

Achievement and Absenteeism

By Nate Jensen and Gregory King



KEY FINDINGS

- **The impact of absences on achievement carries forward year after year.** At every grade level, students who were chronically absent last year start the following year further behind their peers. For example, in our research, chronically absent 1st grade students in 2015-2016 started the following year at an achievement level 32 percentile points below those 1st grade students who had no absences in the prior year. This gap increased to 41 percentile points by the end of the year.
- **Absences become “chronic” earlier than we think.** Chronic absenteeism is generally defined as missing 10% of school (or more). However, our preliminary research suggests that the impact from absences occurs much earlier than when students officially meet this “chronically absent” definition. Policies should start to target students who miss 5-9% of days of school to prevent these students from falling behind their peers.

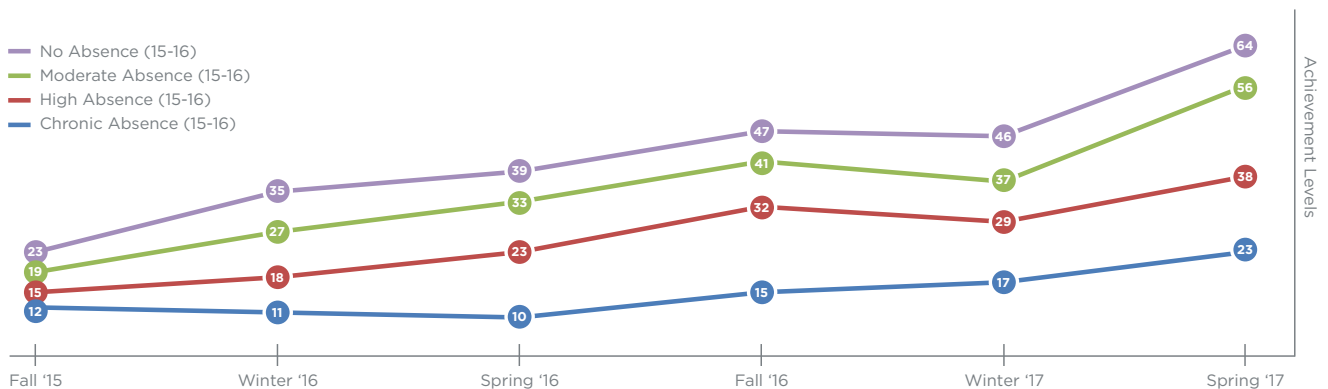
Introduction

One of the primary goals of the Center for School and Student Progress is to conduct research that’s relevant to educators and their work with students. Our aim is to generate practical and relevant research that affects how teachers and schools approach the problems they face every day. We accomplish our aim, in part, by conducting research in direct collaboration with schools—we want to do research with educators and for educators. To that end, we’re excited to share an early look at some of the research we’re doing in collaboration with the [Santa Ana Unified School District \(SAUSD\)](#) on the topic of chronic absenteeism.

The impetus for this research came out of a number of conversations with Emily Wolk and Sharon Bi—the Executive Director and Assistant Director of Research at SAUSD—around patterns we noticed in the long-term achievement and growth trends for students with varying numbers of absences.

Achievement and absenteeism

What did we see? In the figure below are the median achievement percentiles for SAUSD students in first grade in 2015-16 and second grade in 2016-17. We’ve grouped these students based on their attendance level in 2015-16, and then tracked them across that school year and the following year. The blue line shows the median achievement level for students who were chronically absent in 2015-16. These students missed 10% of the school year (or more), which in SAUSD, means missing 18 or more days of school. Conversely, the purple line are those students who had no absences in 2015-16. The green and red lines highlight the median percentiles for students with moderate absences (0.1-4.9%) and high absences (5.0-9.9%) respectively. As you can see, while these students start first grade with fairly similar levels of achievement, by the end of second grade, there is a significant gap in achievement across the student attendance levels—the more absences students have, the further behind they fall over time. The negative effects of absences in one year persist to the next year, to the point where chronically absent students are academically well-behind the rest of their peers.



The figure demonstrates the relationship between student achievement in mathematics and student attendance, following 1st graders in 2015-2016 through 2nd grade the following year.

These trends won't come as a shock to most of you who are reading this. We know that most of these students have the potential to do well on their tests if only they could get to school more often. But, we also know that actually getting students to school is a common challenge¹. It's estimated that some 7.5 million students across the nation are considered chronically absent.² Some estimates put that number at [16% of all students in the United States](#). Extensive research on this topic has shown that students who are chronically absent not only have significantly lower achievement levels³, but they are more likely to show behavioral issues throughout their school years⁴, drop out of high school⁵, and be unemployed after high school⁶. It goes without saying, but the more we can do to “disrupt” a student's absenteeism pattern, the greater the likelihood that we can “disrupt” the student's achievement pattern as well.

What else have we found?

When you look at the above figure, the trend that stands out is that the more absences students have, the lower their overall achievement level tends to be. But there are some other things that stood out to us that have some practical implications for educators, as well as broader policy conversations on this topic. Here are two other areas of focus for our research:

1. The more absences a student had last year, the further behind a student is at the start of the following year (in the fall).

Even after accounting for student race, gender, free and reduced priced lunch and special education status, we still find that chronically absent students start the following year significantly behind their peers, especially compared to those students with perfect attendance. What this tells us is that while we tend to focus on reducing absences—and intervene with students when absences reach a certain threshold—*it's just as critical to provide targeted services and academic interventions at the start of the following year to kids who had significant attendance issues last year*. As our colleague John Cronin noted in his blog post, we should think of a student's attendance in a school year—and how those absences affect their achievement level—as a chapter

in the story of these students' lives, instead of each year being treated as a separate story. If we're reading a book and skip a chapter, we're not going to have a clue about what's going on in the story, and that's what we think is playing out here. These kids are missing big chunks of a school year, and then show up to school the following year with a lot of gaps. If a school knows at the beginning of the year that a student was chronically absent in previous years, then teachers can help fill the gaps for that student and help them write a new chapter in their story that is different from the previous one.

2. It's not just about the chronically absent kids—absences become “chronic” much earlier.

Look at the image again. The other thing that stands out to me is we have a group of students who are labeled as “chronically absent” (the blue line), but there are other students whose absences appear to be having a significant “chronic” effect on their achievement. Students who are highly absent (red line) are also falling further behind their peers, both at the start of the following year and over time.

Do you ever wonder why we've defined chronic absenteeism as missing 10% of days or more? Is there any justification for this in research, or is it just a round number, and everyone likes a round number? It isn't clear that there is a real justification (that we could find) in support of that definition. Based on the above figure, it's pretty apparent that absences become “chronic” before 10% of days are missed. We'd advocate for policies to reflect this, so that those students who are missing a lot of days of school (but haven't yet hit the 10% mark) are getting the additional targeted resources and interventions that “chronically absent” students receive.

This model of collaboration alongside our partners is a new paradigm in research at NWEA®. Our research team here in the Center is excited to share some of our work in this area, and others, with you. In the coming weeks and months, we're going to go into more detail on these research questions, and some of the additional questions we're looking at with our partners at SAUSD on this topic.

¹ Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *The importance of being in school: A report on absenteeism in the nation's public schools*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

Connolly, F., & Olson, L.S. (2012). *Early elementary performance and attendance in Baltimore City schools' pre-kindergarten and kindergarten*. Baltimore, MD: Baltimore Education Research Consortium.

² Bauer, L., Liu, P., Schanzenbach, D.W., & Shambaugh, J. (2018). *Reducing chronic absenteeism under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution.

³ Gottfried, M.A. (2015). Chronic absenteeism in the classroom context: Effects on achievement. *Urban Education*.

⁴ Gottfried, M.A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 19(2), 53-75.

⁵ Neild, R.C., & Balfanz, R. (2006). An extreme degree of difficulty: The educational demographics of urban neighborhood schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 11, 123-141.

Gottfried, M.A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 19(2), 53-75.

⁶ Broadhurst, K., Patron, K., & May-Chahal, C. (2005). Children missing from school systems: Exploring divergent patterns of disengagement in the narrative accounts of parents, carers, children, and young people. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26(1), 105-119.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Intervene to engage formerly chronically absent students at the beginning of the year, rather than waiting for a pattern to emerge.

Policies directed at improving attendance rates should also include a central focus on providing additional academic resources and supports to those students who were chronically absent in a previous year. Additional academic support is essential to ensure that chronically absent students do not continue to fall further behind their peers in subsequent years. In schools that only test in the spring of every year, knowledge of prior-year absences could be essential to helping educators disrupt attendance patterns early in the year.

Reexamine when to define students as being “chronically” absent.

Policies targeted only at students who were absent for 10% or more of days overlook a large subset of students whose achievement is significantly and negatively affected as a result of their absences. Policymakers should consider redefining when absences become “chronic” to focus on providing additional interventions or supports before students are absent 10% of days or more. For example, our preliminary research suggests that students who miss 5% or more of the prior academic year start the following school year at significant academic disadvantages compared to students with minimal to no absences in the prior year.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Nate Jensen is the Director of the Center for School and Student Progress at NWEA. His primary research interests include teacher and school accountability, test engagement, and the relationship between chronic absenteeism and student achievement and growth. He has provided consultation and support to teachers, administrators, and policymakers across the country to help establish best practices around the applications and uses of student assessment data. Before joining NWEA, he was a Senior Research Associate in the Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas and a teacher at the New England Center for Children. Jensen holds a PhD in Counselor Education from the University of Arkansas.



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The Center for School and Student Progress engages directly with schools to influence educational practices and policies that promote student success. The Center's research agenda focuses on issues that impact the daily work of educators and the students they serve, such as chronic absenteeism, the integrity of testing systems, and school accountability. Researchers from the Center for School and Student Progress serve as consultative partners, offering advanced technical support, custom research projects, and analysis to school leadership, educators and policymakers.



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