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Absenteeism: Ramifications for Students, Schools, and Parents

Two days a month. That doesn't sound like much, does it? But a student who misses two days of school a month misses almost twenty days a year—almost a month of missed educational opportunities. It does not matter whether the absence is excused or unexcused. Two days a month is all it takes for a student to miss an average 10 percent or more of a school year, fitting the prevalent definition of “chronically absent.”

Schools, school boards, and parents must work collaboratively to ensure that all students, regardless of grade level, reap the benefits of being in the classroom.

The ramifications for students are clear. When students are chronically absent from elementary school, they are far less likely to be proficient in critical areas like reading at an appropriate grade level. They frequently have lower standardized test scores and grade point averages. As early as the sixth grade, chronic absenteeism is a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school. In addition, students fall behind in forming meaningful relationships with their peers and educators.

But ramifications for schools and parents also stem from students' chronic absenteeism (which includes absences for any reason). States frequently use chronic absenteeism as a measure of school success and quality under the Every Student Succeeds Act, which also requires districts and states to collect and disseminate data on chronic absenteeism. Thus, schools and districts in these states can be held accountable if they experience high rates of absenteeism.

Districts are also tasked with

monitoring truant students or those with excessive unexcused absences. Often, this monitoring requires investigations that take time and resources away from other areas worthy of an educator or administrator's attention. Depending on the jurisdiction, schools may be required to report to and work with law enforcement if unexcused absences reach a certain level. Failure to do so could result in criminal sanctions for school personnel.

Failure to send a child to school can have negative consequences for parents as well. Parents are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their school-age children show up for classes and could face investigation and criminal sanctions over a truant child. In some circumstances—for instance, if a state includes “educational neglect” as a category of abused and neglected children—an extreme consequence may be the involvement of the state's child abuse response system.

The COVID-19 pandemic will likely cause states to reevaluate accountabilities based on chronic absenteeism, with several likely seeking waivers. As we move forward, however, it will become more vital than ever to ensure that students do not regress after losing classroom time to COVID-19. This disruption will necessitate a renewed emphasis on minimizing absenteeism.

No one wants children to fall behind. The best way to prevent it is to educate parents and school staff on the necessity and benefits of attendance, as well as the educational and legal consequences of chronic absence. Working together, they can ensure a student's regular, adequate attendance at school. ■