Research in Practice

Series IV: Dropout Prevention

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Student Absenteeism: Identifying Causes & Solutions

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Chronic absenteeism has long been recognized as a significant predictor of a student's decision to drop out of school (Cumbo, Burden, & Burke, 2012; Hammond et al., 2007; Tanner-Smith & Wilson, 2013). For example, a 2012 Utah study found that a student who was chronically absent (defined as missing school 10 percent of the time or more) in any year, starting in the 8th grade, was 7.4 times more likely to drop out of school than a student who was not chronically absent during any of those years ("Research Brief: Chronic Absenteeism," 2012). Student absenteeism is also a correlate or risk factor for numerous problem behaviors such as adolescent delinquency and alcohol or other drug use (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Flaherty, Sutphen, & Ely, 2012; Henry & Thornberry, 2010; Monahan, VanDerhei, S., Bechtold, J., & Cauffman, E., 2014; Seeley, 2008). Research has also shown there is a relationship between students' absenteeism in high school and their enrollment and persistence in college. For example, researchers in Rhode Island found that while 70% of students with low or moderate absenteeism in the 2009 graduating class went on to postsecondary education following high school graduation, only about 34% of chronically absent students in the same cohort did so. Moreover, only 11% of the students from that graduating cohort who had been chronically absent in high school persisted into a second year of college, compared to 51% of other Rhode Island students in the 2009 class (RI Data Hub, 2012). Other research suggests that if students' maladaptive attendance patterns are carried into adulthood, negative consequences continue. In college,

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Arizona GEAR UP is a project of Northern Arizona University, supported by the U.S. Department of Education

attendance has been found to be strongly associated with both course grades and overall GPA (Credé, Roch, & Kiesczynka, 2010). And, according to a national Harris Poll conducted for Career Builder in 2014, a strong work ethic and dependability were most frequently listed among the soft skills that employers look for in new employees (Career Builder, 2014). Attendance is clearly important for both college and career readiness and therefore an important topic for college access professionals.

Broader Impact of Absenteeism

Student absenteeism not only has negative consequences for the absent students themselves, but widespread absenteeism may also have systemic effects on achievement (Balfanz, et al., 2008). Teachers often are faced with the difficult choice of slowing down instruction to help absent students catch up, or maintaining the normal instructional pace and leaving some students behind. Because tardiness can be considered a type of absence, widespread tardiness can also impact the achievement of non-tardy students for similar reasons (Gottfried, 2012).

"Widespread absenteeism may also have systemic effects on achievement."

Extent of the Problem

According to the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE), "Tracking school attendance is a challenge at best, a nightmare for many" (Finlay, 2005, p. 2). Finlay goes on to note that because schools are motivated to look good, inflation of absence rates is usually not a problem. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that available data may under-report the severity of the problem. With this caution in mind, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012, p. 3) suggest that a, "national rate of 10 percent chronic absenteeism seems conservative and it could be as high as 15 percent, meaning that 5 million to 7.5 million students are chronically absent." In Utah (cited earlier), they found the rates of chronic absenteeism increased from 5th through 12th grade, to a high of 20.1% of students missing more than 10% of their senior year. Also, according to the 2004 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey (approximately 45% of administrators and educators in public schools consider student absenteeism to be a moderate or serious problem (Center for Public Education, 2015).

Causes of Absenteeism

Generally it is the case that students can have different motivations for the same behavior. This clearly can be seen with absenteeism. For example, one student may skip a class to spend time with friends off campus, while a second student may skip class to tend to familial responsibilities. Consequently, understanding students' motivation for missing school is an important first step in designing interventions that are more likely to succeed.

Balfanz and Chang (2013, p. 21) categorize the many reasons for students' absences into the three categories of barriers, aversion, and discretion. In the case of **barriers**, students cannot attend school due to illness, family

responsibilities, housing instability, or the need to work or involvement with the juvenile justice system. Reasons that fall into the **aversion** category include missing school to avoid bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment and embarrassment. Absences due to student **discretion** occur because students or their parents do not see value in attending school, or students have something else they would rather do, or nothing prevents students from being absent.

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A Comprehensive Attendance Management Program

Comprehensive attendance management has to be viewed as a district or system level matter. Research has demonstrated that early identification of students with attendance issues is critical. Students' attendance problems and truancy usually first appear in elementary school (Smink & Reimer, 2005). In the *Beginning School Study* eight-year-old students who would eventually drop out averaged 16.4 absences as 1st graders while future graduates averaged 10.2 absences. Over their middle school years future dropouts averaged 27 absences compared to 11.6 absences for future graduates (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). The implication is that attendance problems should be detected before high school as they tend to worsen over time without early intervention.

According to the literature on absenteeism, an effective student attendance management program has three main components: attendance monitoring, prevention, and intervention ("Preventing Chronic Absenteeism & Truancy," 2015, July 9).

Attendance Monitoring

Generally, attendance monitoring should provide schools with early warning attendance data, so that intervention can be undertaken before an attendance problem becomes chronic. However, according to Finlay (2005), collecting accurate attendance data is challenging for a number of reasons including inaccuracies and inconsistencies in how absences are coded, teacher inconsistencies in reporting attendance, and inconsistencies between schools and districts in how attendance data are collected and coded. To some extent, these problems can be addressed by training teachers and substitute teachers in the attendance system, and by making sure that policies for collecting and coding data are clear. With more accurate data, then, monitoring should encompass: [1]

- average daily attendance (ADA) rates
- early warnings of students approaching an established 'actionable' number of absences

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[1] The nonprofit organization *Attendance Works* provides additional tools, tips and instructions for conducting successful attendance data analyses: http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/use-attendance-data-to-inform-practice/

 ◆   students who are chronically absent (have missed 10% of the school
     year or more)

Longitudinal, student-level data is key to:

 ◆   being able to target students for intervention
 ◆   helping to identify causes of absenteeism
 ◆   assessing the impact of intervention efforts

Prevention

Prevention strategies should target the entire school – both students who
have not (yet) exhibited attendance problems and students who have.
Prevention strategies can take a number of different forms and target the
many possible different reasons for absences. It is important to consider
school factors that contribute to absenteeism when trying to prevent
chronic absenteeism. A number of these factors have been identified
including: inconsistent and ineffective school attendance policies; poor
record keeping; failure to contact parents/guardians; unsafe school
environments where bullying, truancy, and disruption are common; and
poor relationships between students and teachers (Lauchlan, 2003; Yeide &
Kobrin, 2009). On the other hand, warm and engaging school environments
help prevent absenteeism as do core strategies like mentoring, service
learning, and alternative schooling (Smink & Reimer, 2005).

Prevention Strategies from attendanceworks.org

Attendanceworks.org suggests a variety of strategies that can be employed
to prevent attendance problems. Among these are strategies to engage
students and families, to recognize good and improving attendance, and to
address institutional and community barriers to good attendance.

I.   **Engage Students and Families**

   a.   Educate parents on the impact of absenteeism on academic
        outcomes – *parents care about their children's success and can
        become your greatest ally in improving their child's attendance
        when they fully understand its importance*
   b.   Communicate clear and consistent messages to parents and
        families -- *about the importance of attendance, school
        expectations for attendance, and the intrinsic and extrinsic
        negative consequences of poor attendance*
   c.   Involve parents in helping to identify the cause(s) of their child's
        absenteeism and possible solutions – *because who is likely to
        have better insights into this than parents*
   d.   If systemic factors play a role in chronic absenteeism at your
        school (such as unsafe school or streets, high teacher turnover),
        encourage parents to advocate with those in power (school
        board, district office, city or state government) for attention

*Prevention strategies include
"strategies to engage students
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and/or additional resources – *as members of the community, and voters, their voices can be powerful and many*

e. Engage parents and families in specific activities described in attendanceworks.org's "Bringing Attendance Home" Toolkit

II.   **Recognize Good & Improved Attendance**

a. Do not focus on "perfect" attendance – *doing so will exclude the very students whose attendance you most hope to influence*

b. Establish short or interim 'award periods' (weekly, monthly and/or quarterly – *otherwise students who fail early on to meet the longer term benchmark for the award, lose the incentive to improve attendance*

c. Involve students in deciding what the reward for good or improved attendance will be – *you might be surprised how inexpensive the awards that would most motivate students can be, including for example, free entry to a dance or school sporting event, extra credit, a special parking place in the student parking lot, or a coupon for something free from the school bookstore or snack stand*

d. Include 'Timeliness' (i.e., the absence of tardiness) in your incentive program – *because tardiness also impacts academic achievement*

e. Offer incentives for families, not just students – *since families can influence student attendance, as discussed above; incentives for families might be chances to win a larger prize or gift certificate, donated restaurant certificates, etc.*

III.   **Address Institutional/Community Barriers to good attendance**

a. If school or community safety concerns are a reason students miss school, establish community watch programs, work with community policy officers/ school resource officers, and/or add other additional safety measures

b. Examine school policies to determine whether they may have unintended negative consequences on attendance, and change policies and practices that are problematic

c. Assess your school climate and take action based on your findings – *one respected tool for assessing school climate is the National School Climate Survey*

d. Establish a peer-mentoring program – *both the older student mentors and the younger student 'mentees' can benefit in numerous ways, including improved attendance, through these relationships*

e. Provide breakfast at school – *research has shown that students who eat breakfast at school attend an average of 1.5 more days of school each year*

  f. Establish after school programs that students want to attend and parents want their children to attend

Intervention

In combination with the preventative strategies described above, Railsback (2004) recommends targeted interventions for students with chronic attendance problems. These targeted interventions should provide a continuum of supports including but not limited to incentives and aversive consequences, tutoring and after school programs, mentoring, and individual counseling. The key, however, is using the right strategy or strategies for the individual student – based on what was determined to be the student's reason or motivation for missing school.

In a recent review of the research on interventions for chronically truant students, Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly (2013) found that absenteeism interventions yielded generally moderate effects, but the improvement gained in students' attendance did not reach an acceptable level. They also failed to find support for the superiority of complex and collaborative interventions over simpler intervention approaches. These findings tend to underscore the value of prevention and early intervention before attendance problems become chronic. Despite Maynard et al.'s findings, there is still reason to believe that interventions implemented for students that have been identified through attendance monitoring as chronically absent, can be effective if each student's individual motivation is accurately determined and the intervention undertaken is intended to address that motivation. Kearney, Lemos, and Silverman (2004) have demonstrated how functional analysis can be used to identify students' motivations for school refusal. Although it seems both difficult and unnecessary to conduct a comprehensive functional analysis for every student with an absenteeism problem, there are some general principles from functional analysis that seem useful for assessing students' motivation for non-attendance, including considering the following questions:

- *What does the student gain* through non-attendance? Does non-attendance meet a basic need? Is there natural reinforcement for non-attendance? For example, students may stay home to fulfill a familial need for care of younger siblings, or skipping school allows students to hang out with like-minded peers, etc.
- *Is the student avoiding aversive situations* by missing school? For example, a student may be avoiding experiences with bullies, or a student may be avoiding school work that is too challenging or non-engaging. In the case of "skipping" or tardiness, there may be a class or teacher that students want to avoid.
- *Is there a pattern* to the non-attendance? For example are absences more frequent at the end or beginning of the week? Also, students desire to participate in an extracurricular activity could impact attendance if the right to participate is contingent

on academic success, classroom behaviors, and/or attendance explicitly. If so, patterns of attendance, such as good attendance during football season, poor attendance during off-season can be informative.

- ***Are there any recent changes to a student's life*** *that might be disruptive?* For example, is there a divorce in process or the recent arrest of a parent?

In seeking answers to questions like these, we need to be aware that a behavior can serve more than one function (e.g. avoiding a boring class and hanging with friends). It also seems reasonable to assume that the motivations may change over time.

In designing prevention and intervention strategies, it is important to take into account the many reasons for students' absenteeism and also to consider potential unintended negative consequences. For example, zero tolerance policies with harsh consequences for absenteeism do not seem to work and may in fact have the opposite effect (Railsback, 2004).

"In designing prevention and intervention strategies, it is important to take into account the many reasons for students' absenteeism and also to anticipate potential negative consequences."

Summary and Recommendations

1. A comprehensive attendance management system should include attendance monitoring, prevention, and intervention components.
2. Attendance improvement should be a goal at all levels of a school district. A consistent message should be sent about the importance of school attendance.
3. It is important to remember that students are absent for a variety of reasons. Understanding these reasons is the first step in developing a targeted intervention for a particular student.
4. A comprehensive attendance management system should also target tardiness because it can be viewed as a form of absenteeism which has also been linked to achievement.
5. Use attendance data as early warning indicators and establish a system for early outreach to students and their families.
6. In addition to consequences for absenteeism, be sure to provide concrete incentives for improved or good (not necessarily perfect) attendance.
7. Find positive ways to engage parents in improving students' attendance. Numerous web sites exist that contain additional suggestions for improving attendance. One of the more comprehensive sites is attendanceworks.org:
   http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/
8. For Arizona GEAR UP's perspective on absenteeism consult the boxed essay on the next page.

Arizona GEAR UP's Approach to Absenteeism

According to Arizona GEAR UP data, nearly a third (32.6%) of AZ GEAR UP students had no unexcused absences (i.e., absences not permitted by the local school district or school-specific attendance policy) in the 2014-15 school year. Unfortunately, 10.3% of Arizona GEAR UP students were chronically absent (18 or more unexcused and/or excused absences) during the same time period. Consistent with national trends, Arizona GEAR UP data suggest a relationship between attendance and academic performance. As can be seen from Figure 1, there is a fairly consistent decline in GPA as absences increase.

Figure 1. Average Cumulative GPA by Number of Absences in 2014-15.[1]

Average of Cumulative GPA by Number of Absences (n = 3690)

# of Absences during 2014-15	GPA
0-5	2.74
6-11	2.46
12-17	2.07
18 or more	1.65
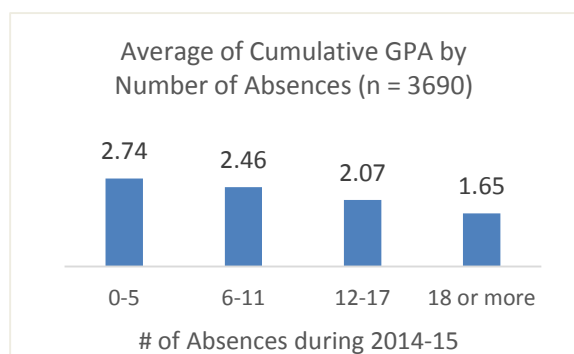
Arizona GEAR UP recognizes the powerful impact absenteeism can have on school success, and focuses on improving attendance in its partner schools.   As recommended by research, Arizona GEAR UP has implemented a Comprehensive Attendance Management Program that includes absence monitoring, prevention, and targeted interventions.

Monitoring: Through   systematized   data   collection procedures, Arizona GEAR has made actionable attendance data available to both site personnel and grant administrators. In most AZ GEAR UP schools, a regular reporting system has been established by which the Coordinator is provided the names of GEAR UP students who have hit an agreed-upon number of absences, requiring intervention. The emphasis is on early detection and intervention with attendance problems in order to prevent absenteeism problems from worsening.

Intervention: Intervention   efforts   are   collaborative – involving school staff and families. Arizona GEAR UP assumes that effective intervention is unlikely unless GEAR UP coordinators understand the nature of the attendance problem.   Consequently,   GEAR   UP   coordinators   are encouraged to investigate the reasons for students' absence before   designing   targeted   interventions   for   students. Specifically, AZ GEAR UP *Minimum Standards & Guidelines for Absence Intervention* require GEAR UP coordinators to take the following actions when a student has been identified as having an attendance problem:

- ➡ talk to the student (in person or over the phone) to learn the reason(s) for the absences.
- ➡ talk to the student's parent(s) (in person or over the phone) to discuss ways to remedy the situation.
- ➡ as applicable, provide referrals and resources to address the reasons for the absences.
- ➡ as applicable, take action to address the reasons for the absences.
- ➡ in collaboration with the student (and parent(s), if applicable) develop a plan to improve the student's attendance.

Some specific intervention strategies include services such as mentoring, personal counseling, credit recovery, home visits, and referrals to local social service agencies.

Prevention: Recognizing   the   importance   of   prevention, Arizona GEAR UP's *Minimum Standards for Absence Intervention*, are prefaced with "many, if not all of GEAR UP strategies   and   interventions   are   intended   to   reduce absenteeism among GEAR UP students." These include activities designed to make school a more engaging and challenging   experience,   personal   contact   by   GEAR   UP Coordinators with students and families, and whole-cohort peer mentoring.

[1] It should be noted that analyses were conducted separately for schools reporting weighted GPA and for those reported unweighted GPA, but the trends are similar in both scenarios. To be parsimonious, this chart does not distinguish between weighted and unweighted GPA

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