

Entrants:

Amber Northern, Senior Vice President for Research, Thomas B. Fordham Institute
anorthern@fordhaminstitute.org

Jing Liu, Assistant Professor in Education Policy, University of Maryland College Park
jliu28@umd.edu

Contest Application:

Description of the Problem

Among the most pernicious consequences of the pandemic has been the apparent normalization of student absenteeism, especially in low-income communities that lack access to high-speed Internet and were disproportionately affected by the virus. In many schools, attendance (whether online or in person) is still weak and woefully inconsistent. And in some of the country's biggest urban districts, thousands of students seem to have simply disappeared.

Numerous studies have found that student absenteeism—and unexcused absenteeism, in particular—is associated with lower achievement,¹ grades,² odds of graduation,³ decreased college enrollment, and other unsavory outcomes.⁴ And chronic absenteeism (commonly defined as missing at least 10 percent of the school year) is widely accepted as a leading indicator of academic peril.⁵ Yet although we've known for thirty years that measures of school climate are correlated with attendance,⁶ particularly in the upper grades,⁷ existing research doesn't definitively tell us to what extent schools are responsible for their own attendance rates (though recent studies have found that individual teachers can have a significant effect on student attendance).⁸ After all, low attendance has many causes. (A recent meta-

¹ Michael A. Gottfried, "Excused versus unexcused: How student absences in elementary school affect academic achievement," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 31, no. 4 (2009): 392–415.

² Jong Liu, Monica Lee, and Seth Gershenson, "The Short-and Long-Run Impacts of Secondary School Absences," EdWorkingPaper #19-125, doi: 10.26300/xg6s-z169.

³ Douglas E. Roby, "Research on school attendance and student achievement: A study of Ohio schools," *Educational Research Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2004): 3–16.

⁴ Denise Hallfors, Denise et. al, "Truancy, grade point average, and sexual activity: A meta-analysis of risk indicators for youth substance use." *Journal of School Health* 72, no. 5 (2002): 205–11.; Jing Liu, Monica Lee, and Seth Gershenson, "The short-and long-run impacts of secondary school absences," *Journal of Public Economics* 199 (2021): 104441, doi:10.1016/j.jpubeco.2021.104441.

⁵ Michael A. Gottfried and Ethan L. Hutt, *Absent from School: Understanding and Addressing Student Absenteeism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2019); and Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know from Nationally Available Data* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2012).

⁶ John DeJung and Kenneth Duckworth, *High School Teachers and Their Students' Attendance. Final Report* (Eugene, OR: Center for Educational Policy and Management, 1986); and Gary D. Gottfredson and Denise C. Gottfredson, *School Climate, Academic Performance, Attendance, and Dropout* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1989).

⁷ Marisa Hendron and Christopher A. Kearney, "School Climate and Student Absenteeism and Internalizing and Externalizing Behavioral Problems," *Children & Schools* 38, no. 2 (2016): 109–16.

⁸ Seth Gershenson, "Linking Teacher Quality, Student Attendance, and Student Achievement," *Education Finance and Policy* 11, no. 2 (2016): 125–49; and Jing Liu and Susanna Loeb, "Engaging Teachers: Measuring the Impact of Teachers on Student Attendance in Secondary School," *Journal of Human Resources* (2019): 1216-8430R3.

analysis identified 781 risk factors!⁹) And of course, like the causes of low achievement, these causes are often related to students' home lives and socioeconomic conditions, making it difficult to know if/when schools should share the blame.

In recent years, thirty-seven states plus the District of Columbia have adopted student attendance and/or chronic absenteeism rates as a "measure of school quality" under the Every Student Succeeds Act, without making any adjustments for students' socioeconomic background. Consequently, the "nonacademic" component of many of states' newly minted accountability systems is deeply unfair to poor schools (which tend to have lower attendance rates) and misleading insofar as the goal is accurately gauging schools' performance. Like measures that are based on raw test scores instead of value added, raw attendance metrics could be doing more harm than good, to the extent they punish honest reporting, dilute the influence of fairer measures, and obscure exemplary and/or mediocre performance.

Objectives for policy change

For attendance to be used as an accurate gauge of school quality and culture, it should be calculated as a value-added metric. A 2022 study examined high schools' contributions to attendance after accounting for individual students' prior absenteeism and other observable characteristics, making the case for value-added attendance measures.¹⁰ First, the study found that conventional student absenteeism measures tell us almost nothing about a high school's impact on students' attendance. Next, attendance value-added, like test-based value-added, varies widely between schools and is highly stable over time. Finally, attendance value-added was found to be positively correlated with students' perceptions of school climate—in particular, with the belief that school is safe and behavioral expectations are clear. State policies and federal guidelines for state accountability plans should encourage and incentivize state and district policymakers to explore value-added measures of attendance rather than only relying on raw attendance metrics (or no measure of attendance). Doing so will make for fairer measures by empowering and rewarding schools to develop strategies to stem chronic absenteeism (more below).

Desired outcome of the policy change

Using raw student-absenteeism measures in accountability systems often impart credit or penalty to schools that don't deserve it. Many schools that do a better job than others of getting students to come to class regularly are overlooked by states' existing accountability systems—even as others are rewarded for habits and circumstances that students developed before their arrival. This policy change, however, would not discourage districts from reporting raw attendance measures. To be clear, there are good reasons to report schools' raw attendance and chronic-absenteeism rates, which are transparent, parent-friendly, and crucial to understanding the depth of the problem.

But if the goal is to hold schools or educators accountable for things that they can control or help parents understand if their child's attendance is likely to improve, then raw attendance rates are unfair and uninformative (and the same is also true of any non-test-based indicator that fails to account for the

⁹ Jeanne Gubbels, Claudia E. van der Put, and Mark Assink, "Risk Factors for School Absenteeism and Dropout: A Meta-analytic Review," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 48, no. 9 (2019): 1637–67.

¹⁰ Liu, Jing. "Imperfect Attendance: Toward a Fairer Measure of Student Absenteeism." Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2022).

things students bring to school). Promoting value-added attendance measures, then, would incentivize and reward schools (and parents) for doing more to increase attendance because they know that their efforts will be recognized and “counted.” Moreover, these measures minimize the potential for gaming and misreporting, which makes them more credible to practitioners.

Description of how the policy change will result in students who are better prepared for college, careers, and civic participation

There is suggestive evidence that students attending high-attendance-value-added schools see long-term benefits even if their raw attendance rates, test scores, and test-based value-added are average.¹¹ For example, results show that attending a high school with high attendance-value-added increases a ninth grader’s probability of attending a four-year college by 1.7 percentage points (for context, attending a high school with high test-based value-added but average attendance-value-added boosts four-year college attendance by 2.2 percentage points).¹² Broadly speaking, this evidence is consistent with an emerging literature that suggests that effective schools contribute to students’ success through the cultivation of noncognitive and/or socioemotional, as well as academic skills.¹³

Similarly the strongest correlates of “attendance-value-added” at the high school level are students’ feelings of safety and order—or, more specifically, their sense that rules and behavioral expectations are clear—which is consistent with prior research on school climate.¹⁴ For example, 7 percent of Black teens report avoiding school activities or classes because of “fear of attack or harm”.¹⁵ Therefore, identifying and promoting schools with high attendance-value-added—and their accompanying practices to decrease absenteeism—may also help strengthen perceptions of school safety for all students.

An explanation of known tradeoffs and potential negative consequences, as well as a rationale for the approach selected

This proposed policy change will carry few, if any, tradeoffs or negative consequences, as it does not advocate for the halting of current reporting of raw attendance data and chronic absenteeism. Instead, we think a *both/and* rather than *either/or* approach is the right choice. In fact, we’d go so far as to suggest that, just as some states have two grades for schools based on test scores (one for achievement and one for growth), we should consider having two measures of attendance (chronic absenteeism and “value-added” measures, once they’re vetted).¹⁶ In general, status measures and growth measures are apples and oranges, so it doesn’t make sense to average or aggregate them. The simplicity and usefulness of a single, summative grade is lost if it doesn’t serve any one purpose well. For instance, if the purpose is to decide whether to renew a school’s charter for the next five years, that decision should rest on growth-based test-score measures. But if the purpose is to understand whether students are

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jackson, “School effects on socioemotional development.”

¹⁴ Susan Williams, et al., “Student’s perceptions of school safety: It is not just about being bullied,” *The Journal of School Nursing* 34, no. 4 (2018): 319–30, doi:10.1177/1059840518761792.

¹⁵ “Students’ reports of avoiding school activities or classes or specific places in schools,” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 19, 2022, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/a17>.

¹⁶ Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Chad L. Aldis, “Disputing Mike and Aaron on ESSA school ratings,” *Flypaper*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, October 17, 2016, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/disputing-mike-and-aaron-essa-school-ratings>.

ready for college and career, status-based measures are best. Each tell us something different. So it is with chronic-absenteeism rates and attendance-value-added.