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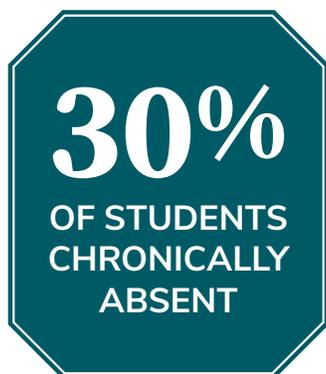
CRANE CENTER FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD
RESEARCH AND POLICY

Absenteeism in Elementary School Has Wide-Ranging Consequences, Especially for Minoritized Children

**Early absenteeism can affect not only academic skills
but executive function, social-emotional skills, and
feelings of belonging**

Arya Ansari, Ph.D.

Across the country, many states have begun to track absenteeism from school as a marker of performance by including measures of children’s school attendance in their state accountability plans (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). This was true even before the COVID-19 pandemic, which only exacerbated challenges in student attendance (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). For instance, in the 2021-22 school year in Ohio, more than 30% of students were deemed chronically absent, defined as missing at least 10% of school days, nearly double the pre-pandemic rate (Ohio Department of Education, 2022).



Improving school attendance among children in the early elementary school years has been a focal point of discussions long before the pandemic, given that the early years of education serve as a key means for expanding opportunity for children from economic disadvantage (Reardon, 2011). Unfortunately, many children in the United States are at risk of frequent absences from school because they experience a great deal of hardship, including children of color and those from low-income homes (Morrissey et al., 2013). Consequently, school absenteeism is likely to limit the benefits of educational programs, especially for children facing adversity (Gershenson et al., 2017). Of note is that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened existing inequities that are associated with absenteeism, including with respect to financial difficulties and mental health challenges (Steimle et al., 2021).

Even though the long-term consequences of school absenteeism have long been recognized (e.g., Ansari et al., 2020), there has been little attention paid to the non-academic effects of missing school during the early school years.

A richer portrait of absenteeism in the early years of education is needed to help identify barriers and supports for students and families as well as solutions for schools held accountable for student attendance.

Accordingly, this research brief addresses these gaps in knowledge and provides greater insight into the ways in which educators, policymakers, and researchers can intervene to ensure that America’s youngest children reap the maximum benefit from early schooling.

DATA AND RESEARCH GOALS

14,370
KINDERGARTENERS

To examine the outcomes of school absenteeism and its associations with children's school success, nationally representative data from 14,370 kindergarteners from over 800 schools across the United States were collected during the 2010-2011 school year as part of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. These children were followed through the end of fifth grade in 2015-2016. Each year, children's academic learning and executive functioning were directly assessed, and their socioemotional skills and school absences were reported on by their teachers. In fifth grade, children reported on their own social and emotional adjustment.

These data were used to examine:

the frequency with which children were absent from school between kindergarten and fifth grade along with disparities across racial/ethnic and income groups;

the extent to which absenteeism in kindergarten through fifth grade was associated with children's academic achievement, executive function, and socioemotional development at the end of those school years;

whether there were cumulative effects of absenteeism between kindergarten and fifth grade; and

whether the associations between school absenteeism and children's outcomes varied across grade levels and for different groups of children.

All analyses were weighted to be nationally representative and all inferential analyses controlled for a rich set of *child characteristics* (e.g., race/ethnicity, health), indicators of *children's educational experiences* (e.g., enrollment in preschool), *household characteristics* (e.g., income, household resources), and *school-going practices and routines* (e.g., transportation).

FINDINGS

The Frequency of Elementary School Absences are Highest in Kindergarten

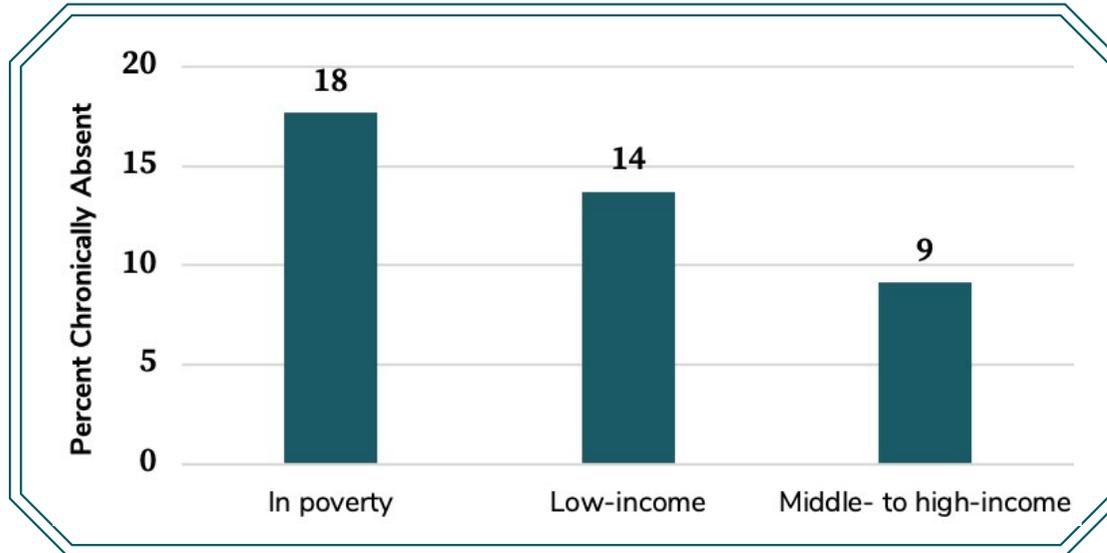
Across the elementary school years, absenteeism was highest in kindergarten and steadily improved over time. More specifically, in kindergarten, children missed an average of 6 days of school, which dropped to roughly 4-5 days of school between first and fifth grade. Collectively, across the first six years of education, children missed an average of 32 days of school. In kindergarten, however, 13% of children were chronically absent (meaning that they missed at least 10% of the school year) whereas 8-9% of children were chronically absent between first and fifth grade. Children who were chronically absent for more than one year missed roughly 73 days of school. These figures reflect the national data captured from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study between 2010 and 2016, but it is worth noting that chronic absenteeism has increased markedly in the last several years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Absences Disproportionately Affect Minoritized Students

When looking at the rates of absenteeism by different demographic subgroups, important patterns emerged. As can be seen in Figure 1, children in poverty were almost twice as likely to be classified as chronically absent between kindergarten and fifth grade relative to children who were from middle- to high-income households. And as can be seen in Figure 2, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and Alaska Natives, were at greatest risk of being classified as chronically absent across all years of elementary school, with an average rate of chronic absenteeism of roughly 19%. Hispanic children were also slightly more likely to be chronically absent relative to white, Black, and Asian children between kindergarten and fifth grade. Asian students on the other hand, were the only group of non-white children who had lower rates of absenteeism relative to white children.

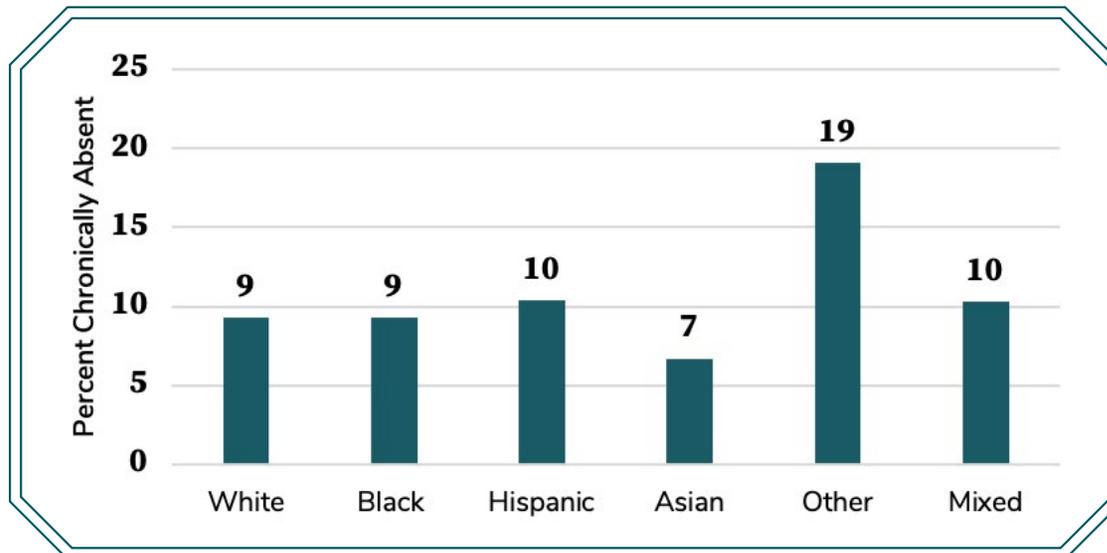


Figure 1. Rates of chronic absenteeism by household income levels between kindergarten and fifth grade.



Note. In poverty included children whose families had an income that was below 100% of the federal poverty threshold. Low-income included children whose families had an income that was between 100-200% of the federal poverty threshold. Middle- to high-income included children whose families had an income that was above 200% of the federal poverty threshold.

Figure 2. Rates of chronic absenteeism by race and ethnicity between kindergarten and fifth grade.



Note. The Other group includes Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and Alaska Natives.

School Absences have a Cumulative Effect and Across Multiple Domains

The frequency with which children were absent from school between kindergarten and fifth grade mattered for their school success across multiple domains of performance. More specifically, children who were more frequently absent in any year of elementary school performed less well on end of year assessments of math, language and literacy, cognitive flexibility, and working memory. According to teachers, children who were more frequently absent from school also demonstrated less optimal interpersonal skills and more externalizing and internalizing problems. Additionally, children who were more frequently absent reported themselves as experiencing greater school-related stress, lower levels of motivation, and lower levels of school belonging.



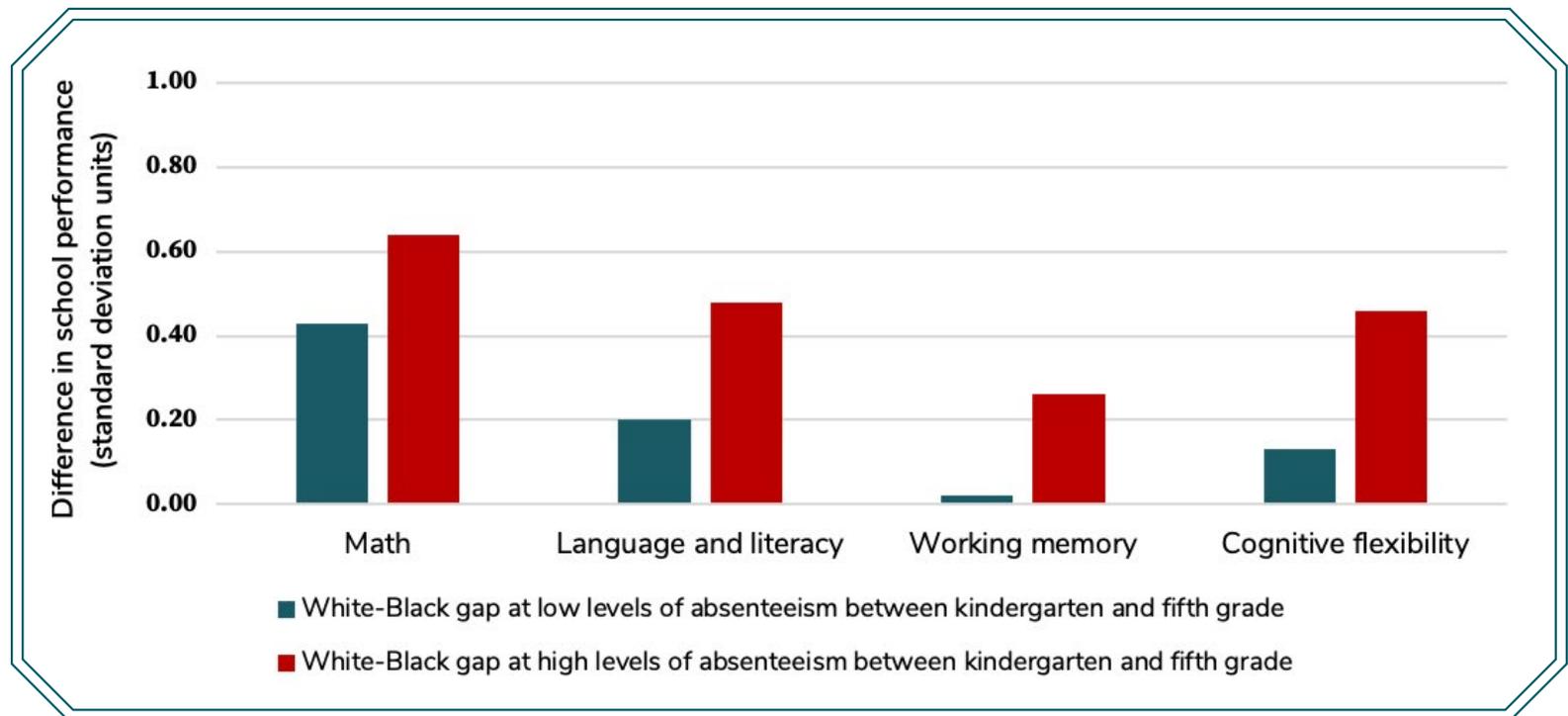
The magnitude of associations between absenteeism in the earliest years of elementary school was equally as large as absenteeism in the later years of elementary school. In other words, there are significant issues regarding absenteeism across all years of elementary education, regardless of grade level. With that said, cumulative effects did emerge across all outcome domains, such that the cumulative outcomes of absenteeism were 2 to 3x larger than the outcomes of absenteeism at any given grade level. Practically speaking, students who missed more time from school between kindergarten and fifth grade were at greatest risk for school difficulty, with each day of school missed being the equivalent of 2.50 days of lost math learning and 1.50 days of lost language and literacy learning.

Black Children are at Greatest Risk because of School Absences

Overall, the negative associations observed between absenteeism and children's learning and development did not consistently vary by household income. There was, however, some indication that the associations between absenteeism and academic achievement and executive function skills were larger for Black children relative to white children (see Figure 3). In other words, the Black-white opportunity gap was exacerbated among children who were absent more frequently in the elementary school years. When children were frequently absent, the opportunity gap in academic domains at the

end of fifth grade was roughly 1.5 to 2.4x larger than when children were infrequently absent. And in executive function domains, the gap between Black and white children at the end of fifth grade was approximately 2.5 to 12x larger when children were frequently absent from school. Collectively, these findings suggest that school attendance is likely to be an important contributor for leveling the playing field in academic and executive function domains.

Figure 3. An illustration of the associations between absenteeism between kindergarten and fifth grade and students' fifth grade achievement and executive function skills as a function race/ethnicity.



Adapted from “The Grade Level and Cumulative Outcomes of Absenteeism” by A. Ansari, M. Gottfried, 2021 *Child Development*, 92, p. e558. Copyright 2021 by the Society for Research in Child Development. Adapted with permission.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When taken together, this brief highlights the prevalence and consequences of absenteeism across the elementary school years. Findings suggest that certain groups of children are at greater risk for absenteeism problems and that regular attendance is of utmost importance in ensuring that children reap the maximum benefit from educational investments. Although addressing absenteeism is a complex issue, there are promising lessons learned that can help stakeholders in education navigate issues of school attendance.

More specifically, educators and administrators should:

- 1 Engage in frequent communication with the families of children about attendance expectations and the importance of regular attendance, even for the youngest elementary students.** Doing so is critical because educators and administrators cannot address attendance issues alone. Children's families are key figures in ensuring their children get to school, but some underestimate the importance of regular attendance, especially in the early years (Ehrlich et al., 2014; Malcolm et al., 2003).
- 2 Provide detailed information about how often children have been absent from school.** Doing so is vital because parents and caregivers often underestimate how frequently their children have missed school (Rogers & Feller, 2018). Providing families with information about their children's absences throughout the school year has been shown to promote better school attendance (Rogers & Feller, 2018).
- 3 Offer safe and reliable transportation to and from school.** Doing so is essential because children who have reliable transportation attend school more regularly (Gottfried, 2017).
- 4 Create a positive and supportive school climate, especially for children who identify with socially vulnerable groups** (Kosciw et al., 2012). Doing so is of utmost importance because when children feel happy and safe, they attend school more regularly (Gottfried & Gee, 2017).
- 5 Intervene as early as possible before small attendance problems become much bigger attendance problems.** Doing so is crucial because long-term trajectories of absenteeism are established as early as kindergarten (Ansari & Pianta, 2019).

Further, policymakers and researchers should:

- 6 Measure school absenteeism and chronic absenteeism more consistently and uniformly across children's educational careers.** Doing so is imperative given the evidence for cumulative effects of school absenteeism reported here. Measuring absenteeism more uniformly and consistently would also allow for more nuanced considerations of the effects of absenteeism across the elementary, middle, and high school years.
- 7 Consider the other non-testing outcomes of absenteeism.** Doing so is critical as much of the focus on student attendance to date has considered test score outcomes (e.g., Gershenson et al., 2017; Morrissey et al., 2013). The consideration of other non-testing outcomes, such as academic motivation and psychological well-being, would allow for a better understanding of the wide-ranging consequences of missing school.
- 8 Differentiate between the types and timing of absences within a year.** Doing so is necessary as the magnitude of associations between school absenteeism and student outcomes may vary as a function of the reason (e.g., illness vs. family vacations, Klein et al., 2022) and timing (e.g., fall vs. spring, Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017) of absences. Examining these more nuanced patterns will also allow for a better understanding of why absenteeism is associated with less optimal student outcomes.
- 9 Work collaboratively with school districts to understand gaps in practice and solutions for improving student attendance.** Doing so is critical as research-practice partnerships are a key vehicle for knowledge generation (Coburn & Penuel, 2016).
- 10 Build capacity for timely, data-based decision making, including support for the development of integrated data systems that allow for the sharing of information across education, health, and human service agencies.** Doing so can provide stakeholders with a cost-effective and promising opportunity to better understand the root causes and consequences of absenteeism (Fantuzzo et al., 2012).

More detailed analyses can be found in the [full study report](#).

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AUTHOR NOTE

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Crane Center for Early Childhood Research & Policy

The Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy, in The Ohio State University’s College of Education and Human Ecology, is a multidisciplinary research center dedicated to conducting high-quality research that improves children’s learning and development at home, in school, and in the community. Our vision is to be a driving force in the intersection of research, policy, and practice, as it relates to children’s well-being. Crane Center research briefs aim to provide research and insights on issues of pressing concern.



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