students who most often faced barriers to engagement. Black students, Hispanic/Latino students, English learners (EL), students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP), and economically disadvantaged (ED) students all demonstrated statistically significant gains in attendance associated with TalkingPoints use. These findings highlight TalkingPoints' potential to support historically underserved groups at elevated risk of absenteeism.

Suspensions

TalkingPoints usage was related to statistically significant reductions in suspensions in early and middle grades (1-4 and 6-8). On average, these reductions equated to a 43% decrease in suspensions, relative to the control group.

Subgroup analyses highlighted significant reductions in suspensions associated with TalkingPoints use among Black students, Hispanic/Latino students, ELs, students with IEPs, and ED students. These patterns suggest that TalkingPoints may be especially relevant for student groups at elevated risk of exclusionary discipline.

DISCUSSION

Recommendations for educators: Universal Family Engagement practices

This study illustrates that when educators and families communicate in positive, consistent, and inclusive ways, students benefit. TalkingPoints was associated with meaningful gains in attendance and reductions in suspensions, including among underserved students.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

These improvements are especially noteworthy because they occurred in a large, diverse, urban district, where barriers to engagement are often greatest.



By lowering long-standing obstacles to family engagement, such as language, accessibility, and capacity, TalkingPoints enabled families to participate more fully in their children's education.



The results highlight the power of supportive, partnership-oriented communication: in the early grades, stronger school-family connections may help prevent behaviors that otherwise lead to disciplinary action, while in later grades, targeted communication can re-engage students who are at risk of chronic absenteeism.



Importantly, fewer suspensions mean more instructional time, ensuring that students retain critical opportunities to learn.

Together, these findings highlight that TalkingPoints can effectively reach the students most in need, those who often face systemic barriers to educational success, and underscore the importance of removing obstacles so that every family has the opportunity to truly partner with their child's school.

When families are welcomed as experts on their child and valued for the strengths and insights they bring, engagement becomes not just more inclusive but also more impactful.

The results of this study are aligned with decades of education research showing that strong family-school partnerships are a high-leverage strategy for improving student outcomes.^{8,9} Consistent with the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, TalkingPoints incorporates the essential conditions for effective partnerships, including relational trust, two-way and interactive communication, and supports that are systemic, integrated, and sustained. By lowering barriers through translation, accessibility, and positive communication tools, the platform enables both educators and families to build the capacity needed for genuine partnership.

This work also illustrates how TalkingPoints' approach to Universal Family Engagement can drive meaningful change in practice: improving outcomes for all students by fostering effective partnerships between schools and families while systematically removing barriers to engagement. The results of this study bring to life the tenets of Universal Family Engagement:

Purposeful communication that supports critical outcomes like attendance

Inclusive design that reaches historically underserved families

Responsive approaches that adapt to student and family needs

Enduring engagement that builds trust over time

The observed shift toward more positive communication further reflects the mindset shifts at the heart of Universal Family Engagement, positioning families as their child's first teacher, strongest advocate, and essential partner in learning.

Together, these findings demonstrate how Universal Family Engagement can be realized at scale in large, diverse districts, strengthening inclusiveness and accelerating progress for the students who need it most.



Looking ahead, TalkingPoints will corroborate these findings in additional district contexts and further investigate the relationship between TalkingPoints usage and academic achievement. In addition, we will more deeply explore usage patterns and message content and tone to better understand the communication strategies that are most impactful in driving outcomes. Together, these next steps will not only strengthen the evidence base for family engagement and TalkingPoints impact but also provide educators with actionable insights on how to enable effective, scalable approaches to family-school partnership with families.

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

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ABOUT TALKINGPOINTS

TalkingPoints is an education technology nonprofit that drives student outcomes by unlocking the superpower of effective family-school partnerships. The award-winning TalkingPoints platform brings the practice of Universal Family Engagement to life, helping educators use research-backed strategies to build strong family-school partnerships to improve student and district outcomes. Across districts nationwide, TalkingPoints has empowered more than 9 million family members, educators, and students, facilitating over one billion conversations that drive student success. TalkingPoints leads to higher academic performance and lower absenteeism, as shown by rigorous, externally validated causal research.

To learn more, visit talkingpts.org.

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