

## Attendance, Achievement, and Educational Equity: Executive Summary

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires schools to select one indicator of school quality and student success. These indicators may include measures of student engagement, college and career readiness, or school climate and safety. Thirty-five states, plus the District of Columbia, plan to use a measure of student attendance or chronic absenteeism to fulfill this requirement. This focus on students' attendance stems in large part from strong correlational relationships between absences and academic outcomes. For instance:

- A study of approximately 13,000 students found that only 17% of 6<sup>th</sup> graders who missed more than 20% of the school year graduated high school within 5 years.<sup>1</sup>
- State-level data from Oregon shows that fifth graders who are chronically absent are about 25% less likely to meet or exceed state standards on state English Language Arts exams, and are 35% less likely to meet or exceed state standards on Math exams.<sup>2</sup>
- For K-3 students in the Madison Metropolitan School District, a single unexcused absence was associated with a predicted drop in state test performance from the 50<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup> percentile in math, and from the 50<sup>th</sup> to the 35<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading.<sup>3</sup>

However, these relationships likely overstate the causal impact of missing school, as much of the association between absences and achievement may be driven by omitted, confounding variables. In other words, lagging student attendance may be a symptom of challenging life circumstances that also, independently, have a deleterious impact on learning and achievement. For this reason, I reviewed three analyses<sup>3,4,5</sup> that control for important, potentially confounding variables (e.g. socioeconomic status, prior performance on state tests, race, disability status) to more precisely estimate the impact of a single absence. These studies indicate that a single absence is associated with between a .002 and .01 standard deviation decrease in end-of-year state test scores, and that these absences may be about 25% more harmful for economically disadvantaged students.

### Implications of Chronic Absenteeism

These estimates are much smaller than the raw associations between absenteeism and performance, indicating that absences may be a signal of other issues in a child's life that also

affect their academic achievement. However, the estimates still indicate that chronic absenteeism can still have a meaningful impact. For example, they predict that a student who misses 20 days of school in a given year will, on average, score lower than 60% of their peers. Over multiple years this effect will compound, and chronic absenteeism will add up.

### Implications of Absenteeism for Equity

It is less clear that absenteeism meaningfully contributes to issues of equity in educational achievement. Nationally, rates of attendance seem to differ, on average, by fewer than 3 school days per year between affluent and economically disadvantaged students, and rates of attendance seem to differ by less than 1 day per year between White, Black, and Hispanic Students.<sup>6</sup> Given these absence rates, it seems that differences in attendance account for to less than 3% of the “achievement gap” between affluent and economically disadvantaged students, and less than 2% of that between White, Black, and Hispanic students.

### Recommendations

It seems that, for the most part, chronic absences (and particularly unexcused absences) should be seen as a signal that events are happening in a student’s life that negatively impact their achievement. It will be valuable to investigate the specific reasons why students miss school on any given day in order to determine what these events are. If we intervene on the reasons that students miss school, we will have a much larger impact than if we simply intervene on attendance itself.

### References

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