



Buffalo Public Schools

Putting children and families first to ensure high academic achievement for all

RESEARCH CAPSULE

Research Services

Vol. 11
February, 2018

Erica J. Boyce, Program Evaluator

Absenteeism and School Dropout

AT A GLANCE

High school graduation is critical for long-term success in multiple life areas including employment, relationships, and health. Relatedly, high absenteeism and school dropout rates have been linked to several negative outcomes such as lower earned income, higher rates of criminal justice involvement, and greater health disparities among those who have not completed high school. During the 2016-2017 school year, almost 35% of BPS elementary and 49% of high school students were either chronically (missing 10.1-20% of eligible schools days) or severally absent (20.01% or more eligible school days) (2016-17 BPS Attendance Report). Relatedly, BPS reported a 63% graduation rate for 2017 (Data.NYSED.gov.) Although these statistics are continuing to improve, it is important to understand factors related to both attendance and dropout rates. This research capsule summarizes recent research findings regarding various spheres of influence that frequently impact student engagement.

According to the June 2016 release of the first national data on chronic absences, missing too much school is a national crisis that affects more than 6.5 million students (Chang, 2015). Students who have poor attendance also tend to experience negative consequences. Higher school absenteeism is associated with many serious problems such as social and emotional disorders, lower reading and mathematics test scores, lower academic performance and achievement, fewer literacy skills, grade retention, antisocial behavior, juvenile justice system involvement, drug and alcohol abuse, and dropout (Bridgeland, 2006; Henderon, 2016; Murat, 2015; Loraine, 2017; McCray, 2006; McCluskey et al., 2004; Gottfried 2009, 2011; Chin, 2016). Additionally, students who are frequently absent from school have a higher likelihood of experiencing school dropout.

Several negative economically-related outcomes have been associated with low attendance and school dropout rates. Students dropping out of high school are more likely to be unemployed and receive public welfare (Jia, 2015; Ricard, 2016; Child trends.org, Kyung-Eun, 2017; Hanushek, 2006; Oreopoulos, 2007;

Lansford, 2016; Wilkins, 2016; Wang, 2016; Archanbault, 2009; Belfield, 2007; Sanford et al., 2011). Young people who drop out of high school are unlikely to have the minimum skills and credentials necessary to function in a technology-dependent workplace. Additionally, high school completion is typically required for accessing post-secondary education. A high school diploma is associated with higher incomes and occupational status. On average, the annual median income of a high school dropout is \$25,000, compared to \$46,000 for an individual with a high school or equivalent degree (Child trends.org). Additionally, young adults with low education and skill levels are more likely to live in poverty, be unemployed, have limited occupational choices, and to receive government assistance (Child trends.org, Kyung-Eun, 2017).

Not only do the individual high school dropout students experience a long-term economic impact from their lack of education, the entire economy is affected. National estimates suggest that each high school dropout costs the U.S. economy at least \$250,000 over their lifetime because of greater reliance on welfare and Medicaid, more criminal activity, poorer health, and lower tax contributions (Lansford, 2016). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) estimated that if the 2011 U.S. dropouts had graduated, the U.S. economy would have benefited by about \$154 billion dollars over their lifetimes.

Student with high absenteeism rates and school dropouts are also at increased risk for mental health problems, health disparities, gang memberships, and deviant behavior (Lansford, 2016; Wilkins 2016; Jia, 2015; Wang, 2016; Hanushek, 2006; Oreopoulos, 2007; Bridgeland, 2006). They tend to have higher levels of depression and feelings of alienation, which can result in physical and mental health problems (Ricard, 2016). An increased frequency of delinquent behavior can lead to criminal activity and incarceration both as juveniles and adults (Ricard, 2016; Wang, 2006; Oreopoulos, 2007). Finally, research has shown greater health disparities and poorer health among those who have not completed high school (Chang, 2015; Wood, 2016; Lansford, 2016; Wilkins, 2016).

Factors Impacting Attendance and School Dropout Rates

Research has shown that students' decision to attend and/or complete school is impacted by several spheres of influence including individual, family, school, and neighborhood. The following summary highlights the more consistently reported factors.

One of the most frequently reported individual factors consists of students' mental and emotional health status. Students who have poor health in these areas tend to have lower attendance rates and higher dropout incidents (Wang 2014; Smith, 2012; Fried, 2016; Kyung, 2017; Archinbault, 2017). Students reporting higher levels of anxiety including both diagnosable anxiety disorders and more specifically learning anxiety attended fewer days of school and did not complete high school as frequently as students without anxiety issues (Wang 2014). High rates of anxiety can interfere with student performance, motivation, and willingness to go to school (Hancock, 2001).

Research has also shown that students diagnosed with ADHD also tend to have higher dropout rates and lower attendance patterns. Breslau (2011) et al.'s study of 29,662 participants showed that ADHD predicted failure to achieve on-time graduation from high school. ADHD makes a significant contribution to grade retention and high school dropout in youth independently of IQ, social class, and learning disabilities (Fried, 2016). Special education status has also received attention regarding its association with higher dropout rates (Smith, 2012). However Wood's (2016) research regarding factors predictive of high school dropout did not find a significant relationship between special education and an incomplete high school experience.

Grade retention and academic performance are additional individual factors that have been found predictive of high school dropout (Bowers et al., 2013; Jimerson, 2002; Archinbault, 2017). Research has shown that repeating a grade increases the likelihood that a student will eventually drop out of school (Bernard, 2005; Mingat, 2002; Kabay, 2016). Students are more likely to drop out of school if they have one or more years of retention in a grade (Cabus, 2016).

Some studies suggest that factors like students' academic performance (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000), history of absenteeism, and general disengagement are important and critical factors that could also predict dropping out of high school (Ricard, 2016). Bowers and colleagues (2013) identified low achievement as the primary student-level predictor across studies (Bowers, 2013; Jimerson, 2002).

Individual demographics have also commonly been associated with dropout and attendance rates. Male students tend to have a higher likelihood of not completing school with the exception of female students who get pregnant (Archinbault, 2017; Hicks-courant, 2016; Wilkins, 2016). Furthermore, students classified as English Language Learners (ELLs) have higher dropout rates than their peers with the risk of dropout increasing the longer a student is designated as an ELL student (Kim, 2011). Prior research on demographics also suggested that race and ethnicity were strongly associated with truancy among youth in middle and high schools (Henry 2007). Poverty appeared to be one of the strongest demographic correlates with truancy (Aud et al. 2012; Finlay 2006; Zhang et al. 2007).

Family Factors

Several family factors impact student commitment to school; however, family-level poverty is one of the strongest indicators (Kyung, 2017; Jia, 2015; Chin, 2016, Wilkins, 2016). This may be attributable to many related reasons such as not having appropriate resources for learning available along with the stress-induced environment as a result of living in a low income household (Kyung, 2017; Jia, 2015; Chin, 2016; Murat, 2015). Chang and Romero (2008) indicated that poor children were more likely to have chronic absences than their peers due to factors like homelessness, high mobility, and living in single-parent households (Chin, 2016).

Studies have found that a student's relationship to parents and teachers can significantly predict their academic motivation and educational outcomes (Ricard, 2016). Parent support for basic psychological needs was predictive of students' commitment to school (Ricard, 2016). Children with a lack of parental social support, family conflict, and maltreatment including abuse reported lower attendance and higher dropout rates (Kyung, 2017; Archinabault, 2017).

Many parents of truant children tend not to value education as highly as other parents typically do, which results in the educational neglect that causes truancy (Kyung, 2017). Such lack of investment may be due to negative educational personal experiences. It is important that schools create a welcoming atmosphere for families and convey the message that family participation is wanted and valued. Krauss and Zelden (2017) indicated that when parents are actively aware of and involved in their children's lives, their children are more likely to be both cognitively and emotionally engaged in school and parents are more likely to encourage their children to be academically successful.

School Factors

School-level factors serve as important indicators of student attendance and commitment to education. The demographics of a high school are consistently associated with its dropout rates. Schools with higher

proportions of low-income students, typically measured by the percentage eligible for free or reduced price meals, have consistently higher dropout rates (Archinbault, 2017; Jia, 2015). When comparing schools with high and low dropout rates, Christle (2007) found that schools with greater dropout rates had a significantly higher percentage of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Research also indicates that the percentage of nonwhite students in schools is significantly associated with higher dropout rates (Christle et al., 2007) and that larger schools tend to have higher dropout rates. Many studies report that schools in urban areas have exceptionally high dropout rates, perhaps because of higher rates of poverty and other risk factors (Jia, 2015).

School climate is a multidimensional construct that has been broadly defined as the quality and character of school life (Jia, 2015). It has been found that student outcomes are most likely to improve when a caring and supportive school environment is combined with a focus on learning and high expectations for student achievement (Wilkins, 2016; Kyung, 2017; Murat, 2015). Having a connection to an adult in the school setting can increase students' sense of belonging in school. Research on mentoring indicates that even informal relationships with caring adults can increase the likelihood that students with disabilities will graduate (Wilkins, 2016, Archinbault, 2017).

Neighborhood Factors

Neighborhoods are commonly believed to influence behavior, attitudes, values, and opportunities including educational attainment. Influenced by Wilson's (1987) seminal book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, modern neighborhood research has focused on dimensions of neighborhood disadvantage, especially the geographic isolation of poor, African-American, single-parent families with children (Sampson, 2002). The range of adolescent outcomes associated with concentrated disadvantage includes infant mortality, low birth weight, teenage childbearing, dropping of high school, and child maltreatment (Sampson, 2002).

Research has also identified that students who reside and/or attend school in communities that are structurally disorganized or economically challenged face a higher level of exposure to hazardous situations that increases the risk of deviant behavior for youth who are already exposed to a series of at-risk factors in family and school environments (Kyung, 2017). In particular, truancy has been a critical and long lasting challenge for educators in urban schools. In a regional analysis of truancy in six states, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) estimated that up to one-third of students in high poverty urban areas are chronically absent, defined as missing school 10% or more of a school year. In that study, the chronic absence rates in urban areas appeared to rise in middle school with an incremental upward trend continuing through 12th grade (Chin, 2016).

Additional research found that children growing up in affluent neighborhoods appeared to do better than children in low-income neighborhoods. This result persisted even when family-level differences were controlled (Gunn, 1993). Living in a low-poverty neighborhood has been found to reduce the rate of high school dropout by about 12 percentage points, almost halving the dropout rate (Harding, 2003). However, researchers have cautioned that estimates of neighborhood effects on high school graduation, years of schooling, and teenage non-marital childbearing are extremely sensitive to the individual and family characteristics for which one controls (Harding, 2003).

Conclusion

As the research suggests, absenteeism and school dropout are complex, multi-level issues that require school districts to use equivalently complicated approaches when addressing attendance and graduation rates. A large portion of the students attending the Buffalo Public School System face many of the issues cited in the literature and most recently published research. As a District, we must continue to find ways of combatting the issues and most importantly, methods to successfully engage students and families in their academic path. Continued research regarding both attendance and graduation needs to be completed to further understand at-risk youth including the impact of recent school climate issues experienced throughout the nation.

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