

Introduction

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REDUCING INEQUALITY and improving academic achievement has been an explicit goal of state and federal policy for more than half a century. While public attention has been directed at policies ranging from financial expenditures and academic standards to teacher training and class size reduction, these issues have often come with a hefty price tag. Improving curricular quality has been of particular interest given the rise of the modern standards and accountability movement. Implementing America's Choice in Rochester, New York, for instance, cost \$90,000 for every thirty teachers, and that is before including additional classroom expenses.¹ While potentially effective, these programs are expensive and complex, and so the prospect of using them to close the achievement gap becomes remote: the schools that need them the most are the least likely to be able to afford them or implement them effectively over the long term.

As a contrast to these complex interventions, research is finding a far simpler means of closing educational gaps: boosting student attendance. Unlike classroom-based reforms that require procuring new materials, securing teacher buy-in, and adapting instructional practice, efforts to improve

school attendance seek a much more concrete outcome and possess a much simpler (if not simplistic) theory of improvement. This theory was succinctly explained to us by a teacher in a large urban school district who said that “students who miss school are ‘ABT’—ain’t been taught.”² In other words, scholars, reformers, and policy makers can dream up the most effective educational programs or ways to improve teacher quality, but if the students are not in their seats, what’s the point?

Right now we are at a juncture in our nation’s history where addressing absenteeism is critically important. Indeed, addressing absenteeism has recently become a matter of interest to federal, state, and local lawmakers and advocates. In late 2015, the Obama administration released *Every Student, Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism*, whose goals were to better monitor attendance data and to reduce chronic absenteeism. The initiative did not solely reflect the priorities of educational stakeholders. Rather, it represented a joint partnership between the White House and the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice. Addressing school absenteeism also extends beyond the federal level. State policy agencies, including the California attorney general’s office under (now Senator) Kamala Harris, had also been invested in reducing absenteeism in recent years. And community-based organizations, such as Attendance Works, have also been involved in understanding and preventing who is absent and why.

Perhaps even more consequentially, the flexibility within the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) had led many states to develop new ways to define and measure school quality. And while, as expected, many indicators of school accountability in ESSA focus on test scores, states are also now incorporating a measure of school-level chronic absenteeism as an indicator of performance. As of the start of 2018, thirty-six states and the District of Columbia had approved ESSA plans to use an absenteeism metric in their accountability rubrics.

This newfound interest in absenteeism is not without justification. Large-scale data collection, as well as more rigorous empirical techniques, have shown that missing school stunts the academic growth and cripples the development of our nation’s students. Research also shows that absenteeism is more prevalent among students from students in our most under-resourced schools; children living in poverty are four times more likely to be chronically absent as compared to their more advantaged peers.³

The consequences of missing school are dire. Students with more school absences have lower test scores and grades, greater risk of dropping out of high school, and higher odds of future unemployment. Absent students are also more likely to use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, and they exhibit greater behavioral issues, including social disengagement and alienation. 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 30 school days in a given academic year, translating into an aggregate 150–225 million days of instruction lost annually.⁴ Also, a fifth of our nation’s schools report that one-fifth of their students are missing 10 percent or more of the school year—an amount that would label them as chronically absent.⁵ Truancy also exerts a financial strain on our schooling systems. Data from the California attorney general’s office states that in the 2014–15 school year alone, absences cost California school districts \$1 billion; and in the past four years, California school districts have lost a total of \$4.5 billion due to absenteeism.⁶ Hence, high absence rates have school finance implications. The “absenteeism crisis,” a phrase often utilized by Kamala Harris, affects all corners of the country.

But while this research provides compelling evidence for trying to improve attendance rates for all children, incorporating attendance metrics into state accountability plans as part of ESSA is no simple matter. The idea that states should hold individual schools accountable for chronic absenteeism relies on two assumptions: that states/researchers can develop useful measures of tracking and assessing chronic absenteeism and that schools have the means and capacity to affect absenteeism. Around the first assumption there are many lingering questions: Can we use absenteeism to successfully identify students at risk for educational failure? What unsettled questions remain in the definition and application of “chronic absenteeism” measures? What lurking measurement measures are likely to arise as we move measures of absenteeism from descriptive statistics to the subject of accountability efforts? How should these issues shape future research and policymaking on measures of chronic absenteeism? The second assumption prompts different questions: What current/ongoing school-specific settings and existing programs could contribute to absence reduction? Is there evidence that absenteeism interventions are successful? How replicable and scalable are these interventions or ongoing practices? What best practices and learning lessons emerge?

Given these lingering questions, and given states’ charges to hold schools accountable for missing students, it is important to take stock of what we know

about the research, policy, and practice regarding absenteeism so that we might best support the efforts to reduce absences. This book is part of that effort.

To help facilitate a broader, more substantive conversation about the use of attendance policies and measures as mechanisms for addressing inequalities, we have assembled some of the experts in this field to produce a volume dedicated solely to the issue of school absenteeism. *Absent from School* presents a unique, multifaceted, multidisciplinary examination of what we have learned about how schools measure and reduce absenteeism and what we need to know going forward as policy charges that schools be held accountable for students' absences. The book's chapters take a critical look at numerous school structures and programs, exploring their links to address aspects of absenteeism and to ask what we can learn from ongoing efforts and what issues demand our further attention and exploration. The book also addresses measurement issues in absenteeism and how understanding the nuances of absenteeism is important as we move forward. Representing a multitude of disciplines and methodological approaches and geographic regions, the contributing authors provide a first critical, systematic look at our nation's current absenteeism crisis.

With the goal of preparing the way for a substantive, fruitful debate about chronic absenteeism, it is necessary first to clear away some of the existing underbrush that prevents new ideas from taking root. To that end, we address at the outset several myths about absenteeism and how the chapters in this book look beyond these misconceptions and disrupt our thinking about the causes, consequences, and possible means of redressing the effects of absenteeism.

MYTH 1: Measuring (and Worrying About) Missing School Is New

School reform ideas move in cycles. Ideas that were once considered state of the art eventually come to be seen as faddish or old-fashioned and fall out of favor before being rediscovered decades later as the newest solution to our education ills.⁷ Concerns around absenteeism are no different. While the flexibility provided by ESSA has increased interest in absentee policies, it is hardly the first time that it has been a matter of public interest and policy makers' concern.

For most of the first century of public schooling in America—from the common school to the Progressive Era—measuring attendance was a major concern of school administrators and reformers.⁸ Then, as now, measuring attendance was a key part of state calculations of school funding. But attendance records meant much more than that. Schools' average daily attendance (school records in those days were almost always collected and reported in aggregate) was seen to reflect a combination of the potency of its moral suasion, holding power, and administrative efficiency. Low attendance rates were understood to pose a high risk to communities in the form of high rates of child labor, incorrigibility, and, many assumed, poverty and crime. As the purposes of schooling grew beyond moral instruction and the three Rs to include the provision of a variety of social and vocational services, reformers spoke of the issue posed by irregular attendance in more alarmed tones. The passage of compulsory school laws in the late nineteenth century, along with the increasingly large attendance divisions and increasingly professionalized truancy officers, underscored the increasing concern with the student attendance. So, too, did the common practice of publishing league tables of school districts' average daily attendance: rates in the high 80s were applauded, rates below 80 were met with admonishment, and rates above 90 were treated with suspicion.⁹

While concern for student attendance rates was universal, views on how best to track and monitor it were not. Efforts to use rates of attendance to hold teachers, principals, and school administrators accountable for school performance were repeatedly undermined by the lack of agreement on basic definitions of truancy or methods of calculating average daily attendance.¹⁰ In an era when students were mobile, school records were paper, and record-sharing capacities were limited, how schools counted the absences of students presumed to have transferred could have very large effects on attendance data. For instance, one common practice was to drop students from school rosters after a week of absences and retroactively drop the absences accrued during that period, a practice that led a district to report perfect attendance during an outbreak of the flu even though half the students were home sick.¹¹ While this account might well be apocryphal, it nevertheless served to communicate reformers' pervasive concern that districts were seizing every possible opportunity to burnish their statistics and avoid public scorn.

Today, as school attendance records once again move into the public spotlight, we should expect the return of all manner of efforts—some undertaken

in good faith (e.g., varied definitions of chronic absenteeism) and others not—to interpret state rules and guidance in a way that is most beneficial to individual schools and school districts.¹² The decision of many states to increase attention on absenteeism beyond No Child Left Behind’s (NCLB) reporting of average daily attendance is a potentially impactful one. But subsequent developments must be viewed in light of both the long history of efforts to define and evade attendance measures and the existing baseline of attendance data. Drawing on data from California’s CORE districts, Heather Hough’s and Kevin Gee’s chapters in this volume offer insights on who chronically absent students are, how concentrated they are in schools, and how chronic absenteeism is associated with other academic and nonacademic risk factors. As the statistics, policies, and debates over chronic absenteeism inevitably evolve in response to newly adopted reporting requirements, Hough’s and Gee’s analyses provide an indispensable account of where we are and what we know about the current state of chronic absenteeism.

MYTH 2: Measuring Absenteeism Is a Straightforward Process

It is certainly true that in order to monitor absences and identify whether efforts to improve attendance are working, schools, districts, and states need access to data—on a regular basis. At the moment, however, the way states and districts collect and measure attendance data varies dramatically. As one example, absences are often delineated into “excused” and “unexcused,” with the former generally falling into the “doctor’s note” category and the latter being reasons a school finds unacceptable, such as missing school for recreational or extracurricular activities.¹³ The result is measurement complexity concerning merely the *type* of absence a student has incurred. Making matters even more complicated, Hancock, Gottfried, and Zubrick show that absences can also be delineated into student- or parent-level reasons.¹⁴ In other words, there is no set rubric for the type of information schools collect about types of absenteeism.

In recent years, the effort to establish cutoffs for measures like “chronically absent” has made matters slightly less complex in certain regards. Generally, “chronically absent” has been defined as missing 10 percent of the school year, regardless of the reason for absence. But, definitions of chronic absence can also vary. Work by Gottfried has tested for the effects of two or more weeks as “moderate” chronic absences and three or more weeks as “strong” chronic

absence.¹⁵ Jordan and Miller present a completely different rubric from the Office of Civil Rights: 0–5 percent of the school year is “low” chronic absence, 5–9 percent is “modest,” 10–19 percent is “significant,” 20–29 percent is “high,” and 30 percent or more is “extreme.” States also vary in their ESSA plans’ definitions of chronic absence: for example, Alabama uses fifteen or more days, Colorado 10 percent of the school year, and Montana 5 percent of the school year.¹⁶ Thus, even attempts to develop simplifying heuristics have propagated complexity.

The United States will likely see a surge in the collection and analysis of chronic absence data as states develop their plans for accountability under ESSA. In doing so, schools will need to collect the right information, which can then be used for research and school improvement efforts. However, without more definitive answers regarding absences metrics and how they impact students’ outcomes, there may be unwanted variation in the collection, measurement, and analysis of chronic absence data.¹⁷ Several chapters examine dimensions of these measurement issues in greater depth. Shaun Dougherty and Joshua Childs explore the implications of absences being quite unlike test scores in that absences are not normally distributed—that is, many students have zero absences. Kevin Gee examines whether we can detect where variation exists in student absences given that students are nested within classrooms and within schools. And Seth Gershenson, Jessica Rae McBean, and Long Tran explore the analysis of the effects of student absences on achievement, considering different modeling schematics to test for these impacts.

MYTH 3: To Solve Chronic Absenteeism, We Just Need to Focus on Teens Ditching Class

Contrary to what many believe, missing school begins very early. Ehrlich and colleagues found that in Chicago, almost half of three-year-olds and a third of four-year-olds were missing 10 percent of the preschool year.¹⁸ Chang and Davis showed that in any given year, 10 percent of all kindergartners and first graders in the US are missing at least 10 percent of the school year.¹⁹ Further, 14 percent of all US kindergartners were “at-risk” absentees, meaning they missed only one to six days fewer than the number that would have classified them as chronic absentees.²⁰ In sum, among children just starting out in formal education, one-quarter of our nation’s students are chronically absent or just shy of being classified as such.

Research specifically around absenteeism in early education has found negative effects of such behavior on school outcomes, thereby highlighting that missing school is an issue that starts early and has immediate negative impacts. Ehrlich, Gwynne, and Allensworth found that preschoolers who missed more school were less prepared to attend kindergarten both academically and socioemotionally.²¹ Chang and Romero linked absenteeism in kindergarten to lower first-grade academic performance.²² Connolly and Olson linked early absenteeism in kindergarten to lower achievement, grade retention, and future chronic absenteeism.²³ Ehrlich and colleagues also showed that preschoolers who were chronically absent were much more likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten, and Gottfried linked absenteeism in kindergarten to lower academic achievement and socioemotional development at the end of that year.²⁴

This is not to say that absenteeism is not also a problem as children become older—it is. Balfanz and Byrnes show that chronic absence rates in kindergarten are equivalent to those at the end of middle school and beginning of high school (there is a slight drop in late elementary school).²⁵ Therefore, this dire situation regarding absenteeism throughout preK–12 presents an opportunity for prevention at the very onset of schooling *as well as* in later years of education. By addressing absenteeism at numerous points in students' schooling careers, we can help students and schools develop positive habits and strategies around attendance for students at various life stages. Unique to this book, the chapter by Stacy Ehrlich and David Johnson focuses on addressing absenteeism at two major life points for students: prekindergarten and ninth grade. As described by the authors, both times represent major educational transitions, and both periods deserve equal attention and weight when considering how to combat missing school.

MYTH 4: The Ways Schools Can Reduce Absences Are Straightforward

As with so many things in education, what we wish were easy, straightforward, and monocausal turns out to be difficult, complex, and multicausal. First and foremost, students come through the school's front doors faced with numerous risk factors that are linked to more absences, ranging from lower socioeconomic status (SES) to social stress to disabilities.²⁶ Second, and often intertwined with SES, individual race moderates rates of absenteeism

with students from underrepresented minority backgrounds cited as being absent more often.²⁷ And finally, health, having a cold or flu or any other illness, impacts school absenteeism.²⁸ To make matters more complex, it is not necessarily well understood why many individual factors of risk contribute to school absences.²⁹ Even when we can identify a set of factors we think are important for driving up absenteeism, the relationships among those factors are intricate and complex and can be among the factors themselves.³⁰

The focus on individual risk factors is certainly critical, and there are many factors beyond a school's control. They help to identify children and families that require the most support in order to be successful in school. But identifying these factors may not directly lead to devising actionable items or levers for schools and policy makers. For instance, knowing how SES interplays with absenteeism is certainly important to document and address in order to reduce absenteeism gaps, but establishing this relationship on its own does not provide insight into what policy makers and school leaders can do to intervene. That said, Ehrlich and colleagues offer a three-pronged taxonomy for how schools might be able to play a role in reducing absenteeism by focusing on student health, school-going logistics, and school culture.³¹ This taxonomy is useful in considering where schools can help to address absenteeism.

Around health, schools have traditionally addressed student illness and its link to absenteeism through their nurses.³² Yet little work has explored beyond other ways schools can address student health in order to lower absenteeism. In their chapter, Jennifer Graves, Sarit Weisburd, and Christopher Salem explore whether schools can expand their capacity to address student health, looking at whether school-based health centers can play a role in reducing acute and chronic illnesses and thereby lower absenteeism. The role of the school is actionable: if schools can offer services that promote good health and address illness on campus, this can be a way for schools to take action to reduce absences.

Regarding logistics, students and their families can have difficulty setting routines and schedules around getting to school.³³ Failing to address issues such as transportation, packing lunches, and leaving the house does not instill good school-going behavior.³⁴ In their chapter, Sarah Cordes, Michele Leardo, Christopher Rick, and Amy Ellen Schwartz examine whether taking the school bus can help families better address such logistical issues. Schools offering busing is a straightforward policy lever: if a bus provides a reliable, cost-effective way for children to get school, then schools offering access to

busing each and every day can promote school attendance.³⁵ This is another actionable way for schools to intervene in the attendance crisis.

Finally, we are at an important juncture in determining if school climate itself might exacerbate student absenteeism. For instance, Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj and Jacob Kirksey's chapter examines how the school's interplay with immigration enforcement activities can impact absenteeism for first- and second-generation immigrant-origin children. In their chapter, Kaitlin Andersen, Anna Egalite, and Jonathan Mills address the role of school disciplinary action programs and implementation and their effect on absenteeism and suggest that a shift in culture around at-risk students can influence school-going behavior. Stacy Ehrlich and David Johnson also examine school culture, looking at whether a school culture of data use links to higher or lower student absenteeism.

MYTH 5: Parents Understand That Missing School Is Bad

Too many parents are either unaware of or underestimate their child's absences.³⁶ This may be more true for low-SES families, where there is often less parental engagement and awareness.³⁷ However, when it comes to understanding the role of parents with regards to absenteeism, most research has been limited to studying family contextual factors or processes, such as family structure, father's occupation, mother's work status, and poverty status. Less is known about what parent-focused interventions might influence school attendance for our youngest schoolchildren.

What we do know is that high rates of absenteeism in elementary school are indicative of parents being absent from, unaware of, or uninvolved in their children's schooling.³⁸ Therefore, if patterns of absences serve as signals of family home environments, then it is possible that parents of children with high rates of absenteeism may be less involved in their children's schooling or less aware of the need for them to attend school regularly.³⁹ That is, parents of truant students may not be involved in their child's daily schooling and may not understand the negative consequences during early school years; they may believe that their children will catch up or that attendance in school is only important in later years.

The educational benefits of programs that improve the relationship between parents and schools, particularly for low-SES families, have been well documented.⁴⁰ Therefore, in determining how to allocate resources

to reduce absenteeism, one potential way of reducing absenteeism may be through parent education and awareness interventions. In fact, for low-SES families, interventions mediated through parents have the potential to be more successful than purely school-based approaches. This is true because schools continue to make unrealistic demands on parents (e.g., mandatory volunteer hours at charter schools) without taking into account the daily constraints that low-SES families face.⁴¹

Chapters in this volume explore whether straightforward and easily scalable interventions can increase parental engagement and reduce absenteeism rates for families. Ken Smythe-Leistico and Lindsay Page focus on the role that text messages might play in the links between parent, student, and school, specifically for families in early education. Martha Mac Iver and Steven Sheldon examine an intervention that engages parents of students transitioning from eighth to ninth grades in better understanding the implications of good attendance. Finally, Rekha Balu's chapter takes a macro-level approach and synthesizes learning lessons from several parental engagement interventions.

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When considering these issues, a multifaced, interdisciplinary focus on determining what drives absenteeism and how to measure it is justified. Being absent from school impacts academic performance, among other consequences.⁴² In this book, we look to whether and how schools can impact and reduce absences to stop this damaging behavior in its tracks. There is growing evidence that reducing absences can improve student performance. The field generally agrees that one standard deviation reduction in absences can improve test scores by up to 0.10 standard deviations.⁴³ The importance of this comes into perspective when we consider the decades of time we've spent on improving test scores by other means. Schanzenbach reported that reducing class size from 22–25 to 13–17 students was associated with 0.15–0.20 standard deviations improvement in test scores.⁴⁴ And others have found the effect sizes of attendance to be similar in magnitude to one-third the effect of one standard deviation increase in teacher effectiveness.⁴⁵

There is potential for absenteeism reduction to improve student achievement. But unlike many other school interventions, such as class size reduction or teacher quality improvement, there is potential for absenteeism reduction efforts to be replicable, scalable, and potentially more cost-effective than those programs that rely entirely on changes to or the increase of both capital

and labor. In *Absent from School* we identify how these efforts and programs may reduce engaging in and the effects of such damaging behavior. This will allow researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and community members to consider how to develop scalable programs to reduce absenteeism. This first book on absenteeism should engage multiple stakeholders in considering how to more efficiently channel funds and resources in ways that reduce this high-risk schooling behavior, thereby boosting educational possibilities for all.