



NCPIE Update

A Publication of the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education

January 2008

Chronic Absence in the Early Grades: Preliminary Findings of an Applied Research Project

At the January NCPIE meeting, Hedy Chang, an independent consultant, shared the early findings of an applied research project on chronic early absence. Supported by the Annie E Casey Foundation, this project began with an anecdote-informed premise that chronic early absence was an important and overlooked issue. The work to date suggests that chronic early absence may matter more than originally suspected given preliminary results showing an impact on academic performance and the potential to affect nearly a quarter of the entire K-3 student population in an urban school district.

Chronic early absence occurs when K-3rd graders miss 10% or more days in a school year regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused. National research found that this level of school absence was associated with lower academic performance. Although extended periods of school absence is sometimes called “truancy” this study has intentionally avoided that term to move away from blaming the child, especially young students, for missing school.

So why does it matter?

- Chronic absence in elementary school is associated with negative outcomes including low academic achievement, school truancy and drop out, delinquency and substance abuse.
- The educational experience of regularly attending children can be adversely affected when teachers must divert their attention to meet the learning and social needs of chronically absent children when they return to school.
- Chronic early absence could be a critical tool for identifying troubled children, families or educational institutions early on before problems are more difficult to ameliorate.

Why is it often overlooked?

- It lies hidden within typically high overall elementary school attendance at a district level
- Given high elementary attendance, it is not seen as a priority in light of troubling middle and high school truancy rates.
- Data on the prevalence and impact of chronic early absence has not been widely available.

This research project included an analysis of data from the National Early Childhood Longitudinal Study to assess impact, prevalence and risk factors for chronic early absence (National Center for Children in Poverty), and a review of relevant literature, after which 9 localities were examined for early absenteeism patterns by grade and for particular populations (ELL, gender, low-income and special education). Interviews with practitioners and researchers on promising programs and practices were also conducted.

Some of the preliminary findings include:

- Nationally, chronic absence in kindergarten was associated with lower academic performance in 1st grade among all children, and most significantly for Latino youngsters.

- Nationally, among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicted low 5th grade academic achievement. This association did not hold true for children from families above poverty.
- Nationally, an estimated 10% of kindergartners and 1st graders were chronically absent.
- Rates varied tremendously across localities, ranging from just over 5% to nearly a quarter of the K-3 student population.
- Within a single school district, chronic absence could range from 0-45% depending upon the school.
- In most of the 9 localities studied, chronic absence affected 20% or more of K-3rd graders in at least a few schools
- Chronic early absenteeism was associated with living in poverty nationally and for most the localities where economic data was available.
- Nationally, for children in poor health, school absence increased significantly among families at 200-300% of poverty.
- Nationally, participation in full day kindergarten was associated with lower rates of chronic absence in kindergarten than attendance in half-day day programs.
- Chronic early absenteeism appeared to be lower among students categorized as English Language Learners across localities.
- Chronic early absenteeism was elevated for children identified as needing special education in all localities.
- Chronic early absenteeism was found at similar rates among boys and girls nationally and in all localities.

Collecting this data presented some problems as many districts do not have a universal student identifier in place to track absenteeism for highly mobile children across schools and the quality of data can be questionable for purposes of comparison, because of differences in how data is coded and stored between schools and across school districts. This is especially true with regards to categorizing absences as excused or unexcused though not as problematic for overall absence results. Also, the attendance data on ELL students may underestimate levels of chronic absenteeism since data may be lost if students and their families are migrating between different communities for extended periods of time. And finally, this local analysis was not a random sample. School districts participating in the local research were primarily urban vs. rural or suburban.

Although the major causes of absence can vary across families, schools, and communities (and they are not mutually exclusive) the following questions arise:

Is chronic early absence arising because *schools...*

- Do not monitor absences, communicate the importance of attendance or contact families when children miss extended periods of time?
- Are not effectively engaging parents in their children's education?
- Are not providing a high quality, engaging and safe educational experience?

Is chronic early absence occurring because *families...*

- Are highly mobile?
- Are poor and lack the resources (transportation, food, clothing, etc) to ensure their children regularly attend school?
- Have difficulty addressing and managing chronic illness among children?
- Do not prioritize school attendance due to negative experiences with education or lack of initiative?
- Face multiple risks and, in some cases, serious problems such as domestic abuse, mental illness, drug addiction or incarceration?

Is chronic early absence happening because the *community...*

- Does not provide adequate support to help young children and families make a positive transition into elementary school?
- Is severely distressed and suffers from a dearth of formal or informal supports to promote the positive development of children including regular school attendance?
- Experiences high levels of violence that adversely affect family functioning and getting children to school safely?

Potential Implications for Action

School districts and key community partners (parents, non-profits, government agencies, and local philanthropy) could work together to:

- Identify the overall prevalence of chronic early absenteeism in their community including identifying which schools or demographic groups experience the highest rates
- Gather quantitative data (e.g. from the census or public agencies or schools) and qualitative information (e.g. focus groups or surveys with students, parents, social workers, school nurses, etc.) to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of chronic early absence in their communities.
- Develop appropriate interventions that address relevant causes of chronic early absence

Implications for Federal and State policies could encourage school districts to:

- Include absences among the data elements tracked with a universal student identifier, including among elementary school children.
- Adopt a common definition of chronic absence (missing 10% or more of the school year school year regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused)
- Regularly calculate and report on the number of children chronically absent including excused and unexcused absences by type of school (elementary, middle, secondary) and by grade.
- Use chronic absence data to target schools and children for intervention services that engage the students, their parents, and public and private agencies in joint efforts to improve attendance and promote learning.
- Increase attention to attendance by using average daily attendance in school funding formulas.

Implications for Research could include:

- Longitudinal data analysis to examine long-term academic and social outcomes for children chronically absent in the early grades.
- An assessment of the prevalence and impact of chronic early absence on children living outside of urban areas, especially in rural communities.
- Inclusion of chronic early absence in evaluations of the impact of various programs serving young students and their families.
- A multi-site study to determine how chronic early absences is affected by different family, school and community variables (including for example, poverty, proximity to school from child's home, rates of community violence, school funding formulas, age of compulsory education, educational program quality, levels of parent education as well as the availability of preschool education, afterschool and family support programs).

For more information, contact:
Hedy Chang at hncchang@earthlink.net