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# Present and Accounted For

Encouraging daily attendance might be the best, quickest way to increase achievement. Even a few days absent can affect test scores, student achievement, and graduation rates



“Adults,” a high school student once told us, “are always asking the wrong questions.” In Georgia, many efforts have been made to improve public education. Pockets of excellence exist, but we have not been able to cobble them together to improve as a state. So, instead of asking, “What are we missing?” we suggest that the right question may be: “Who are we missing?”

To answer this question, we started looking at statewide student attendance in a different light. Instead of just looking at truancy data—students missing 15 or more days a school year—we looked at all of the attendance patterns for all students, including excused, unexcused, and out-of-school suspensions.

The findings were troubling. Too many students are missing instruction because of absences, regardless of the reason. However, to change the conversation about student attendance, we needed to find research that shows the impact of absences on achievement. Unfortunately, little empirical consideration has been given to a systematic investigation of how student attendance affects achievement on a statewide scale using an entire population of students.

A few researchers and practitioners have attempted to connect attendance rates with student achievement measures, and there is some evidence that an increased attendance rate predicts higher standardized test performance in urban schools. Additionally, a few have found that attendance rates are an indicator of overall school quality, which could have an indirect impact on student achievement measures.

In addition to concentrating on certain populations or environments, student attendance-based research has focused primarily on issues of truancy or the impact of extremely low student attendance rates, as in the study conducted by Camilla A. Lyle and her colleagues, published in their 2004 article for the *Journal for Students Placed At Risk*. They found that increases in absences in the elementary and middle grades, along with other education-related risk factors increase a student's probability of dropping out.

Sociologically, increases in student absences are directly related to alienation from peers and school staff members along with the increased likelihood of engaging in negative behavioral activities such as tobacco, alcohol, and drug use. Increases in student absences also have been connected to a higher probability of unemployment and financial hardship.

## Link between attendance and achievement

Given the dearth of empirical investigation and evidence surrounding student attendance and student achievement, the Georgia Department of Education undertook a study to look at the relationship between student attendance and achievement. The study builds on the current empirical work, while taking a systemic approach to estimating the impact of student attendance.

We looked to estimate the benefits associated with increasing student attendance rates on standardized achievement tests and graduation rate. The focus on graduation rates and test performance is directly related to Georgia's statewide priorities on preparing college- and career-ready students for post-high school opportunities along with providing content mastery in the elementary and middle grades.

Data for this study was derived from the department's student data warehouse. The use of student-level data was essential in not only displaying graduation rates, but also in the estimation of the individual impact of attendance on student performance, controlling for student variables.

For the analysis of student graduation rates, the study used a longitudinal data set that included the first-time ninth-graders in the 2006-07 school year and tracked their matriculation until the 2010-11 academic year—their four-year graduation mark. After the initial year, a cohort was established, including students who may have transferred in from another state or a private school and accounting for students who transferred out of Georgia or into a private school.

Since the analysis was primarily interested in statewide graduation rates rather than an individual school's graduation rate, the transfer of students between schools and districts did

not play a role in the data set creation.

To determine the impact of student attendance on academic performance, data from the state's Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) for the 2009-10 academic year was used. Full-time academic year students (continuously enrolled from before the first count in October through the end of the state testing window) were included to mirror the state's accountability process.

Students enrolled in grades three through eight were matched with demographic and testing records. Attendance rates were derived from the school district student attendance files that showed days present and days absent. The days absent were broken down into excused and unexcused absences and out-of-school suspensions. All matching of the data was done within the Georgia Department of Education's student information system to ensure accuracy in matching student demographic and attendance data with test performance.

### **The dramatic impact of days**

The results of the study not only confirmed that student attendance impacts graduation rates and academic performance on standardized tests, but also revealed how dramatic the impact can be, and not just for truancy. Findings confirm that missing just a few days of school, whether the absences are excused or not, can reduce a student's chances for academic success.

The analysis of the student graduation rates, based on that 2006-07 group of students, showed that, for eighth-graders who were absent 15 days or more, the four-year graduation rate dropped from 78.73 percent (for students with no absences) to 30.89 percent. Perhaps the biggest surprise was the graduation rate for eighth-graders who were absent 11 to 14 days. Those students' graduation rate dropped to 54.33 percent. The graduation rate for eighth-graders who were absent six to 10 days dropped by 14 percent, which was a significantly unexpected decline.

Most school districts do not consider students who have missed six to 10 days of school each year as chronically truant, and they provide little support or intervention to prevent these absences. However, the results of this study clearly indicate that those students are potentially underachieving at significant levels. Also, many school districts do not consider "excused" absences when contemplating student attendance issues. They focus only on the "unexcused" absences. The research suggests that high schools should consider any absence from school regardless of cause as a day of lost instruction and learning and a potential impact on graduation rates.

For ninth-graders, the impact of student absences on graduation rates was also significant. In fact, the graduation rate for ninth-graders who were absent 15 days or more dropped from 76.32 percent to 26 percent, a shocking difference. The graduation rate for ninth-graders absent 11 to 14 days declined almost 27 percent. Students who missed six to 10

days graduated at a rate of 64 percent, which represented a 12 percent decline in graduation rate.

Student absences continued to affect 10th-graders. For those 10th-graders who were absent 15 days or more, the graduation rate dropped from 79.63 percent to 34.45 percent, while the graduation rate for students who missed six to 10 or 11 to 14 days of school dropped by 7 percent and 18 percent, respectively.

### **Elementary and middle school achievement**

To study the impact of attendance on achievement in the elementary and middle grades, the research question shifted to whether or not increased attendance would improve academic achievement, as measured by the CRCT. The findings are so significant that educators should reconsider how they view student attendance.

The projected number of students who might have passed the subject-specific CRCT tests had they increased their own attendance by 3 percent—or equivalent to five days in a traditional 180 academic calendar—was noteworthy. More than 10,000 additional students could have passed the reading test. More than 15,000 additional students could have passed the English/language arts test, and more than 30,000 additional students could have passed the math test. In other words, increasing students' attendance by five days could represent the most efficient intervention aimed at increasing student proficiency rates. Increasing the attendance had the largest effects on students who had missed between five and 10 days of school; rather than the chronic truants.

This study changes the conversation about the dramatic impact of attendance on graduation and achievement. We hope that these results given pause to educators on the importance of ensuring students are present at school. Additionally, the discussion around the results of this study have sparked statewide collaborations aimed at ensuring students are in school. Many Georgia superintendents are revisiting how they view student absences and are planning to include more discussion in staff meetings and in local strategic plans on the importance of student attendance.

Additionally, the public health sector has found the research results useful when conveying to parents how health issues are related to school attendance, which then impacts student achievement. This has become an extremely useful communication point for local boards of health as they advocate for school-based flu vaccination clinics.

The question of "Who is missing?" is becoming part of the new conversation about student attendance in Georgia. ■

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