

FOREWORD

THIS IS A TIMELY VOLUME. Its publication occurs just as the majority of school districts in the United States will begin to regularly measure and publish the percentage of students who miss 10 percent or more of the school year (about 18 days in a typical 180-day school year). As a result of the federal Every Students Succeeds Act, passed in 2015, thirty-six states plus the District of Columbia have included measures of chronic absenteeism in their school accountability systems. The first school and district report cards to include a school's chronic absenteeism rate will be released during the 2018–19 school year. As a result, interest in learning more about what chronic absenteeism is, what is known about it, and what can be done to reduce it will be as high as it has ever been.

That makes this an important volume, as current knowledge and understanding of chronic absenteeism is low. Attendance has been recorded and reported ever since schooling became universal. Students typically receive report cards that list total days absent to date, and states have had compulsory school attendance laws on the books for over a hundred years. It was not until 2016, however, that the US Department of Education released the first data it ever published on chronic absenteeism. Thus, it remains the rare principal who can tell you from memory what percent of his or her students are chronically absent.

What most principals will be able to tell you is their school's average daily attendance. This is a measure that shows the percent of enrolled students present in school on a typical day and, historically, is the attendance measure used to determine school funding and accountability. It is typical for schools to have attendance rates around 90 percent. That *seems* OK, as schooling has

taught us that anything in the 90s equals an A, which is good. But an attendance rate of 90 percent means the typical student is missing 10 percent of class time, or almost a month of learning.

It may sound obvious to say that student attendance and engagement in schoolwork is a mandatory part of learning, but it is constantly overlooked as a primary mechanism for improving student achievement. Policy makers and educators often view increasing attendance as a low-level goal, claiming it's not enough to just get students to show up and what matters is what they're being taught. However, there is increasing recognition that a focus on content and curriculum do not matter if students are not fully engaged in the lessons teachers prepare. It can seem okay for students to miss class now and then, but you never know when a student will miss something—information or a key assignment—that makes them fall behind. And catching up is much harder than keeping up.

Thus, until recently chronic absenteeism has been hiding in plain sight as a key mechanism for understanding differences in student achievement and for changing practice to improve it. This volume does a great service by pulling back the covers. It shows both what we know about chronic absenteeism, what we are learning, and what remains to be understood. Each of these is important.

What we know, and what this volume reinforces, is that being in school on a regular basis matters. This may seem self-evident, but decades of disparagement of the public education system have created a sense that not much of value is going on in schools. This volume clearly shows that being in school leads to student learning and educational advancement, and being chronically absent undermines student success. Every missed day matters, whether the student's absence was formally excused, unexcused, or the result of the school's actions via a suspension.

What we are learning is two-fold. First, though attendance is easy to measure, whether the student is in school or not, how we define chronic absenteeism and measure it is complex. This volume shows that we must thoughtfully approach what might seem like simple measurement issues. Second, solutions to chronic absenteeism will need to involve educators working collaboratively with students, families, and the community. This will be nearly as big a change for some schools as measuring chronic absenteeism is. A long-standing belief that will need to be overcome is that it is the school's responsibility to teach those students who attend and that it is the responsibility of families and

the students themselves to do what is needed to attend school regularly. Yet, research shows that educators can influence student attendance through the ways that they engage with students and their families. And there are issues that cut across schools, families, and community, such as transportation and health, that can induce chronic absenteeism and must be combated through integrated efforts.

The research on chronic absenteeism is young, and there is much work that remains to be done. We know that students who are chronically absent in one year, absent effective intervention, are more likely to be chronically absent in future years. Yet, few studies have been able to document and understand these patterns and their relationship with student achievement. School, district, and state data systems are rarely designed to record patterns of absenteeism over multiple years or the amount of school time lost when students transfer between districts or between schools within the same district. Finally, and perhaps uncomfortably for both scholars and school administrators, we need to understand how the evaluation of effective and ineffective school reforms has been biased by not measuring attendance. That means learning the extent to which students attended school regularly enough to benefit from the reform, whether the intervention itself influenced attendance in ways which had potentially adverse effects that undermined it, or beneficial effects that explain the real success of the program. Hopefully this is the first of many scholarly volumes on the measurement, impact, and solutions for chronic absenteeism.

Now that the cover has been pulled back, it's time to fully discover what we have been missing.

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