

Why Being in School Matters: Chronic Absenteeism in Oregon Public Schools

A Research Brief

By Melanie Hart Buehler, John Tapogna and Hedy N. Chang | June 2012



The vast majority of states maintain attendance data in their longitudinal student data bases. Yet few ever use this rich source of information to identify how many students are academically at risk because they have missed too much school and which districts, schools and student populations are most affected. This analysis of Oregon attendance data collected by the state's Department of Education, demonstrates the valuable insights gained from examining how many students are chronically absent—defined as missing 10 percent or more of school during an academic year for any reason: excused and unexcused absences, as well as time lost to suspensions.

Conducted by ECONorthwest—in partnership with the Children's Institute, the Chalkboard Project and Attendance Works—this analysis revealed that chronic absence is a significant issue in Oregon, dragging down academic performance, for communities and students of all demographic backgrounds, but especially those in families living in poverty.

In the 2009-10 school year, nearly a quarter of all K-12 students in Oregon were chronically absent.

Equally troubling, researchers found that absences starting in kindergarten predicted poor attendance and lower achievement in the years ahead.

The study revealed problems with chronic absenteeism at every grade level, starting with 24 percent of kindergarten students and dipping to about 14 percent of third graders before climbing to 38 percent in the 12th-grade. Researchers found troubling rates of absenteeism in all types of communities—rural, suburban and urban—with the highest rates among students living in poverty and those with disabilities.

The good news is that this research also shows that chronic absence is a solvable problem. While many schools are struggling with high levels of chronic absence, the research also identified schools that are beating the odds by maintaining higher than expected attendance rates despite serving high risk populations.

The findings in this analysis have already brought attention to the issue in Oregon. The governor's office has included the chronic absence rate among sixth-graders and ninth-graders as a key performance metric in the new achievement compacts that districts are signing with the state. And the Chalkboard Project, a partner in this study, has posted district-by-district data on its Web site (www.openbooksproject.org), responding to public demand for more information and accountability on this important matter.



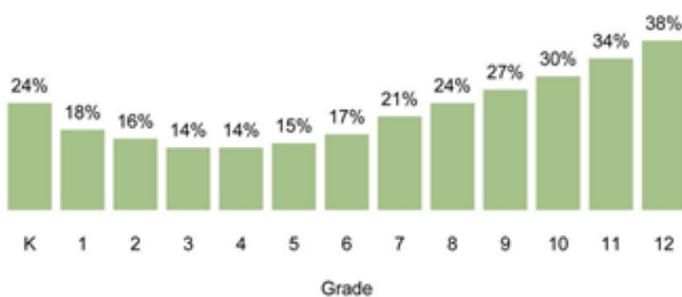
Why Is Chronic Absence Overlooked?

In Oregon, as in most states, schools seldom look at chronic absence figures. Instead, they focus on average daily attendance and unexcused absences (truancy).

Truancy numbers can be especially misleading in the early grades, because young children typically do not stay home without an adult who may call in an excuse. Truancy also doesn't capture days missed due to suspensions, which are often considered excused absences. Some states do not include suspension days in their absenteeism totals, but Oregon does. Thus an overly punitive discipline code can exacerbate the problem of chronic absence. School-wide averages can also be misleading because they do not reveal whether absences are spread evenly, with all students missing a few days, or whether they are concentrated, with a few students having excessive absences; and they don't show patterns of absences, such as whether students from an unsafe neighborhood or an unruly classroom are more likely to miss school.

The Oregon analysis is an important step toward revealing these patterns and showing the effects that chronic absenteeism can have on achievement.

23% of K-12 students in Oregon were chronically absent in 2009-10



Percentage of Oregon students who are chronically absent, by grade
Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2009-10.

Why Does Attendance Matter?

Research backs up the common-sense belief that children suffer academically if they aren't in class to learn. An analysis of a national sample of chronically absent kindergarten students revealed lower academic performance when they reached first grade. Reading scores for Latino children were most affected. Among poor children, who lack the resources to make up for lost time on task, chronic kindergarten absence translated into lower fifth grade achievement.ⁱ

By 6th grade, chronic absence begins to predict high school dropout rates, a study of Baltimore students showed.ⁱⁱ By 9th grade, missing 20 percent of school can be a better predictor of dropout rates than 8th-grade test scores are, Chicago researchers found.ⁱⁱⁱ Along with behavior problems and failure in core academic courses, poor student attendance is a critical early warning sign of dropout.

Oregon's analysis bore out this trend. Using the state's comprehensive longitudinal data base, ECONorthwest's researchers were able to track student attendance and state test scores from the 2004-05 school year forward. They examined two cohorts of students, following one from kindergarten to fifth grade, and the other from fifth grade to 10th grade.

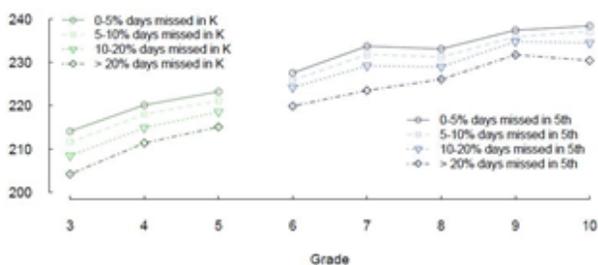
In the younger group, researchers saw an improvement in attendance from kindergarten to first grade and later years. But the youngsters with the worst attendance in kindergarten continued to have the worst attendance in fifth grade. The same pattern held true in the older cohort of students. After a drop in absenteeism rates from fifth to sixth grade, rates increased slightly across the grades for all students. For example, on average, students with good attendance in fifth grade gradually approached the chronic absence line by the time they reached 10th grade. For all groups, a student's attendance range in the fifth grade was a relatively good predictor of 10th grade attendance.

The analysis also looked at scores on state assessments and found that all students showed improvement over the years,

but that the kindergartners with the highest absenteeism rates were not likely to catch up to their peers. The second cohort, with test results from sixth through 10th grades, shows a nearly identical pattern. Because these are two different cohorts based on attendance in two different sets of grades, we cannot assume that the pattern of the younger set's test scores would resemble that of the older cohort. However, the results do suggest a clear and consistent relationship between early attendance and later achievement. A similar analysis of math achievement suggests the same thing.

With the younger cohort, researchers paid special attention to whether high rates of absenteeism in either one or both of the early years (kindergarten and 1st grade) predicted lower reading scores. The analysis showed that children chronically absent in both early grades have the poorest reading achievement levels in fifth grade, followed by students chronically absent in first grade only, and then students chronically absent in kindergarten only. Being chronically absent in either kindergarten or first grade alone is associated with lower test scores throughout elementary school.

There is a clear and consistent relationship between early attendance and later achievement



Average reading RIT scores for two cohorts of Oregon students, by absence rates in kindergarten and 5th grade
Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2009-10.

Who Is Affected by Chronic Absence?

A national study, which included Oregon's data, estimated that 10 to 15 percent of students are chronically absent each year.^{iv} That means as many as 7.5 million students throughout the United States are missing nearly a month of the school year.

While national data suggest that one in 10 kindergartners are chronically absent, the rate is nearly one in four in Oregon. The rates only get higher by middle and high school when truancy, or unexcused absences, becomes a bigger concern. When chronic absence is too high, it can affect all students, as teachers spend more time reviewing concepts for children who missed the lessons in the first place.

The news from the analysis is not all bad. About half of all K-12 students in Oregon have very low absence rates—0 to 5 percent—or about nine or fewer days. Among students who are chronically absent, very few miss more than 20 percent of school days. Nearly all students with very high absence rates are in high school. On average, chronic absenteeism in high school is 14 percentage points higher than in early elementary school.

The analysis found the statewide rate varied by grade and student subgroup. American Indian students have the highest rates across all grades, followed by special education students and those who are black or economically disadvantaged. The sharpest increase from early grades to later grades came among Hispanics and English language learners.

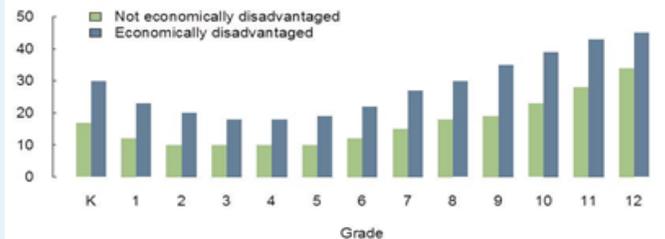
Children from low-income families are disproportionately affected by chronic absence in the early grades: They are more likely to miss too much school and more likely to fall behind academically because of it.^v In the primary grades, Oregon's economically disadvantaged students are nearly twice as likely to miss too much school. The gap narrows somewhat in high school, but poor students are still 50 percent more likely to be chronically absent.

Geographically, chronic absenteeism was spread out across Oregon with particularly high rates in several rural communities. However, urban and suburban areas were affected, as well. Schools with larger populations of poor children tended to have higher absenteeism rates. Altogether, 20 percent of the elementary schools accounted for nearly a third of the chronically absent students in the primary grades.

ECONorthwest went a step further, scouring the data for examples of schools that would be expected to have poor attendance rates, based on a model factoring in student and school characteristics and other factors. Researchers found several schools that managed to keep absences down, despite challenging conditions. Researchers plan to look further at these schools to determine what accounts for their success in keeping children coming to school.

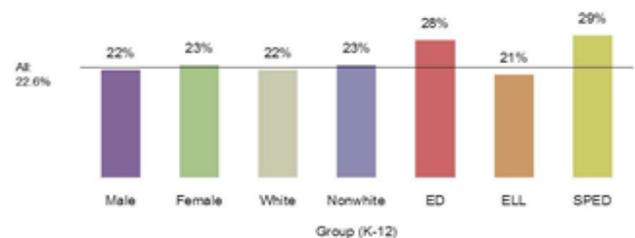
The extent of chronic absence across Oregon, along with the evidence that some schools can overcome challenging circumstances, suggests the need for more research into the forces influencing good attendance. Armed with that information, the state and its school districts can continue to implement the policies and practices needed to bring students back to school before absenteeism limits their opportunities for academic success.

Economically disadvantaged students were consistently more likely to be chronically absent; by high school, two out of five were chronically absent



Percentage of Oregon students who are chronically absent, by grade and economic disadvantage
Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2009-10.

Most subgroups had rates close to the overall average; groups with the highest rates were economically disadvantaged students (28%) and special education students (29%)



Percentage of Oregon students who are chronically absent, by subgroup
ED = economically disadvantaged; ELL = English language learner; SPED = special education.
Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2009-10.

Buehler, Melanie H., Tapogna, John, and Chang, Hedy N., *Why Being In School Matters: Chronic Absenteeism in Oregon Public Schools*, Attendance Works, June 2012.

ECONorthwest's analysis of Oregon attendance data was conducted with support from the Children's Institute, The Chalkboard Project and Attendance Works, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Please note the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

- i. Chang, Hedy N., and Romero, Mariajose, *Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty: September 2008.
- ii. Balfanz, Robert et al., "Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions." *Educational Psychologist* 42, no. 4 (2007), 223-35.
- iii. Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q., *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and at Attendance in the Freshman Year*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2007.
- iv. Balfanz, R., and Byrnes V., *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, May 2012.
- v. Ready, Douglas D., "Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development: The Differential Effects of School Exposure," *Sociology of Education* 83, no. 4 (2010), 271-86.