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Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data

Why Does Attendance Matter?

Every school day counts in a child's academic life...

A missed school day is a lost opportunity for students to learn. In this era of increased accountability for states, districts, and schools, the connection between student attendance and learning is being studied more than ever before. As a result, education agencies are asked with increasing frequency to report attendance data in a standard manner to allow comparisons across organizations and jurisdictions.

The primary rationale for high-quality attendance data is the relationship between student attendance and student achievement. Teacher effectiveness is the strongest school-related determinant of student success,[1] but chronic student absence reduces even the best teacher's ability to provide learning opportunities. Students who attend school regularly have been shown to achieve at higher levels than students who do not have regular attendance. This relationship between attendance and achievement may appear early in a child's school career. A recent study looking at young children found that absenteeism in kindergarten was associated with negative first grade outcomes such as greater absenteeism in subsequent years and lower achievement in reading, math, and general knowledge.[2]

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT ATTENDANCE IS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT.

Poor attendance has serious implications for later outcomes as well. High school dropouts have been found to exhibit a history of negative behaviors, including high levels of absenteeism throughout their childhood, at higher rates than high school graduates.[3] These differences in absentee rates were observed as early as kindergarten, and students who eventually dropped out of high school missed significantly more days of school in first grade than their peers who graduated from high school. In eighth grade, this pattern was even more apparent and, by ninth grade, attendance was shown to be a key indicator significantly correlated with high school graduation.[4]

The effects of lost school days build up one absence at a time on individual students. Penalties for students who miss school may unintentionally worsen the situation. The disciplinary response to absenteeism too often includes loss of course credits, detention, and suspension. Any absence, whether excused or not, denies students the opportunity to learn in accordance with the school's instructional program, but students who miss school are sometimes further excluded from learning opportunities as a consequence of chronic absenteeism.