Break Out Session: Chronic Absenteeism

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• What is chronic absenteeism?
• How is it different from other measures?
• What do the research/data tell us?
• What are the benefits and risks of including chronic absenteeism in accountability ratings?
• Considerations and questions
What is chronic absenteeism?

• **Broad definition:** “A measure of how much school a student misses for any reason.”

• **Usually measured as:** Percent of students missing $X$ school days.
  • The $X$ varies from state to state.
    • MI – 10+ days
    • FL – 21+ days
    • MA – 10% or more days
How is chronic absenteeism different from other measures?

- **Attendance Rate:** Average number of days a student attended school out of the possible number of days the student could have attended.

  - For example, out of a 180 possible school days, these students attended:

    | Days  | Rate |
    |-------|------|
    | 160   | 89%  |
    | 175   | 97%  |
    | 180   | 100% |

    So their school’s attendance rate is: \[
    \frac{160+175+180}{180+180+180} = 95\%\]

    The school’s chronic absenteeism rate is: \[
    \frac{1}{3} = 33\%\]
Most schools have very high average daily attendance—often above 95 percent. This means schools will look good on the measure even if they have students at risk of academic failure due to chronic absenteeism.

Also, if all schools look good on a measure, it doesn’t meet the ESSA requirement that accountability indicators “meaningfully differentiate” among schools.
How is chronic absenteeism different from other measures?

- **Truancy rate**: Truancy includes only unexcused absences (while chronic absenteeism includes both excused and unexcused absences).
  
  - While the distinction between excused and unexcused absences matters for deciding how to intervene, for student achievement, it’s the number of absences that matters, not the reason.

What do we know from the research?

• **Patterns in absenteeism:** (Based on Balfanz, 2012)
  - Low income students and students with disabilities are more likely to miss school than their peers.
  - Absenteeism starts in kindergarten, then drops off in elementary grades, before climbing back up in middle grades, and even further, in high school.
  - High absenteeism rates tend to be concentrated in certain schools and districts.

What do we know from the research?

• **Impacts of absenteeism:**
  - Chronic absenteeism is associated with a number of negative consequences for students, including lower achievement and higher chances of dropping out.
  - Some studies show greater negative impacts for students from low-income families.

What do we see in the data?

Nationally, about 13 percent of students miss 15 or more school days, and schools demonstrate higher chronic absenteeism for some groups.

![Bar graph showing percent of students chronically absent by student group in 2014.](Image)
What do we see in the data?

- FL, MA, and MI all define chronic absenteeism differently (FL = 21 days; MA = 10% of days, or about 18; and MI – 10 days). But the relationship between proficiency and chronic absenteeism is strong in all three states.

Source: Preliminary Ed Trust analysis of data from the FL, MA, and MI Departments of Education
The relationship between chronic absenteeism and proficiency is holds for groups of students, too.

**Chronic Absenteeism and Proficiency Rates – Black Students, Elementary and Middle, MI**

![Graph showing the relationship between chronic absenteeism and proficiency rates for Black students.]

**Chronic Absenteeism and Proficiency Rates – Students with Disabilities, Elementary and Middle, MI**

![Graph showing the relationship between chronic absenteeism and proficiency rates for students with disabilities.]

*Source: Preliminary Ed Trust analysis of data from the MI Department of Education*
In Massachusetts, the correlation between chronic absenteeism and discipline rates is strong, particularly at the elementary and middle school level.

**Chronic Absenteeism and Discipline Rates – All Students, Elementary and Middle Schools, MA**

**Chronic Absenteeism and Discipline Rates – All Students, High Schools, MA**

*Source: Preliminary Ed Trust analysis of data from the MA Departments of Education*
In Baltimore: Strong relationship between 6th grade absenteeism and high school graduation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Days missed</th>
<th>Graduation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 10</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-19</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-39</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40+</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Huge difference in days missed between those schools with the lowest absenteeism rates and the highest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quintile</th>
<th>Mean Number of Days Absent</th>
<th>Mean Days Absent Per Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top 20%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Middle 20%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle 20%</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Middle 20%</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom 20%</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implications for Accountability

Benefits
• Absenteeism has strong relationships with achievement and graduation rates. It matters for student success.
• The measure is relevant to all grades – including K-2.
• Absenteeism is something that schools/districts don’t always feel responsible for. Including the metric in accountability would send clear signal that they are responsible, and encourage early intervention.

Risks
• May be easily gameable.
• May provide schools with incentive to define “absence” as narrowly as possible.
• Including the measure could lead districts to pursue legal action against families whose students are missing a lot of school.
Considerations: Questions to Ask

• How is “chronically” absent defined?
  • Research suggests that missing 10 percent or more of school days can affect student outcomes. But defining “chronic” as a percentage of days missed as opposed to a number of days missed may lead to different definitions in different school districts.

Note: States have to report the percentage of students missing 15 or more days to the federal Civil Rights Data Collection. Under ESSA, this information must also be included on school report cards.
Considerations: Questions to Ask

• What qualifies as an “absence”?  
  • Missing the whole day? Half a day? A class?  
    • In high school, students may be missing individual classes, rather than entire days.

• How are students who are suspended counted?  
  • Most states count out-of-school suspensions as an absence.  
  • Most don’t count in-school suspensions as an absence, even if the in-school suspension results in lost instructional time.

• Are there exemptions in place for students absent for medical reasons?
Considerations: Questions to Ask

• **What safeguards are in place to ensure data accuracy?**
  • Are schools tracking absences in-house, or are they entering this information into a district, or ideally, state, data system?

• **What mechanism will the state use to audit the data to ensure accuracy?**
  • Since chronic absenteeism is defined as a set number of days missed, there can be an incentive to stop reporting once students approach the threshold.
A couple of helpful resources...
Discussion