Addressing Absenteeism: Lessons for Policy and Practice

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Addressing student absenteeism continues to permeate education policy and practice. California and a majority of other states have incorporated "chronic absenteeism" as an accountability metric under the Every Student Succeeds Act. It is therefore a crucial time to take stock of what we know on the research, policy, and practice to better understand the measurement of student absenteeism and how to reduce it. To further this goal and spark a broader conversation about student attendance as a valuable policy lever, we wrote the first book centered on the issue of school absenteeism. This policy memo summarizes our multifaceted, multidisciplinary examination of what we have learned about how schools measure and reduce absenteeism and what we need to know going forward as California and other states hold schools and districts accountable for students' absences.

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Introduction

California and the nation are at the crossroads of a major shift in school accountability policy. At the state level, California's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) encourages the use of multiple measures of school performance used locally to support continuous improvement. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, reinforces these ideas, requiring more comprehensive assessment of school performance and a less prescriptive, local approach to school support. This approach of using multiple measures of school performance in accountability systems is a result of policymakers, and the public they serve, now recognizing that schools should be held accountable for more than just increased test scores. In addition to more traditional measures such as test scores and graduation rates, ESSA requires states to include a measure of "school quality or student success," which can include measures of student engagement, educator engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, post-secondary readiness, or school climate and safety.

California, like the majority of states, has opted to include student attendance/absences as a new school accountability metric. In December 2018, for the first time, California reported student absenteeism on the California School Dashboard, the state's school accountability measurement system. As discussed in a recent PACE brief, the addition of these measures has big implications for accountability and school improvement.[1] Now that chronic absenteeism is part of California's measurement system, leaders at all levels of the education system are in the process of trying to make sense of this new data and decide how to act on it. As a result, this is a crucial time to take stock of recent research on student attendance and identify how it can best support schools' and districts' efforts to reduce absenteeism. In pursuit of this goal and seeking to spark a broader conversation about attendance, we co-edited a book[2] centered on the issue of measuring and reducing school absenteeism. This brief highlights key issues around the importance of measuring chronic absenteeism, its effects on student achievement, and potential strategies for lowering the rates of student absenteeism.

Why Measure Chronic Absence?

California's decision to select student attendance as a measure of school performance is reasonable in light of a recent and growing body of research substantiating what most parents and teachers have long believed to be true: School truancy undermines the growth and development of our nation's students. Students with more school absences have lower test scores and grades,[3] greater chances of dropping out of high school,[4] and higher odds of future unemployment.[5] Absent students are also more likely to use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs,[6] and they exhibit greater behavioral issues, including social disengagement and alienation.[7] The most recent national estimates suggest that

approximately 5–7.5 million students, out of a K–12 population of approximately 50 million, are missing at least 1 cumulative month of school days in a given academic year, translating into an aggregate 150–225 million days of instruction lost annually.[8]

These absences not only decrease student achievement but also have significant financial implications for school districts across the country. Data from the California Attorney General's office states[9] that in the 2014–2015 school year alone, school absences cost California school districts $1 billion. In a three-year period, California school districts have lost a total of $4.5 billion due to absenteeism. Hence, high absence rates also have state finance implications.

The array of negative consequences—educational and financial—associated with student absenteeism is certainly a cause for concern. One silver lining of recognizing the relationship between chronic absenteeism and student achievement is that there has also been a steady accumulation of evidence that student attendance rates can be addressed through relatively low-cost interventions. In comparison to other research-based means of improving student achievement, such as reducing class sizes or increasing teacher training, improving student attendance may be a key method for improving educational outcomes for all students and one that is within reach of all schools and all districts.

Using Absenteeism for Accountability: What We Need to Know

The increase in concern over chronic absenteeism presents opportunities to improve the school experience of students all across the state. With that opportunity, however, also comes the potential for unintended consequences. A major lesson of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)-era accountability was that the setting of unrealistic goals led to a range of unintended, negative outcomes. The goal of universal proficiency under NCLB led to a general narrowing of curriculum towards tested subjects, a lowering of proficiency definitions in some states, and strategic gaming or outright cheating on accountability measures.[10] Overly ambitious attendance goals could result in similar behavior. If the consequences for chronic absenteeism are too strong, schools could game their metrics, for example, by marking students present when they are absent, which would make it difficult to track attendance for the purposes of helping students or improving school outcomes. Additionally, schools could encourage students to attend school on days when—for instance, because they are sick or have lice—they would be better off at home. In order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past and holding schools accountable for student attendance, policymakers need to ensure that we have (a) accurate data on student attendance, (b) a culture in which the measures are used not to punish but to drive improvement, and (c) the knowledge and capacity to reduce absences within schools and districts. The extent to which we possess these necessary prerequisites has—to date—remained largely unknown in California given the newness of the measures.

In fact, because the measurement of chronic absence in accountability systems is so new nationally, when we began the research for our book, there were many unresolved questions. With regards to the issue of attendance measures, there were no answers to these questions:

- As states begin holding schools accountable for absenteeism, what measurement issues might arise?
- Can we use absenteeism to successfully identify students at risk for educational failure?
- What are reasonable attendance goals for schools?
- Should these goals vary based on the grades and student populations served?
- What measurement pitfalls might arise, and how might they impact research and policymaking?

The issue at hand is that schools will need to collect reliable data of students' absences—data that can be used for both research and reform and to create targets and implement change.

On the issue of what can be done to reduce student absences and what kinds of resources are necessary to secure these reductions, there were many open questions:

- What current/ongoing school-specific settings and existing programs might be contributing to absence reduction?
- Is there evidence that absenteeism interventions are successful?
- Which of these factors can be characterized as scalable and replicable?
- What best practices and learning lessons emerge?

Though researchers had begun answering these questions in isolation, the sum total of these insights had rarely been collected and presented in a way that speaks to the now pressing policy question of how to address student absenteeism. In the book, summarized in this brief, our goal was to provide a summary of what programs and practices might be best to move the needle on absenteeism and, more importantly, which programs and practices are scalable and replicable.

Lessons Learned

Addressing absenteeism might be complex. Yet, throughout our research endeavor, we found promise that with the right absence metrics and interventions, schools and districts have the potential to take concrete steps to close attendance gaps. Based on the research, we identified three key lessons. These can be used to help policymakers and practitioners navigate how they attend to attendance.

Lesson 1: Measuring Absenteeism Seems Easy but Is Actually Complex

Underlying the measurement of absenteeism is the understanding that improving attendance will lead to improvements in student achievement and that missing school undermines achievement. California and other states have operationalized this concern by setting a specific threshold—missing 10 percent of the school year—for defining chronic absenteeism. Such a threshold is useful for communicating to families, educators, and the public the severity of missing too much school. Thresholds are also useful for helping the state and the public spot schools that need more help, scrutiny, and attention. But as useful as a defined cutoff can be, it can also be misleading if people think the negative effects of missing school either kick in just at the threshold or are especially severe once the threshold is crossed. As it turns out, there is no special relationship between the negative effects of student absences and the number of days of school missed. The effects of missed school are incremental, with each missed day having roughly the same "lost value" no matter which day of school was missed.[11] Additionally, attendance matters for all children: Whether they are low or high performing, the test-score decline of missing each day of school was the same. This provides an easy message to both policymakers and practitioners—every day counts, for every student.[12] There are good reasons for educators and families to be concerned about each day students—regardless of their achievement level—are absent from school even in cases where they are well below the threshold for being "chronically absent." In this way, even the metric of chronic absenteeism can mask broader issues of attendance.

Additionally, though the effects of missing a day of school may be relatively uniform, who misses school is not. We find tremendous variation in who is absent from school.[13] For instance, there is significant variation in attendance by race within California[14] and there is also significant variation by school, grade, and school type.[15] This suggests that ongoing efforts to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism have strong equity implications for California's students.

Therefore, though talk of chronic absentee thresholds may dominate accountability conversations, the story of who misses school and the effects of missed school are much more complex and nuanced. An overreliance on simple measurements will obscure key areas of risk if we fail to incorporate the variation in attendance rates that exists among our students. We know now that every school day matters for all students—and we should certainly emphasize this key message. Yet, from this, we need to espouse a nuanced examination of who's absent, and why.

Lesson 2: Schools Cannot Address Attendance Alone

Schools do not exist in a vacuum, nor do absences. In fact, we find that many factors affect going to school. For instance, whether a student gets a ride to school from

their parents or takes the bus to school affects the number of days a student is likely to be absent from school;[16] and whether a student has access to health services at school can also play a role in the rates of absenteeism.[17] The school climate and events surrounding the school can also affect rates of student attendance and, in turn, rates of chronic absenteeism. For instance, enforcement activities concerning immigration and deportation in communities may affect school-going rates.[18] Taken together, these findings point to the complexity in ensuring students attend school each and every day.

Despite this complexity and the sheer variety of factors related to rates of chronic absenteeism, there are still plenty of ways to bolster good attendance. Schools can begin by engaging administrators, teachers, and support staff.[19] Engaging everyone in the school building is crucial because neither teachers nor administrators can be expected to address the absenteeism crisis on their own. Instead, school leaders need to develop a firm organizational commitment from everyone in the building. Furthermore, an action plan cannot be mandated, as prior research has shown that mandated educational policies often fail or backfire when they are not vetted by all school personnel.[20] And in implementing programs and practices, schools need direct buy-in from their agents and actors.

In addition to drawing on the collective resources and expertise contained within the school, schools must also engage the community to create a network, a system of support to address chronic absenteeism. One potentially highly-effective way to achieve this involves schools directly engaging parents in students' absence reduction.[21] This can be done in a variety of ways including through the use of school–parent texting programs to ensure parents are aware when their children are absent from class and to ensure parents are aware of the negative consequences of missed school.[22]

Finally, there is also evidence that suggests schools can work with partners outside of the educational system, such as those offering legal supports to immigrant families, as a way to support families sending their children to school.[23] Evidence also suggests that schools can work with health (and insurance) partners as a way to boost attendance.[24] In each case, the school can play a role by enlisting various community actors in order to address absenteeism, whether they are parents or social or health service providers.

In sum, often the focus of absenteeism reduction places the onus on the student— why isn't the student more engaged, why are they ditching class, why are they showing up so late to class? The findings of our collective work in this book, however, suggest that schools do not necessarily need to focus on student-driven solutions to make an impact. Rather, schools can enlist various community players or engage from within in order to develop systems of support and plans of action to address and reduce absenteeism.

Lesson 3: Parents Are Key Players

A third and final lesson focuses on parents. While there is evidence on the positive effects of a range of programs and interventions, it was quite clear that the school–parent connection is critical. A first way to support this connection is through raising parental awareness of the importance of school attendance. As we described earlier, it is often the case that parents are unaware of the numerous consequences of missing school. Without key information about absenteeism coming from school and going home to families, there may be even higher risks of students engaging in this behavior. For instance, kindergartners often have some of the highest rates of absenteeism and their attendance is often wholly reliant on parents getting them to school or to the bus stop. Thus, a first-stage learning lesson is that parents need more information, and schools can be an excellent channel for providing this.

However, providing information and statistics alone will not be sufficient. What is important is for schools to provide tools and tips to parents. For instance, we find when schools texted parents about ways to get their children to school, they saw improvement in attendance rates.[25] It was not simply giving information to parents that helped but rather providing specific actions they could take to improve their student's attendance.

Finally, and related, the way schools and districts communicate with parents is important. As our book explains, texting seemed to have been an effective way to address absenteeism for two reasons. First, texting is a ubiquitous practice. Second, texting is a low-cost practice that can be used in real time. Together, these two aspects highlight that a successful school–parent intervention is both replicable and scalable. Third, texting is contemporary. Interventions that have the potential to be the most efficacious to invoke a change in attitudes and behavior seem do so in a way that feels very "now."

The promising programs and interventions for addressing absenteeism are still new. Therefore, it is difficult to say there is a surefire way to reduce school absenteeism. However, based on the new research in this book, we propose that attendance interventions that focus on school–parent partnerships might be particularly salient.

Implications

Overall, there is a lot of both inertia and excitement around addressing absenteeism. The way that absences and attendance are measured (and for whom) and the way that programs and interventions are structured carry a significant amount of

potential to impact policy, practice, and scholarship. To conclude, we discuss the steps that people in each group of actors might take towards understanding, addressing, and reducing students' absences.

Policymakers

Like many states, California loses billions of dollars each year as a result of students missing school[26]. Therefore, it is important to collect absenteeism data correctly, such that each state can identify problem areas and send appropriate supports and resources. States such as California also should be interested in finding ways to reduce absenteeism that are scalable and replicable. As discussed above, our book provides a starting point for such approaches. Policy and state-level structures play a critical role in creating and distributing good data as well as curating and spreading knowledge about absence-reduction programs that take into account the cost of infrastructure and human resources.

Practitioners

Schools cannot solve the absence problem alone, nor should they be expected to do so. Our research finds that schools must partner with community players—social, health, immigration, and legal services—in order to find ways to address absenteeism. Schools must also partner with parents. Parental attendance awareness and support programs have potential to be powerful, and schools can leverage this partnership in numerous ways to address absenteeism. Because making these connections can be costly and time consuming, districts can find economies of scale by developing and facilitating these relationships locally.

Researchers

California has a rich research community in education policy. Our book should spark further dialogue about measurement and program evaluation. Addressing absenteeism is a relatively new area of scholarship. This yields an exciting opportunity to further explore an under-researched area using both quantitative and qualitative rigor. As schools and districts try new methods to address absenteeism, they need to know whether these interventions worked, and whether they were cost-effective. Researchers can help with this evaluation effort and can spread this evidence to the field at large. Exploring these opportunities will provide feedback to policy and practice with implications for student success when it comes to addressing absenteeism.

Endnotes

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