

The Unproductive Place of ‘Norm Erosion’ in Student Attendance

BY THOMAS S. DEE

The post-pandemic growth in chronic absenteeism has been sharp, broad and stubbornly persistent. These striking increases are a sobering indicator that, more than four years after the pandemic started, the serious challenges of academic recovery remain.

Reduced school attendance is a barrier to student success that also vexes other prominent in-school efforts to support pandemic recovery such as tutoring and other forms of extended instructional time and student supports.

As researchers, we know chronic absenteeism has a diverse variety of underlying causes such as illness, housing insecurity, safety, social anxiety and a lack of engaging instruction. The different factors that are uniquely contributing to the persistent increases in chronic absenteeism we now face are not yet as well understood. However, one specific hypothesis that has captured public attention is that the experience of the pandemic — especially, the extended periods many students spent in remote instruction — reduced parents’ and students’ recognition of the importance of regular school attendance.

Various Causes

While we do not have definitive evidence for such “norm erosion,” two factors suggest its empirical relevance. One is that higher

rates of chronic absenteeism largely have persisted even as the apparent salience of other pandemic-related explanations such as health risks have abated.

Second, my research shows the recent increases in chronic absenteeism were not clearly related to measured changes in youth mental health or COVID-19 infection risk. However, this growth in chronic absenteeism was substantially higher in the states where remote instruction was widely adopted during the 2020-21 school year.

A better understanding of this and other causes behind the disturbing rise in chronic absenteeism can usefully guide the design and targeting of relevant supports, particularly at the student and community levels. At the same time, I believe much of the national public discourse about causes such as norm erosion has become unproductive. In particular, the thinly veiled subtext to many of these discussions is a highly politicized and contentious re-litigating of the decision to close some schools to in-person instruction during the 2020-21 school year.

Of course, constructively critical reflection on past policy decisions is both valuable and appropriate. However, remaining mired in finger-pointing and assigning blame also can become a distraction from addressing the serious challenges at hand. Improving our students’ school attendance during this

school year should be a national imperative and a foundational component of our academic recovery from the pandemic.

Tactics Await

Encouragingly, reasonably strong evidence exists on the tactics schools can adopt to meet this challenge. However, many schools seeking to use this evidence also face several serious headwinds.

One is the immediate need for grounded, local data on the most relevant school-attendance barriers within each community and reflection on how this can align with evidence-based solutions. Second, in many schools, the current challenges to implementing promising strategies well can seem prohibitive, particularly during an unprecedented period of unique organizational stress.

Perhaps the most serious barrier to adopting and implementing promising solutions is cost. Schools are currently facing exceptional fiscal strain due to the confluence of enduring enrollment loss and the expiration of federal pandemic aid. These factors suggest schools should privilege attendance strategies that are locally appropriate and evidence-based. Interventions that are also low-cost and comparatively easy to scale (e.g., engaging families with real-time, well-designed messaging about their child’s attendance) are uniquely well-suited to meet the current crisis.

THOMAS DEE is the Barnett Family Professor at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education in Stanford, Calif. E-mail: tdee@stanford.edu



Thomas Dee

or particular programs with comparatively better attendance and any practices worth sharing.

► **Unpack the underlying causes of chronic absence.** As the graphic created by Attendance Works shows (page 18), reasons for absence typically fall into four broad categories: Barriers to attendance, aversion to school, disengagement from school and misconceptions about the impact of absences.

Various strategies, focus groups, surveys, phone banks and home visits can be used to unpack

causes. Many school districts see students with heightened levels of anxiety combined with a lack of meaningful relationships to peers and adults.

Too often, families and staff believe students must stay home for any symptom of illness even though health guidance has changed. Availability of online learning as well as a lack of a full understanding of how much their children have fallen behind academically likely contributes to families undervaluing the need to show up in person for children’s social as well as academic development. In the communities hardest hit by pandemic