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Student Absenteeism: Three New Studies to Know

By Sarah D. Sparks on [May 8, 2017 1:42 PM](#)



For improving achievement, boosting student attendance seems like the lowest of the the low-hanging fruit: If you can't get the kids to school, nothing else you do matters. But new research on chronic absenteeism reveals surprising details can make a difference in whether students make it to class.

The [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) has spurred more action on chronic absenteeism by requiring states to report chronic absentee rates and allowing districts to use it as another indicator for school accountability. Nearly all of the [states that have submitted ESSA plans have included chronic absenteeism](#) in their new accountability systems.

That, in turn, is spurring new research on the topic.

"I think that within absenteeism, a lot of the focus has been on documenting who's absent and leaving it there—we know high-poverty schools, boys, kindergartners, all have higher absenteeism," said Michael Gottfried, an associate professor of education policy at the University of California Santa Barbara.

"Those are really important to know, but knowing it doesn't really move anything forward to solve the problem," he said. "Looking at schools and structures and programs is a really good way to look at absenteeism, rather than just looking at families. If we are going to start to hold schools accountable for absenteeism, we must think that schools can do something about it. "

Here are a few studies states might want to consider as they work to improve attendance.

The (Bus) Route to Better Attendance

Kindergartners tie with high schoolers for the highest chronic absenteeism rates, but bringing in the big yellow school bus could help, according to one study released last month in the journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

Gottfried and his colleagues used federal longitudinal data to track attendance for more than 14,000 kindergartners in the 2010-11 school year and compared how they each got to school, including being driven by their parents, riding the bus or public transportation, walking, or biking.

While more than half of the students were driven to school by parents or other adults, 30 percent took the school bus, researchers found—and the children who did missed fewer days and were 2 percentage points less likely to be chronically absent by the spring semester than students who got to school any other way. That included students who took public transportation, such as city buses or subways.

The commute time to school didn't seem to make a difference in whether students attended regularly, but parents' work habits did: When both parents worked full-time, children were less likely to miss school. Children who had older siblings at the same school were also more likely to attend, researchers found.

"It comes down to logistics and routines," Gottfried said. "The school bus is an easy lever. If the bus comes every day at 7 o'clock, you [as a parent] are more likely to get your kid ready to get on that bus" than if the parents had to drive or walk the child themselves.

The findings come as more districts cut back on bussing to save money, and Gottfried suggested that administrators who need to change their transportation should plan ways to recreate the "bus affect" for students who would no longer take the bus. That might mean helping parents sign up for a "walking bus" or "biking bus," in which parents take turns leading groups of students to school.

Gottfried's study did not dig into how individual bus routes affected students' attendance, but the Institute of Education Sciences has just launched a new research study, headed by Amy Ellen Schwartz, an economics and public administration professor at Syracuse University, to http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2017/05/the_bus_route_to_fewer_student.html?cmp=eml-enl-eu-news2&print=1

dig into how bus commutes in New York City affect students' attendance and choice of schools.

Little Absences Add Up

In secondary school, **skipping class can often fly under the radar of administrators calculating chronic absenteeism**, but all those hours add up, finds a new study in the journal AERA Open.

Researchers Camille Whitney of Mindful Schools and Jing Liu of Stanford University tracked class-by-class attendance for more than 50,000 middle and high school students in an urban district from 2007-08 to 2012-13. They found that missing individual classes accounted for as many total missed days as full-day absences—added all up, the chronic absenteeism rate rose from 9 percent to 24 percent of the district's secondary students.

"If you are just looking at full-day absences, you are not capturing all of the students who are at risk," Whitney said.

Moreover, while more than half of the district's full-day absences were excused—including extracurricular trips, for example—more than 9 in 10 of the partial absences were not excused.

"Students are choosing their subjects. They do attend their core classes [reading and math] at a higher rate than their noncore classes," Whitney said, "but it is paralleling which classes they like the most. They miss social studies classes the least, math classes the most."

The first and last periods of the day were those most likely to be skipped, with 4 percent to 5 percent of classes gone during those times. Like Gottfried, Whitney said this pattern may point to students having trouble getting to and from school, and she said it suggests administrators may be able to mitigate the effects of skipping class by scheduling study halls or advisory periods to bookend critical classes.

You can see more about the study from Liu below:

Getting an Early Warning

Chronic absenteeism—missing 10 percent or more of the available school days—has been found to **predict students' later grades** and the likelihood of dropping out of school. One new study by the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest suggests **early-warning systems can help school officials catch students who start to miss early in the year** before they fully go off track.

Researchers randomly assigned 73 high schools in three Midwest states (representing more than 37,000 students) to either continue their normal identification and supports for students at risk of not graduating on time, or to use the Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System, a seven-step data tool that tracks absences and other indicators for each student.

The study found that schools that implemented the early-warning system over the 2014-15 school year had significantly fewer students who

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The study found that schools that implemented the early warning system over the 2014-15 school year had significantly fewer students who were chronically absent than did control schools, 10 percent versus 14 percent. Moreover, overall grade-point averages were higher at the schools using early-warning systems, and significantly fewer students in those schools failed one or more classes than the students in the control-group schools, 21 percent versus 26 percent.

The study found no difference in students' suspension rates at schools that used early-warning systems, but the results still provide early evidence in favor of using warning systems to curtail student absenteeism.

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