

Understanding Chronic Absenteeism and Examining a Strategy to Improve Attendance

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To better understand chronic absenteeism in Fulton County Schools, we analyzed the relationship between the school perception survey and attendance patterns and examined the Attendance Recovery Bus Pilot program. The school perception survey analysis suggests that student engagement plays a role, but there are other root causes to investigate. The Attendance Recovery Bus Pilot can improve the academic achievement of some students who are at risk of being absent, but it does not reduce schoolwide absenteeism during the pilot period studied.

What did we learn?

The student climate survey explains only a small portion of attendance differences across schools. Among survey topics, questions on School Buildings, Safety, and Security were most strongly linked to attendance, but the variation requires further study. With daily attendance data, we find that absences peak during weeks with multiple days off and at the end of the school year.

Attendance Recovery Bus usage patterns varied: About a third of students rode only once, while another third rode five or more times. Bus usage successfully targeted students with high absence patterns in the pre-pilot period. For moderate users, the pilot improved math achievement growth but did not affect reading.

Why is this issue important?

Georgia's chronic absenteeism rate has more than doubled in the post-pandemic period, yet its causes remain unclear. As the patterns of absenteeism and recovery differ across schools and communities, understanding these drivers is crucial for designing effective policies. Evidence on what interventions work can help ensure efforts are equitable and cost-effective, especially for students facing the greatest barriers to consistent attendance.

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What questions did we answer?

1. Is school climate related to student attendance patterns?
2. Do attendance patterns vary throughout the spring semester?
3. Did the Attendance Recovery Bus Pilot program improve student attendance and academic outcomes?
4. Which students benefited most from the Attendance Recovery Bus Pilot?

What data did we use?

We used administrative data from Fulton County Schools, including student-level daily attendance records, daily bus usage logs, and formative assessment scores. We also analyzed daily absence notes and parent outreach data from the two pilot schools and incorporated four years of school-level student perception survey data, measuring perceptions on school climate, safety, facilities, and learning environments.

What are the policy implications?

The root causes of chronic absenteeism and the most effective interventions to address it are complex and require more study. Efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism should build on pilot programs toward integrated strategies that address multiple barriers simultaneously. Holistic responses are needed, including student and family engagement, community partnerships, and targeted assistance for students facing persistent challenges.

Want to learn more?

Both reports are available at
gpl.gsu.edu/gpl-publications

The **Georgia Policy Labs** is an interdisciplinary research center in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University that works through a series of research-practice partnerships across the education pipeline to advance actionable, policy-relevant research to drive decision-making that best serves communities and ensure that all students, families, and communities thrive.

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