

How Much Does Missing School Matter for Young Children?

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This week we are hearing from the [Madison Education Partnership](#) (MEP, [@MEP_WCER](#)). This post is by Eric Grodsky, MEP Co-Director and Professor of Sociology & Educational Policy Studies at [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) ([@UWMadison](#))

Today's post is written from the researcher perspective. Stay tuned: Thursday we will share the practitioner's perspective on this research.

Why this Research

As for many districts around the country, attendance is a high priority for the [Madison Metropolitan School District](#) (MMSD). With MMSD already invested in work to increase attendance and having added attendance as part of its accountability metrics, the [Madison Education Partnership](#) set out to better



understand how much missing school mattered for the academic progress of MMSD students.

What the Research Examines

We examined the associations between absenteeism and academic and socioemotional outcomes for MMSD students in Kindergarten through third grade. Our [final report](#) differentiates between excused and unexcused absences. We looked at all K-3 students who were enrolled in an MMSD elementary school for 175 or more days of the school year (about 90% of students) from 2012-2013 through 2016-2017 school years, a total of 18,053 students. Because we observed most of the students in at least two years or more, our research included a total of 39,934 observations of students in all years of the data.

When we first started our work, I expected that we would find that attendance contributed to lower rates of achievement growth and helped account for some of the inequalities in learning between our district's more and less economically advantaged students (the latter are very disproportionately African American). I anticipated that, after establishing these empirical patterns, we would go on to review some of the interventions that have been relatively successful in increasing attendance among students who miss a lot of school and then estimate the extent to which inequalities in learning would decline if we implemented those interventions in Madison, assuming the effects were similar to those in previous studies. I wasn't thinking about differences

between excused and unexcused absences (these are early elementary students!) and was not even aware that the district made that distinction. Then we got data, and that made everything much more interesting, or ruined it, depending on your perspective.

What the Research Finds

Our assumption coming in to this study was that attendance impacted students' opportunities to learn by reducing their time in the classroom. If this were true, we reasoned, the association between days missed and learning would 1) be about the same for excused and unexcused absences and 2) increase as the number of absences grew (and it got harder and harder for kids to catch up to their classmates).

Instead, we found that unexcused absences had a much stronger association with achievement growth than excused absences. In fact, having even one unexcused absence was much more predictive of negative academic and socioemotional outcomes than having 18 excused absences. And that first absence was a killer — absences above three days had much more modest associations with learning than those first critical days. Students from low-income families, African American students, Latinx students, and students with parents whose education stopped at high school were more likely to have unexcused absences than other students. Finally we found that background characteristics of students accounted for most of the observed association between attendance and achievement growth: unexcused absences, in particular, appear to signal other challenges students may face, rather than being a cause of inequalities in academic achievement.

We estimated that equalizing rates of attendance among students in the district would reduce black-white disparities by at most around 10% (in third grade math grades) and at a minimum not at all (in third grade ELA test scores).

Implications for Practice

From a research perspective, all this is really, really interesting. Who doesn't like a finding that runs contrary to the consensus? It's not attendance that matters! It's differences among kids and families that do and do not have unexcused absences that drives the relationship! This implies that holding schools accountable for attendance means holding them accountable for the socioeconomic and demographic composition of the children and families they serve. We probably shouldn't do that. It also implies that a campaign to reduce unexcused absences would do more to extinguish a signal of other challenges families confront than it would to improve students' grades or test scores. Of the descriptive reports MEP has produced thus far, this is probably the most interesting and most likely to lead to a peer-reviewed publication. That's good for the research half of the partnership, but the benefits to the practice part of the partnership on this one are less clear. On Thursday, Beth Vaade will outline how the district responded to these surprising findings.