Making the Case for Tracking Chronic Absence

Attendance Works
Advancing Student Success By Reducing Chronic Absence

A growing body of research is revealing the prevalence of chronic absence and its critical role in student achievement. Fortunately, research is also showing that chronic absence can be addressed when school districts, communities, and policymakers work together to monitor the problem and implement solutions that address the underlying causes.

General

- **Balfanz, Robert and Byrnes, Vaughan (2013),** *Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism,* **Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University School of Education.** This report examines the impact of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's task force on truancy, chronic absenteeism and school engagement, a program that spanned 2010 to 2013 and reached more than 60,000 students in NYC public schools. The study found that students who missed at least 20 days of school per year — the definition of chronic absenteeism — had lower grades and were more likely to drop out than students with better attendance. Yet, the researchers also found these effects of absenteeism are reversible with the help of mentors, incentive programs and awareness campaigns.

- **Balfanz, Robert and Byrnes, Vaughan (2012),** *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*, **Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.** This report analyzes data on chronic absenteeism at the state level to begin the process of mapping its extent and characteristics. Although currently only a handful of states collect data on chronic absenteeism, results from a sample of states suggest that an estimated 10-15% of students in the U.S. are chronically absent each year. The report also highlights some promising practices among cities, school districts and nonprofits to combat chronic absenteeism. The authors offer policy recommendations on tracking and reporting chronic absence data and evidence-based interventions.

- **Bruner, Charles; Discher, Anne; and Chang, Hedy (2011),** *Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight*, **Child and Family Policy Center and Attendance Works.** This study confirms the premise that districts and schools may fail to detect high levels of chronic absence because the problem is easily masked by average daily attendance, one of the most commonly calculated attendance measures. While many educators assume a 95% ADA rate is an indicator of good attendance, the authors find that this sometimes mask a problem with a group of students missing excessive days.

Early Education and Elementary

- *Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes*, **Applied Survey Research (2011).** This study suggests that attendance in the early grades is critical to sustaining the school readiness skills that preschool or Head Start programs can help children to develop. The report found that students who arrived at school academically ready to learn — but then missed 10% of their kindergarten and first grade years — scored an average of 60 points below similar students with good attendance on third-grade reading tests.

- **Chang, Hedy and Romero, Mariajose (2008),** *Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades,* **National Center for Children in Poverty.** This report documents the consequences, prevalence, potential causes and possible solutions to children missing extended periods of school in grades K-3rd. Although students must be present and engaged to learn, thousands of this country's youngest students are academically at-risk because of extended absences when they first embark upon their school careers. Nationally, an estimated one in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students are chronically absent. The report recommends that schools, communities and families monitor and promote attendance, as well as to identify and address barriers to good attendance.

- **Connolly, Faith and Olson, Linda S. (2012),** *Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten*, **Baltimore Education Research Consortium.** This brief looks at attendance in the early grades with particular focus on pre-kindergarten and kindergarten and follows these young students over time. The study finds that students with low attendance in both pre-kindergarten and kindergarten often continue to have low attendance, are more likely to be retained by third grade and on average have lower academic outcomes than peers with better attendance. The impact can be minimized, however, by improved attendance in later grades. Head Start students began with and maintained high rates of attendance compared with comparable students. They initially underperformed in reading and math but by third grade, they performed as well as their peers on the state assessment.

- **Ehrlich, Stacy B., et al. (2013),** *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences: Research Summary.* This report highlights the critical importance of consistent preschool attendance. Students who attend preschool regularly are significantly more likely than chronically absent preschoolers to be ready for kindergarten and to attend school regularly in later grades, the report finds. The study, which follows 25,000 three- and four-year-olds served by Chicago Public Schools school-based preschool programs, finds that chronic absenteeism is rampant among Chicago preschoolers. In 2011-2012, almost half of 3-year-olds and more than one-third of 4-year-olds missed at least 10% of the school year.

- **Ready, Douglas D. (2010),** *Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development, The Differential Effects of School Exposure*, **Sociology of Education.** Despite the substantial body of research documenting strong relationships between social class and children's cognitive abilities, researchers have generally neglected the extent to which school absenteeism exacerbates social class differences in academic development among young children. This study suggests that missing school in the early grades has a more powerful influence on literacy development for low-income students than it does for their more affluent peers. Put another way, school matters more to children from low-income families.

Secondary School

- **Allensworth, Elaine and Easton, John Q. (2007),** *What Matters for Staying On-track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year*, **University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research.** In this study of the freshman year of high school, researchers found that attendance in this pivotal transition year was a key indicator of whether students would finish high school. The study also found attendance and studying more predictive of dropout than test scores or other student characteristics. In fact, 9th grade attendance was a better predictor of dropout than 8th grade test scores.

- **Balfanz, Robert, et al. (2007),** *Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions*, **Educational Psychologist, 42(4), 223–235.** This study examines the application of an early identification and intervention system for students in the middle grades to prevent student disengagement and increase graduation rates. The authors follow a cohort of students to demonstrate how indicators reflecting poor attendance, misbehavior and course failure in sixth grade can be used to identify 60% of the students who will not graduate from high school. The authors find that by combining effective whole-school reforms with attendance, behavioral, and extra-help interventions, graduation rates can be substantially increased.

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