

Sending e-mail messages emphasizing social norms reduced school directors' absenteeism by 4% on average, equivalent to seven full days of school.

How to encourage school principals not to play hooky

Research shows that teacher and administration absences can negatively affect students' reading and math abilities.

In Peru, data from random spot checks conducted by the Peruvian Government found that, on average, 7% of teachers and 17% of principals are absent on any given day. This corresponds to teachers missing 12.5 days and principals missing 30.5 days of school a year, and can affect outcomes for students. So, how do we get teachers and principals to turn up to school?

The Project

Working with the Peruvian Ministry of Education (MINEDU) and the UK's Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), we tested whether attendance could be influenced by sending different behaviorally informed messages by email. One email message conveyed the current level of attendance of one's school district - the "social norm" - while the other built on teachers' pro-social motivations by highlighting the positive effect of teacher attendance on student performance.

Using a randomized experiment, we tested the effect of each email on teacher and director attendance, as measured in administrative surveys and payroll data. Close to 100,000 teachers and principals in 27,000 schools around Peru were divided into three groups and received either no email (control) or one of two behaviorally informed messages.

In order to measure effects on attendance, we planned our trial to be implemented in schools that we knew would be visited by the Ministry of Education for spot checks, controlling for the fact that not all schools would be visited at the same time. During these spot checks, survey staff check directly to see if teachers are present in classrooms, which offers a more objective measure than the one reported by school principals (who our qualitative research revealed are likely to under-report their teachers', and their own, absences). This strategy provided us with comparable outcome data, at no additional cost for the Ministry. This "embedding" method is a great example of how we aim to design trials that are both rigorous and cost-effective for governments.

The Results



Social norms emails significantly increased average attendance of principals.

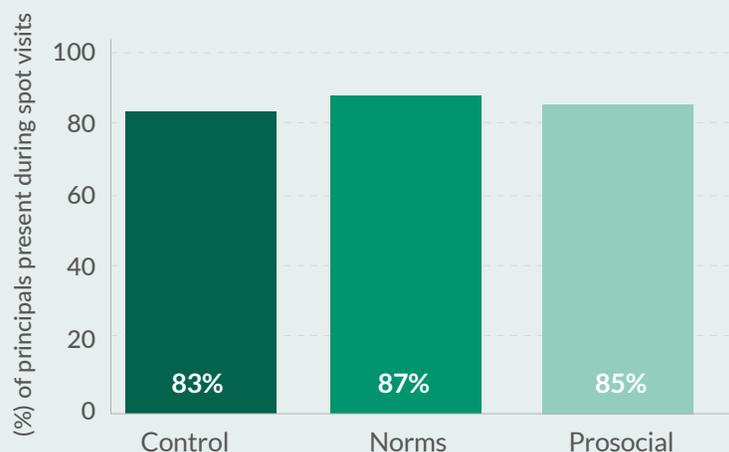
There was an increase in attendance of 4%, which corresponds to approximately **seven fewer missed days of school a year** per principal out of a total of 179 days - a substantial effect, especially for an intervention that had near zero cost to the Peruvian government.



E-mails had no impact on teachers' attendance.

There are three main reasons that may explain why there is an impact on principals but not on teachers. **First, we may not be using the right communication tool.** Only 17% opened the first e-mail and 12% the second. **Second, teachers' attendance was higher at baseline**, which could mean that principals' attendance had a greater room for improvement. **Third, we didn't use the most impactful messages.** For example, we didn't try personalized messages on attendance relative to peers due to Ministry's protocols on how to communicate with teachers.

IMPACT OF BEHAVIORAL E-MAILS ON PRINCIPAL ATTENDANCE



** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Note: Sample is restricted to principals who provided email address. Total N=2,182



Policy Implications

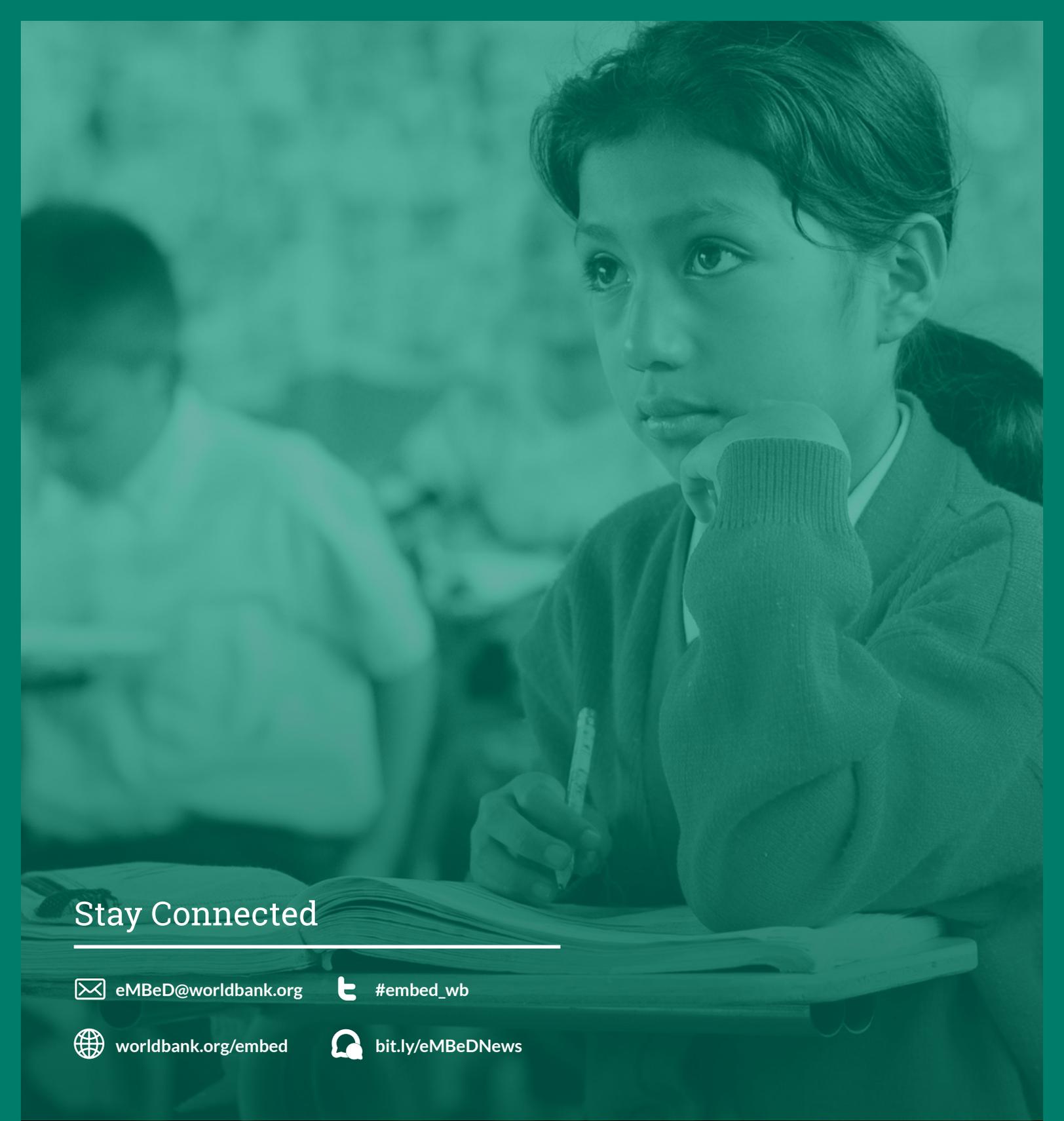
Our results overall suggest that sharing information on attendance norms may be an effective low-cost tool to reduce absenteeism among directors. As in other fields, behavioral science has shown that individuals care about what others in their group are doing. Social norms have been effective in, among other things: encouraging recycling, reducing energy and water consumption, and in this instance, encouraging school teachers and administrators to show up.

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For teachers, it will be worth exploring different communication methods where the information is more likely to be seen. In future work, it would be interesting to test other cost-effective ways to reach out to teachers such as adding behavioral messages on pay slips, SMS messages, or other official communications. These will be more complicated to implement than e-mails, but would present an opportunity to make direct links between absences and their negative consequences on pay, for example, which should be a strong motivator.

About eMBed

The Mind, Behavior, and Development Unit (eMBed), the World Bank's behavioral science team in the Poverty and Equity Global Practice, works closely with project teams, governments, and other partners to diagnose, design, and evaluate behaviorally informed interventions. By collaborating with a worldwide network of scientists and practitioners, the eMBed team provides answers to important economic and social questions, and contributes to the global effort to eliminate poverty and enhance equity.



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