

Effects of School Absences on GPAs for Disabled Students

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ABSTRACT

Chronic absences, suspensions, and expulsions can all be detrimental to students' GPAs. Students with disabilities have a disadvantage with learning and require additional services making it crucial that they are present in school. There are various reasons why students miss school and the study examined a few specific research questions. The current investigation examined students' current GPA scores in the core content areas compared to the number of days absent from school, the frequency of health related school absences, and the number of days spent out of school due to suspensions and expulsions, using data from a national data set. This investigation examines whether or not attendance is related to students' academic success, when specifically considering students with identified disabilities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Chronic Absenteeism Issue Brief Series (CAIBS) [1] poor attendance has had high costs in terms of young people's academic learning, connection to peers, teachers and schools, health, high school graduation, and future employment. Students that are chronically absent face many obstacles. Student's physical health accounts for thirty six percent of attendance challenges while student mental health accounts for twenty four percent of attendance. Academic issues pertain to twenty seven percent of attendance issues in schools [1].

Student health issues that are commonly identified for why students miss school range from flu, headaches, asthma, etc. but no particular ailment stood out over the others. According to the CAIBS [1] students in special education are found to be most impacted by physical health which results in chronic absenteeism and subsequently affects grades. Parent physical health is also a noted cause for missed days, and can account for up to one out of every six days. The mental health problems of student's play a role in the absenteeism of students. Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and addiction can account for about one quarter of student absenteeism [2].

Not only are academics affected by absenteeism, but they also play a role in attendance. Academic issues such as boredom, preparedness, understanding, challenges of the curricula, cause a large portion of absenteeism for students [3]. Almost forty seven percent of high school students miss school due to academic issues. Thirty one percent of special education students missed school due to academic challenges. Multiple strategies must be implemented to reduce chronic absences in schools [4]. Finding motivators and working as a team may help increase student attendance overall [5]. Implementing interventions in the areas of health, academics, and behavior can increase academic success and students' presence in schools.

According to Henry [6] truancy is a serious concern across schools, but there are not accurate tracking systems and researchers are unaware of the true prevalence. The author used a survey of national self-reported data to determine the truancy rates (skipped a day of school within the last four weeks) of 8th and 10th graders. Henry's survey asked for students' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions towards school. The

results indicated that 11% of 8th graders and over 16% of 10th graders reported recently skipping school. Specifically, there were a number of identified variables that predict student truancy rates: students having a significant amount of unsupervised time after school, drug use, parental education level, poor grades, and low educational aspirations. The research concluded that there was a correlation between school-related problems and drug use. Henry suggested that leaving the students unsupervised for large amounts of time gives them the opportunity to abuse drugs. She suggested that parental interventions may help decrease the rate of truancy.

Similarly, suspension of students from school is a common disciplinary action that keeps students out of the classroom. According to Hemphill & Hargreaves [7] the use of school suspensions fits within a zero tolerance framework and seeks to reduce challenging behaviors. However, research finds that suspensions reduce the chances of students completing their education and can impair employment opportunities and student's futures [8]. Suspensions from school can shift a problem to the community allowing unsupervised students to engage in activities that may lead to physical injury, property loss, and increased medical police or juvenile justice costs. Suspensions often do not benefit students. Schools that make frequent use of suspension have students and staff that experience a less positive school climate, a lower sense of security, and poor academic results [9]. Students who do not want to attend school or enjoy school are actually given what they want when they are suspended.

Hemphill & Hargreaves [7] research found that within twelve months of being suspended from their schools, students are fifty percent more likely to engage in anti-social behavior; seventy percent are more likely to engage in violent behavior. Preventing students from being suspended or expelled and efforts to increase attendance are all extremely important to student success.

Goran and Gage [10] examined the relationship between language, behavior, cognitive ability, and academic performance of students with disabilities. Students with high incidences disabilities, emotional disturbance (ED) and learning disabilities (LD), are more likely to be suspended from school. Students with ED typically display academic deficits and have troubles with behaviors – internalizing (withdrawal and depression) and externalizing behaviors (aggression and lack of compliance). Many students with LDs display problems with using language, spoken or written, which hinders their abilities to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, and do math. The study examined 142 students identified with ED and LD (ED $n=25$ and LD $n=117$). Cognitive ability was assessed based on ability to reason and problem solve. Academic performance was assessed by the researchers using the Missouri Assessment Program (achievement tests). History of suspension was also studied. The results indicate that there is a significant effect on language skills, academic, and cognitive ability. Cognitive ability had a significant impact on academic performance. Surprisingly, there was also a significant association between disabilities and history of suspensions [10].

School attendance determines the potential benefits that students can received from instruction. The more school a child misses, the more he or she is at risk for decreased academic attainment, grade retention, poor self-esteem, school dropout, and ultimately lower standards of living as adults [3]. The potential consequence of missing school pertains to both regular and special education students. Redmond & Hosp[11] examined the impact of school attendance on the grade point averages (GPAs) of fifth graders: 70 receiving regular education and 17 receiving services for learning disability (LD). For all students, there is a negative association between absenteeism and students' GPA, leading to a weak but significant trend for a student's GPA to decrease when days absent increased [3]. As a result, inconsistent attendance will place students at increased risk for academic failure and possibly reduce the amount of potential benefit that students can gain from therapeutic services.

All signs point to school absentee rate being an important education concern. Although regular attendance does not guarantee that students will learn and achieve a higher grade point average (GPA), poor attendance can hinder learning. As the above research suggests, there is a strong relationship between school attendance, the number of courses passed, the more of a possibility of delinquency, and these problems can also impact students with disabilities [11]. However, there is little research that looks specifically at attendance issues and whether these are impacting the achievement of students identified as special education. That is the goal of the current investigation.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study's population consisted of all individuals from the National Adolescent Health public data set [12]. A full description of the data collection is provided at <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth>. A random sample of student responses was drawn from the publically available data set. Students were identified as special education ($n = 62$), and as not identified as special education ($n = 1105$). The responses to the survey were taken from both student responses to a few survey questions. The following item responses were incorporated into this investigation:

- a) How many times (have you been/were you absent) from school for a full day with an excuse – for example because you were sick or out of time?
- b) How many times did you skip school for a full day without an excuse?
- c) Have you ever received an out-of-school suspension from school?
- d) Have you ever been expelled from school?
- e) In the last month, how often did a health or emotional problem cause you to miss a day of school?

GPA was computed using the students reported grades in their core classes. Students who did not answer all of the items included were eliminated from the data that was used for this investigation.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

An Independent Sample's t Test revealed that there are significant differences across special education students and regular education students on mean GPA; special education students received an average GPA of 3.00 and non-special education students received a 2.21. There were no significant differences found for skipping school, suspended from school, or school expulsion across the two groups, $p < .05$. However, there were significant differences in "How many times have you been absence for a full day with an excuse?" across the two groups, $t = -2.25$ (1171), $p = 0.025$, CI_{95} [-.468, -.032]. The mean for excused absences for special education students is 1.87 and for non-special education students is 1.62. While this result is statistically significant, it does not present a practically significant difference. Additionally, there were significant differences found for "In the last month, how often did a health or emotional problem cause you to miss a day of school?", $t(68) = -2.66$, $p = 0.02$, CI_{95} [-.407, -.093], across the two groups.

4. DISCUSSION

Research suggests that non-special education students usually perform poorer than students who do not have disabilities because of issues that create achievement gaps for the special students [13]. However, according to the findings of the current investigation, this is not the case. There may be many reasons why these results contradict previous findings. Students not receiving special education may participate in a more difficult curriculum and have a stricter grading scale. The students in special education group may also overcompensate for their academic difficulties and work harder, or may have greater parent involvement in their school work, therefore, resulting in higher GPAs. These results, although drawn from a random sample of a larger national data set, could simply reflect some sampling bias.

Overall, the hypothesis was not strongly supported that special education student's GPA is affected by the number of days they miss school or the reason for the absence. There was not enough evidence to support the hypothesis because of the small sample population of students who identified as special education ($n = 62$), and the few days missed by students in both groups. However, it is generally accepted that the more a student attends school the more likely they are to be academically successful [3]. Students identified as special education did report more missed days that were excused or were due to physical or emotional health issues. This finding is unique, and not found in other recent studies.

According to existing research, there is a continuing need to encourage students to attend school, for a variety of reasons [2],[3],[5],[6],[11]. And the problem has existed sometime for special education students. For example, Lich et al., [5] evaluated a program to modify the school attendance of special education (SE) students in high school to determine if these students would attend more if they were given rewards. Lich et al.'s study demonstrated that reward programs can reduce the absenteeism of special education high school students. Other research suggests that a variety of strategies might be needed in order to prevent truancy, and poor behaviors that lead to skipping, suspension, and expulsion [3],[4]. The CAIBS investigation [1] indicates that the issue of low school attendance is a chronic one, and one that can negatively impact student success in school, specifically for students with special needs.

More research is needed that focuses on special education students as a whole, including those who have identified as other health impairments, multiple, serious physical impairment, deaf-blindness, and autism, as this study did not include in-depth information on these individuals. There is a lack of research examining school attendance and success for students with special needs. While a number of studies have identified achievement gaps for the special education and low incidence disabilities groups [14] no recent studies have specifically identified if those achievement gaps exist because of continuing absenteeism issues specific to these groups.

5. CONCLUSION

This investigation examined the impact of not being physically present in the classroom, due to the student's physical illness, mental illness, or excused absences for doctor visits. Unique from other studies, this investigation also examined the impact of suspension, expulsion, and reported frequency of skipping school, for students identified with disabilities relative to those who are not. As indicated above, more focus on providing students with meaningful and engaging opportunities at school can have a big impact on the likelihood that students will miss school, or even skip school. Building a sense of a learning community for all types of students can create a supportive culture that young people desire to participate in, potentially mitigating the frequency of absences from school. An engaging learning community culture can provide a social bridge to help students with disabilities identify more significantly with their peers and their school experiences.

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Elizabeth Christani is a graduate assistant within the Beeghly College of Education with a specialized focus in accreditation at Youngstown State University. She is studying to become a school psychologist. She currently holds a degree as an Intervention Specialist: Mild to Moderate from Kent State University.



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Karen Larwin, Ph.D. acquired her Ph.D. from Kent State University in Evaluation, Measurement, and Statistics in 2007. She currently serves as a professor at Youngstown State University. Dr. Larwin has participated as the evaluator on multiple federal and statewide grant supported projects over the past decade. Her primary teaching focus is in the area of research methods, quantitative methods, evaluation, and measurement. She is currently a Chair for the American Evaluation Association's Quantitative Methods: Theory and Design TIG.