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'Chronically Absent' Students Skew School Data, Study Finds, Citing Parents' Role

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA

Up to 15 percent of American children are chronically absent from school, missing at least one day in 10 and doing long-term harm to their academic progress, according to a [new study](#) by researchers at [Johns Hopkins University](#).

They argue that policy makers tend to look at absenteeism in the wrong way, requiring districts and states to measure average daily attendance rates, but — with the exception of a few states — not focusing on the relatively small number of students who account for most absences. They found that some schools report an average of more than 90 percent daily attendance, masking the fact that 40 percent of their students are chronically missing.

“We don’t see the problem clearly because, in most places, we don’t measure it, and average daily attendance really skews the way we view this,” said one of the authors, Robert Balfanz, a research professor at the university’s School of Education.

Many studies have linked frequent absence to [low academic achievement](#) and [high dropout](#) rates; recent studies of children in [New York](#), [Chicago](#) and other cities suggest that attendance may predict a student’s academic progress as effectively as test scores do. Poor children — who stand to benefit most from attending school — are also more likely to miss school.

Professor Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, a research associate, found that only six states — Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon and Rhode Island — measure chronic absenteeism, as do some local systems, including New York City and Oakland, Calif. Based on data from those states, they estimated that in a given school year, nationwide, more than 10 percent and possibly as many as 15 percent of students miss at least one day in 10.

Though the states report the data in different ways, making direct comparisons difficult, [Oregon](#) had the highest rate, with 23 percent of all students missing 10 percent of their school days or more.

While truancy — unexcused absences — and illness play a part, the researchers said the primary problem is absences that are optional but excused with a parent’s permission.

“There are so many efforts at school reform, but what people overlook is that none of them work if the kids don’t show up,” said Marie Groark, executive director of the [Get Schooled Foundation](#), a nonprofit group that commissioned the Johns Hopkins study.

She said she became aware of the issue while teaching at a public high school in the Bronx. “There might have been 35 kids theoretically in my class,” she said, “but on any given day, only 20, 25 were there, and it wasn’t the same 20 or 25 from one day to the next, so we were always playing catch-up.”

A few states and local school systems are taking steps to address the problem. Alabama and Virginia have automated systems that look at warning signs, like frequent absences, to identify students who are at a greater risk of dropping out.

Nonprofit groups formed recently to promote attendance and to lobby for better data collection, like Get Schooled and [Attendance Works](#). Hedy N. Chang, director of Attendance Works, called the Johns Hopkins study an important milestone.

Experts say that in the last two years, New York City, where 20 percent of public school students are chronically absent, has built one of the strongest campaigns against the problem. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg set up a task force to address it, with officials from several agencies — from social services to law enforcement — that had long worked with the schools but had not shared information with each other.

“As early as sixth grade, we could have known that kids were on the train to drop out, and too often our efforts in the past began when it was too late,” said John Feinblatt, senior policy adviser to the mayor and head of the task force.

Some of the resulting projects include [automated wake-up calls](#) from athletes and other celebrities to about 30,000 at-risk students, urging them to go to school.