

## *Five Myths About School Attendance*

By Hedy Chang

**W**ith millions of children beginning the new school year, millions of teachers have inevitably begun to take the daily roll in their classrooms.

Done right, this simple task not only can provide a way to welcome and engage students, but also can offer important clues about students, classrooms, and whole communities. Most schools miss out on this information, though, because they don't track the right numbers and they trust the following commonly held myths.

### **1. STUDENTS DON'T START MISSING A LOT OF SCHOOL UNTIL MIDDLE OR HIGH SCHOOL.**

Actually, one in 10 kindergarten and 1st grade students misses at least a month of school every year, national research shows. In New York City, one in five elementary students falls into this category—a figure that led Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg to launch pilot programs addressing the problem in 25 schools this fall. This can't be labeled truancy in the early grades, since most 5- and 6-year-olds don't stay home without a parent's knowledge. It's chronic absence. Unexcused absences become a bigger problem in secondary school. But the bad attendance habits that lead to skipping school can become entrenched in the early years.

### **2. ABSENCES IN THE EARLY GRADES DON'T REALLY AFFECT ACADEMICS.**

National research shows that chronically absent kindergartners demonstrated lower academic performance than their peers once

they got to 1st grade. For many low-income children, the poor performance persisted through 5th grade. A long-term study in Baltimore showed that many chronically absent 6th graders later dropped out of high school. In Chicago, poor attendance in 9th grade was a better predictor of dropping out than 8th grade test scores.

When too many students miss too much school, the classroom churn starts to affect the entire class, as teachers repeat material to help children catch up. When state funding is linked to attendance, these absences mean schools get less money.

### **3. MOST SCHOOLS ALREADY KNOW HOW MANY STUDENTS ARE CHRONICALLY ABSENT.**

In fact, most schools don't look at chronic-absence patterns. They measure schoolwide attendance—or they track truancy (unexcused absences). Neither figure captures all that's going on. For example, an elementary school of 400 students can have 95 percent of its students showing up every day and yet still have 60 children missing 18 days—or 10 percent of the school year.

Further analysis can find that these students are concentrated in neighborhoods with no school bus service, in chaotic classrooms with an inexperienced teacher, or in communities with high asthma rates. Often, chronic absence is tied to poverty—to families who have no reliable transportation, little access to health care, and unstable housing, or no home at all. Understanding these patterns can lead to solutions—if we crunch and examine the numbers.



#### **4. THERE'S NOT MUCH THAT SCHOOLS CAN DO TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE; IT'S UP TO THE PARENTS.**

While parents are certainly essential, schools partnering with community agencies can make a real difference when they work together. Some solutions are universal: educating parents and students about the importance of attendance and ensuring that every absence receives a response.

Other solutions reflect particular challenges. One Bronx school found that chronic absence increased because Muslim students stayed home during Ramadan, lest they be tempted to break their fasts in the cafeteria. So the school hired a monitor for the Muslim students and set up a separate lounge. A school in Providence, R.I., found that some absentee students had parents who worked overnight shifts, then fell asleep before bringing their kids in. The school opened an early-morning program with breakfast, so that parents could drop children off before going home to sleep.

Sometimes a child or a family needs special attention. Baltimore and Providence have programs to help with transportation for students who can't get to school, and to offer health services and counseling to families who need that support. In New York City, 15 homeless shelters will each have a point person paying attention to whether children there are making it to school.

At its most intractable, truancy is a matter for the courts. There are dedicated truancy officers and court programs that can reach students when schools and communities fail to turn around poor attendance. But it's generally quicker and much less costly to start with preventive measures and targeted solutions.

#### **5. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS NO ROLE IN REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENCE.**

While the best solutions are ultimately local, federal policymakers can help ensure schools are looking at the right attendance data. They can require reporting of chronic-absence rates, not just truancy. They can require states to add absences to longitudinal student databases. And they can assess school improvement not just by standardized-test scores, but by an array of measures, including chronic-absence rates. They can promote using federal grants to form school-community partnerships to reduce high levels of chronic absence.

Ultimately, it comes down to this: Students can't learn if they don't go to school. And schools can't improve if students don't show up for class regularly. The first step is discarding these old myths. ■

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