

New Research Finds a Crucial Factor in Reducing Chronic Absenteeism



By Caitlynn Peetz — October 23, 2023

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Schools fighting a surge in chronically absent students may find success if they focus on strengthening the bonds they have with parents. And schools that had the strongest ties with families before the recent rise in chronic absenteeism are less likely to be experiencing those high absence levels today.

Those are some of the findings from a new study conducted by the organizations Learning Heroes and TNTP, in partnership with scholars Karen Mapp and Todd Rogers from

Harvard's Graduate School of Education and Kennedy School of Government, respectively.

While schools across the country have seen an increase in chronic absenteeism following extended school closures in 2020, the researchers found that schools that had high levels of family engagement before pandemic shutdowns have seen significantly lower rates of chronic absenteeism.

Schools with stronger, preexisting family engagement—measured in surveys that assessed trust between parents and teachers, parent involvement in schools, and parents' influence over schools' decisionmaking—had chronic absenteeism rates after remote learning that were about 6 percentage points lower than similar schools with weaker family engagement.

“Effectively, what we found is that family engagement is a really critical piece of the puzzle,” said Eyal Bergman, senior vice president of Learning Heroes, a nonprofit focused on ensuring parents have accurate information about students' academic progress.

The findings build on an already robust base of research showing that parents' involvement with their children's education—through participation in parent-teacher conferences, attendance at school-sponsored events, and at-home discussions about what their children are learning—leads to improved academic outcomes, and that the benefits apply regardless of students' race and socioeconomic status. As schools work to cut down on student absences, some have already found success in stepping up their connections with families in an effort to better understand why students have been staying home from school, rather than taking a more punitive approach.

While the researchers found benefits for schools that already had robust family engagement, all hope is not lost for schools that had lower levels of family engagement prior to 2020, the study found. While much of the study focuses on pre-pandemic family engagement and post-pandemic outcomes, researchers also analyzed the effect of family engagement on chronic absenteeism between 2018 and 2019.

The effect was about half as big when comparing the school years before the pandemic, but Bergman said that's still a sizable impact. And he anticipates the pre-pandemic impact to more closely mirror the effect schools could see from cultivating more robust family engagement in the years to come, “given the challenges we're seeing today.”

“What this data reveal is that there are ways to mitigate [chronic absenteeism],” Bergman said. “Schools that actually have invested in building strong family engagement are seeing

improvements in their chronic absenteeism. This data actually gives us an answer about what to do about it.”

The findings come from the first phase of a three-part project the researchers are undertaking. The first phase was a quantitative analysis of more than 3,000 schools in Illinois. The state was chosen because it has been found to be the most representative of the diversity of race, income, age, religion, and education in the United States.

The researchers determined a school’s level of family engagement using their “involved families” score from the 5Essentials survey—a survey that teachers across Illinois as well as students in 4th through 12th grades take annually. The survey, developed by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, also includes an optional parent component and measures five areas linked to school success: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction. The “involved families” section of the survey measures parent influence on decisionmaking in schools, parent involvement in schools, and trust between parents and teachers.

The researchers relied on results from the teacher portion of the survey, Bergman said.

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Eyal Bergman, senior vice president, Learning Heroes

The researchers used statistical modeling to look at schools that scored in the 10th percentile (high family engagement) and those that scored in the 90th percentile (low engagement) on the survey, and controlled for other factors that may affect student outcomes, such as poverty rates.

The biggest takeaway from their work, Bergman said, is that schools with strong engagement had a 39 percent smaller increase in students’ chronic absenteeism between 2019 and 2022—a period when schools nationwide were experiencing a rise in chronic absenteeism, which is when students miss 10 percent or more of the academic year—than

schools with weaker engagement. Schools with stronger family engagement had student attendance rates that were 25 percent better.

The findings were consistent regardless of school size, grade level, and poverty rate, Bergman said. The researchers also found that the results were consistent regardless of how long schools were closed for in-person learning at the height of the pandemic.

The proportion of students attending schools with “high” or “extreme” rates of chronic absenteeism rose from 26 percent in the 2017-18 school year to 66 percent during the 2021-22 school year, according to a recent analysis of federal data by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and Attendance Works.

Research has consistently shown that attendance is crucial to academic success, so much so that some districts have taken steps to add learning time by lengthening the school day or academic year, or adding more summer, evening, and weekend learning options to accelerate students’ academic recovery.

There’s evidence, too, that parent engagement leads to better test scores on Illinois state standardized assessments, according to the new research. Not only were students in schools with stronger family engagement more likely to take state tests, but they performed 27 percent better in English and 37 percent better in math, on average.

In the second phase of their project, the researchers will aim to complete a qualitative analysis of a selection of schools that performed well and poorly in the initial, quantitative phase to determine what, specifically, they have done to boost family engagement, Bergman said.

Then, in the third phase of the project, the group plans to design and test a tool aimed at helping schools measure family engagement and how successful they’ve been in promoting it, Bergman said.