# ADDRESSING ABSENTEEISM: MYTHS, METHODS, AND MORALS

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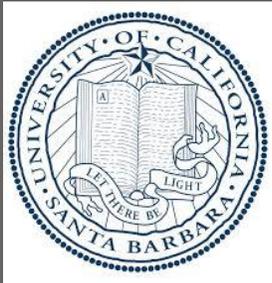
Absent from School

- A new collaborative book
  - Michael Gottfried, Ethan Hutt (Co-Editors)

Kaitlin Andersen (Lehigh)	Rekha Balu (MCRD)
Josh Childs (UT Austin)	Shaun Dougherty (Vanderbilt)
Sarah Cordes (Temple U)	Anna Egalite (NC State)
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Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk

- Two-part special issue
  - Michael Gottfried, Stacy Ehrlich(Co-Editors)

Arya Ansari (Ohio State U)	Ann E. Bailey (U of Minnesota)
Robert Balfanz (Johns Hopkins U)	Rekha Balu (MDRC)
Vaughan Byrnes (Johns Hopkins U)	Joshua Childs (U Texas Austin)
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Why Absences, Why Now?

Clearer Picture of Students' Paths through School

Better administrative data, empirical techniques provide clearer picture of scope, effects of missed school on education, life outcomes
- **5-7.5 million K-12 students are missing at least 1 month of school**

Renewed Policy Focus

Federal, state, and local officials have become invested in absenteeism
- **Not "just" an education issue. *Every Student, Every Day* was an Obama initiative involving ED, DOJ, HHS, HUD**

New Measure of Accountability

Under ESSA, states have more flexibility in selecting accountability measures
- **Majority of states have now included chronic absenteeism as school quality indicator**

To hold schools accountable for attendance…

We must assume…

- that <u>states</u> and <u>districts</u> can develop robust systems for accurately tracking student attendance

- that <u>researchers</u> can develop fair measures assessing schools on attendance metrics

- that <u>states</u>/<u>districts</u>/<u>schools</u> can affect student absenteeism

Important to figure out what we have learned; what need to learn; and what we need to <u>unlearn</u> about absenteeism.

MYTHS

Report of the Committee

ON

Uniform Records and Reports

TO THE

National Council

AT THE

St. Louis Meeting

February, 1912

I. Total number admitted. (The sum of a, b, c, and d)............

	Boys	Girls	Total
e) Temporarily dropped........................			
f) Transferred to another school or room.......			
g) Permanently withdrawn to work............			
h) Permanently withdrawn for other reasons....			

II. Total number discharged. (The sum of e, f, g, and h)............

III. Number belonging at the end of this month. (III'+I−II)......

	Boys	Girls	Total
onging (Total for all sessions)			
:sent (Total for all sessions)			
sent (Total for all sessions)			
:dy (Total for all sessions)			

used by the principal in finding attendance data for the school.
rt.)
: the average for the room may be found and recorded as indi-

	Boys	Girls	Total
2. Average number belonging (2' ÷ the number of sessions).......			
3. Average number present (3' ÷ the number of sessions).......			
4. Average number absent (4' ÷ the number of sessions).......			

IV. Per cent of attendance $(3' \div 2')$............%
V. Per cent of absence $(4' \div 2')$............%
$2' = 3' + 4'$ $2 = 3 + 4$ $IV + V = 100$ per cent. (These checks should be applied before handing in report.)

Explanation: Items a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h are to be obtained by counting the number of pupils recorded under each item according to "Directions to Teachers" accompanying the Daily Register.

Items 2', 3', 4', 5' may be summarized daily on the last four lines of the Register.

It is advised that pupils be admitted or discharged only for whole days, i.e., in the morning. The number of pupils belonging for the day will then be doubled to get the number belonging for both sessions. This number minus the number of absences for both sessions will agree with the number present for both sessions.

These daily summaries, added, give the totals required for 2', 3', 4', 5'. Totals 2', 3', 4', each divided by the whole number of sessions for the month, give the averages 2, 3, 4.

(This explanation would be omitted from regular form, and the space used for additional items that might be of local significance.)

....
Teacher

Absent A.M.	ǀ	Tardy A.M.	T
Absent P.M.	⌐	Tardy P.M.	⌐T
Absent All Day	ǀ ǀ		

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL RECORD SYSTEM—PROMOTION RECORD

This card is to pass from teacher to teacher or from school to school as the pupil is promoted or transferred. It is to be filled out and sent to the principal's office when any change is made requiring a change in the office records. It is then to be sent to the teacher who has the pupil.

School (a)	Date of Admission (b)	Age Sept. 1 (c)		Grade (d)	Room (e)	Days Present (f)	Health (g)	Conduct (h)	Scholarship (i)
		Yrs.	Mos.						
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(over)

(1) 1. Last name........(2) First name and initial........	ELEMENTARY SCHOOL RECORD SYSTEM— ADMISSION, DISCHARGE, AND PROMOTION CARD
(3) Place of birth........ | (4) Date of birth | (5) Vaccinated..	To be kept for every pupil and sent with the pupil when he is transferred to any school, either public or private, in the city or outside the city. Great care should be used to have the names complete and correct.
(6) Name of parent or guardian | (7) Occupation of parent or guardian	Write all dates as follows: 1912–9–25.

(8) Residence (Use one column at a time. Give new residence when pupil is transferred.)	(9) Date of discharge	(10) Age
		Yrs. | Mos.
....	....	... | ...
....	....	... | ...
....	....	... | ...

When a pupil is permanently discharged to work, to remain at home, or because of death, permanent illness, or commitment to an institution, this card is to be returned to the principal's office and a full statement of the cause of the pupil's discharge is to be made in the blank space remaining above.

8–304   (over)

The High Cost of Elementary School Absenteeism

High rates of absenteeism in elementary school have all too predictable outcomes. In 2013-2014, 1 in 4 low-income students failed to graduate from high school. African American and Native American students also had lower graduation rates than their White and Asian peers.[xlii]

> "California school districts have lost $4.5 billion in 4 years due to absenteeism."

The high cost of student absences in elementary school extend to lost revenues for school districts in California, revenues that could be used to improve the quality of education and outcomes for students who need it most. In 2014-15 alone, school districts statewide lost over $1 billion due to student absences.[xliii] These losses top $4.5 billion in four years.[8 9 10 11]

2015 survey data also confirm, as in previous years, that many individual districts lose millions of dollars each year due to student absences. One district reported a loss of $12 million dollars in the 2014-2015 school year alone.

Yet, even modest investments in programs to reduce student absences have significant payoffs. 2015 survey data confirm findings from the 2014 report.[xliv] Most school districts report spending less than $50,000 on truancy and chronic absence programs, while some districts recoup between $500,000 and $1 million dollars in ADA funding.

Myth #2: Measuring Absences is Straightforward

Incredible amount of variation in measurement practices

- Parental authorized versus student reported (Hancock et al 2014)
- Unexcused vs. Excused (& what is counts as excused) (Gottfried 2014)
  - Instances when high attendance is undesirable (e.g. lice/flu outbreak)

Definitional challenges lie ahead

- "Chronic absenteeism" widely used, variably defined
  - 10% of school year vs. number of days (cf Gottfried 2014; Jordan & Miller 2017)
- Not clear "threshold" is right approach (Gershenson 2017)

Myth #3: Biggest Problem is Teens Ditching Class

Young students miss a staggering amount of school

- 50% of 3-4 yr olds in Chicago miss 10% of Pre-K (Ehrlich et al 2013)
- 10% of K-1 students absent at least 10% of time (Chang & Davis 2015)

Early absences portent early gaps, future absences

- Absent preschoolers less prepared for kindergarten (Ehrlich et al 2018)
- Early absences patterns tend to persist in future years (Connolly & Olson 2012; Erlich et al 2012)

Myth #4: Schools can Easily Reduce Absences

Many factors associated beyond school control

- ☐ Health issues, mobility, disabilities (Gottfried et al in press; Hancock et al 2018)
- ☐ Relationship among factors complex, not necessarily malleable (e.g. Gee 2017)

Schools face limited resources, expanding program demands

- ☐ Vectors of intervention not easy to identify
- ☐ 'Home-grown' solutions often hard to scale, replicate, sustain

Myth #5: Parents Know Absences are Bad

Parents underestimate absences' effect on kids (Rodgers & Feller 2018)

▪ Often exacerbated in low-SES families (Abrams & Gibbs 2002; Epstein 2001)

▪ Sometimes a signal of parental disengagement

▪ Lack of school involvement, outreach

One issue is research has focused on family demographics

▪ Important to identify vectors for school intervention

▪ Address underlying factors not just "symptoms" of problem

Myths Dispelled, Now Questions (Part 1)

Unresolved questions regarding measurement

- As states begin holding schools accountable for absences, what measurement issues might arise?

- Can we use absenteeism to successfully identify students at risk for educational failure?

- What are reasonable goals for schools?

- Should these goals vary based on the grades and student populations served?

- What measurement pitfalls might arise, and how might they impact research and policymaking?

Myths Dispelled, Now Questions (Part 2)

Unresolved questions regarding resources needed

- What current/ongoing school-specific settings and existing programs might be contributing to absence reduction?

- Is there evidence that absenteeism interventions are successful?

- Which factors can be characterized as scalable and replicable?

- What best practices and learning lessons have emerged?

Summary

Focus on attendance has enormous potential, esp given cost

▫ Attendance interventions can improve scores ~.1 std (Aucejo & Romano 2015)

■ For comparison class size interventions (.05-.2 std) (Schnazenbach 2014)

■ 1/3 the size of teacher quality interventions (Gershenson et al 2017)

This cost-effective, scalable potential cannot blind us to immense challenges, potential perverse effects and also we must focus on key examples and learning lessons!

METHODS
(EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD)
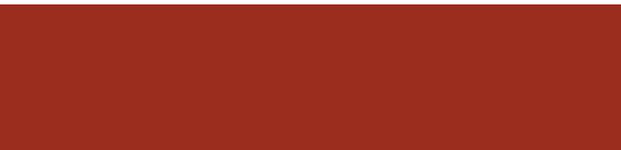
Motivation

1. **What explains chronic absenteeism in early elementary grades at the national level?**

   - Sorting out the influence of child and family factors as well as school-related factors

2. **How "much" of chronic absenteeism do these factors explain?**

   - Factors that help explain more of absenteeism, can be considered more important

   - So what?

     - Helps us identify factors that might be *manipulable.*

     - Helps us *prioritize* which factors we can address.

Child > Parent > School > Classroom

Factors together as a whole: 20%
Of that, half is attributable to prior absenteeism
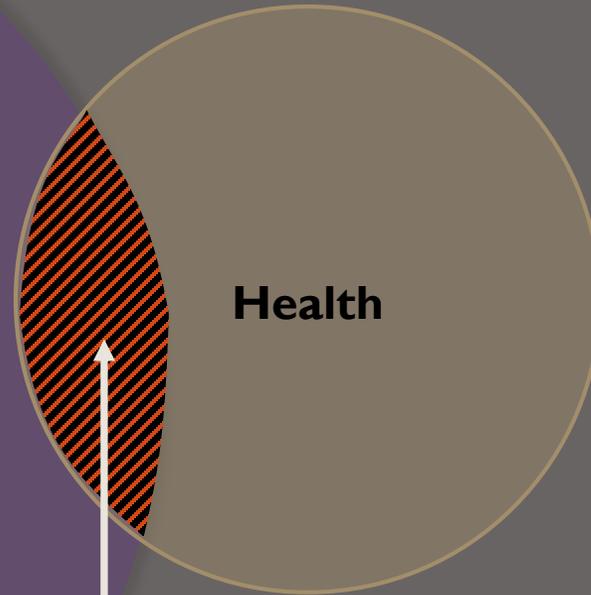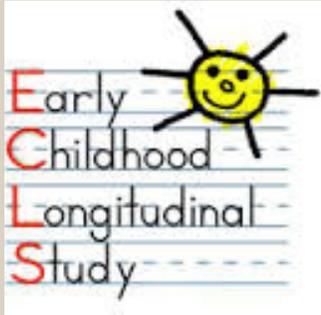
Child

Prior absenteeism	10.61%
Health	3.46%
Approaches to learning	2.14%
Race and ethnicity	1.09%
Home language	0.79%
Disability status	0.44%
Gender	0.07%
Child Total	15.13%

Family

Parental employment status	4.13%
Socioeconomic status	2.89%
Parental involvement	0.18%
Parent Total	5.80%

Classroom and School

Classroom Characteristics

Closeness to teacher	0.74%
High quality teacher	0.16%
Conflict with teacher	0.06%
Teacher years of experience	0.00%
Classroom Total	0.89%

School Characteristics

School theft, aggressive behaviors or bullying	0.79%
School race/ethnicity & poverty	0.56%
Teacher absenteeism	0.15%
School Total	1.45%

	Take Away	**Implication**
1	Multiple factors work in combination to explain absenteeism.	Chronic absenteeism is a holistic challenge, requiring holistic solutions.
2	When explaining absenteeism at the individual-level, child factors help explain the most, followed by family, then the classroom/school.	If you're seeking to address your overall chronic absenteeism rate, start by looking within schools and ask what is happening at the individual student level.
3	Prior absenteeism matters the most.	Efforts at reducing absenteeism in earliest grades will be critical to prevent chronic absenteeism in future grades.

CAUSAL

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Bismarck News

A new program allows kids to eat breakfast in the classroom

Schenectady's Lincoln Element serving breakfast in classroom

District officials hope that the move increases student participation in the

Breakfast After-the-Bell (BAB)

Breakfast is served in classrooms, rather than a cafeteria

Breakfast is available for students prior and after school has begun

BREAKFAST AFTER THE BELL

SETTING UP COLORADO'S CHILDREN FOR SUCCESS

Classroom Breakfast and Attendance

Routines

☐ Positive impact on attendance. <u>Why</u>:

1. School can be stressful and prompt negative attitudes about school (increasing absences)

2. Classroom breakfast cuts out many stressors (waiting in line, finding a place to eat)

Nutrition

☐ Malnourishment has been linked to lower rates of school attendance

☐ Breakfasts at school improve nutrition of students

☐ Especially when not in cafeterias (which breed illness)

Policy changes!

COLORADO — CDE — Department of Education

Breakfast After the Bell Nutrition Program HB 13-1006

Required Participants

To increase the number of low-income students receiving a healthy breakfast, the Colorado Legislature passed the Breakfast After the Bell Nutrition bill in May 2013. The program requires public schools with 70 percent or more students who are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, to offer all students a breakfast at no cost.

NDA — Nevada Department of Agriculture

Senate Bill 503 - Breakfast After the Bell

What is SB 503?

Signed into law on June 12, 2015, Senate Bill (SB 503) mandates that all schools with a free and reduced lunch eligibility of 70 percent or greater serve breakfast after the start of the school day. This bill is intended to increase access to breakfast so that students start the day well-nourished and ready to learn.

Causal Design

Sharp Discontinuity

280 schools: Comparing those with 60-69% to those with 70-79% eligible students

8% points decrease in chronic absenteeism for BAB schools in 2015-16

Fuzzy Discontinuity

1,820 schools: Comparing all schools in Colorado and Nevada

9% points decrease in chronic absenteeism for BAB schools in 2015-16

Implications

Research

- Breakfast location is a malleable factor for schools to potentially address chronic absenteeism

- More research is needed to provide an evidence-base for whether there are average treatment effects for BAB – or just state specific?

Policy

- Are the benefits worth the cost?
  - e.g. Cost of classroom breakfast vs. cost of absenteeism
- States are looking for all malleable factors to help schools reduce chronic absenteeism – but is this the silver bullet?

QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL

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FOUNDATION FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Full-Day Kindergarten and Students with Disabilities

Absences could increase or decrease!		
Longer school day	**Absences increase** • Full-day more taxing on development and attention, especially for SWDs' stress and anxiety about going to school increases	**Absences decrease** • **But,** longer day means more teacher time & more time with a special aide • Success and attitude about school increases, and so does attendance
Greater access to resources at school	**Absences increase** • SWDs end up missing more school because of outside appointments • Difficulty catching up to full-day material • Success and stress increase	**Absences decrease** • Longer access to disability resources and care at the school site • Fewer reasons to not be at school

50-State Comparison: State Kindergarten-Through-Third-Grade Policies

FIGURE 1: WHERE IS FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN REQUIRED?

■ D.C.
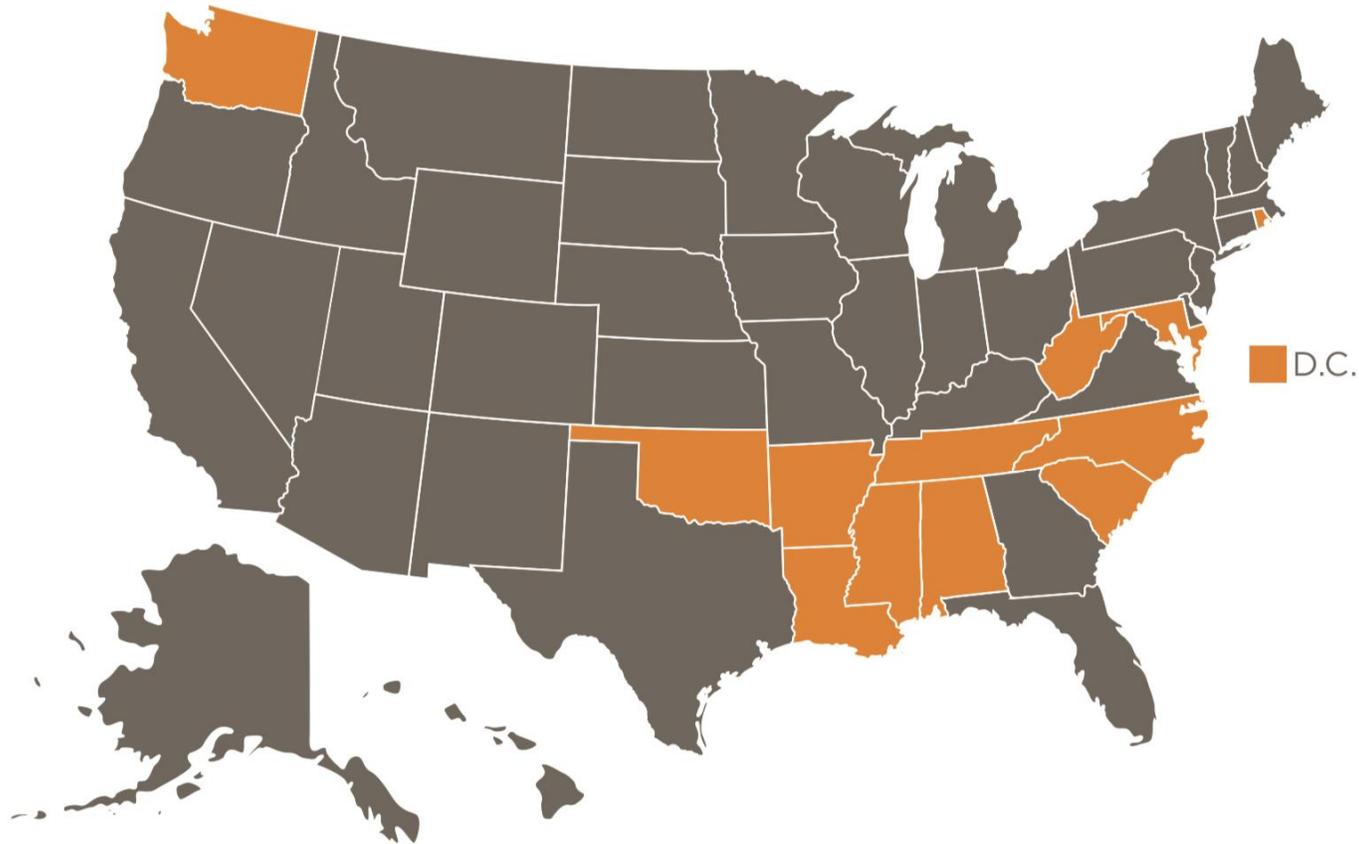
Differences in policies

States do not have the same FDK laws

Quasi-Experimental Design

Dealing with omitted variables

- We want to estimate the effect of FDK on absences
- But, FDK associates with other variables that affect absences
- We need an instrumental variable:
  - Predicts FDK
  - Does not predict absences
  - Does not correlate w/ other variables

Instrumental Variable

FDK → Absences

Instrument
(state policy changes)

Other variables: wealth, expectations, culture, etc.
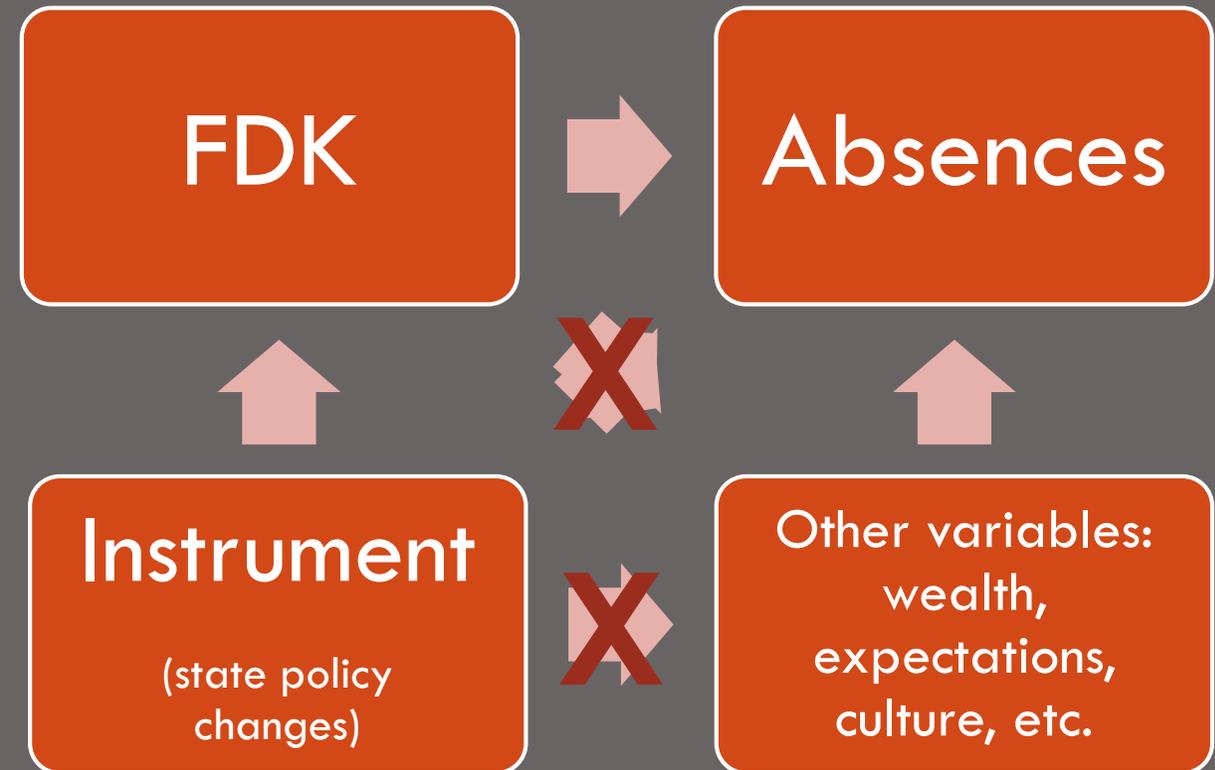
Effect of FDK on attendance

Kindergarten
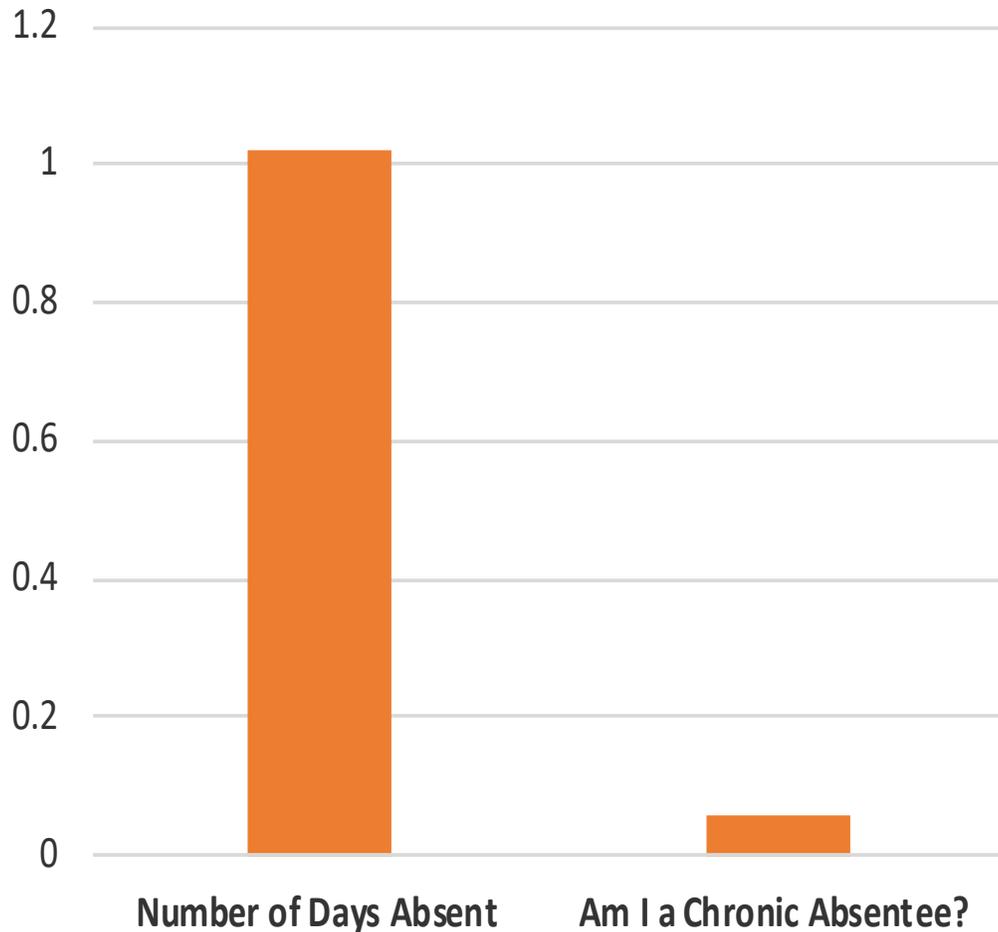
No effect on later years of elementary schooling: Grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5

No differences based on type of disability

Good news, bad news?

Kindergarten: Absences increased on average by 1 (~20%)

Does FDK exacerbate stress/transition for SWDs?

Later grades: Absences were no different from those of other students

Could be good news that initial negative effects go away as kids adjust

MORALS
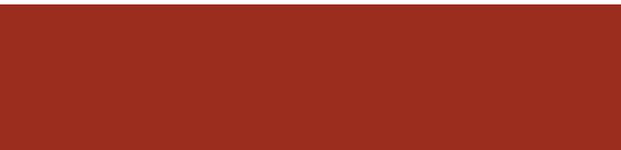
What Have I Learned?

- Case studies in absenteeism
  - Measurement
  - Existing programs
  - Interventions
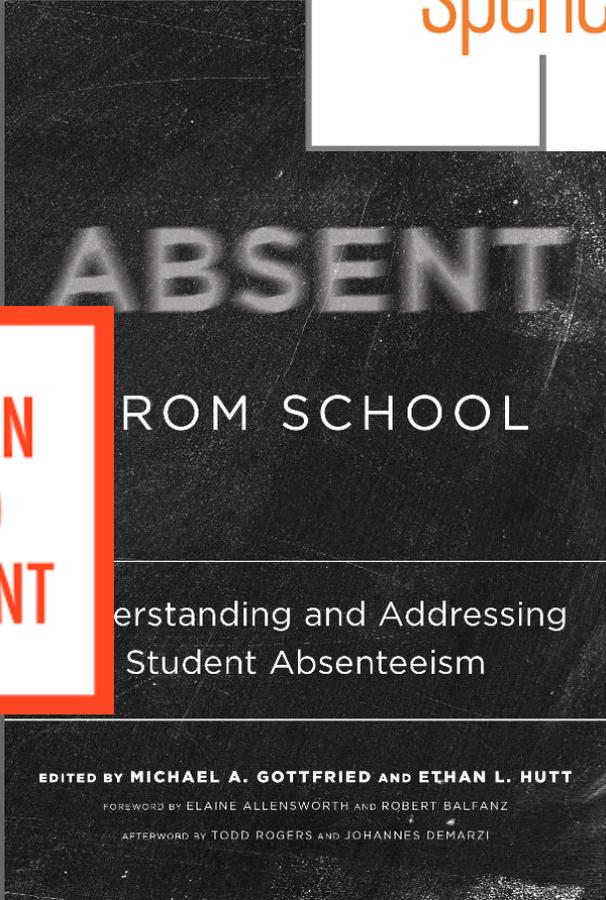
Breadth of Analysis: Measurement

▫ Critical analysis of who is absent

  ■ California: by race, grade, school type, school performance

  ■ Undisclosed state: by income level, by age

  ■ Tennessee: by academic ability

  ■ U.S. national data: by student, classroom, school

Continuing to Develop the Taxonomy of Absenteeism
Aligns w/ efforts to distinguish who is absent, how much, what type of absence
•Hancock et al. (2014): Parent versus student reported
•Gershenson et al. (2017): Chronic absence threshold analysis
•Gottfried (2017): Students with and without disabilities

Breadth of Analysis: School Programs/Policies

- Critical analysis of school context
  - Chicago: leadership, fostering family relationships
  - NYC: role of school bus programs
  - Arkansas: role of discipline
  - U.S. national data: school context vis-à-vis immigration raids
  - U.S. and int'l national data: role of school based health programs

Continuing to Understand How to Leverage Existing School Structure

Builds out prior research, which explored the role of what school programs and policies that are <u>in place</u> might help to reduce absences
- **Kennedy & Davis (1998): School breakfast**
- **Gottfried (2017): Role of full- vs part-day kindergartens**
- **Childs & Grooms (2018): Mentoring programs**

Breadth of Analysis: Interventions

- Critical analysis of experiments, new programs
  - Pittsburgh: sending texts
  - Seattle: implementing workshops and coaching
  - Multi-site: giving financial incentives, support services

Continuing to Understand Role of Intervening
Consistent evidence that targeted information intervention programs can work •**Robinson et al. (2018): Mailed notifications** •**Rogers & Feller (2018): Mailed notifications** •**Smythe-Leistico & Page (2018): Two-way texting**

Case-Specific Learning Lessons: Methodology

- Numerous quantitative approaches
  - Descriptive to causal
  - OLS to HLM to quantile regressions
  - District data to statewide to national
  - Experimental
- Qualitative, mixed methods
  - Interviews, case studies
  - Narrative syntheses
  - Geocoding, mapping

Putting It Together: Learning Lessons
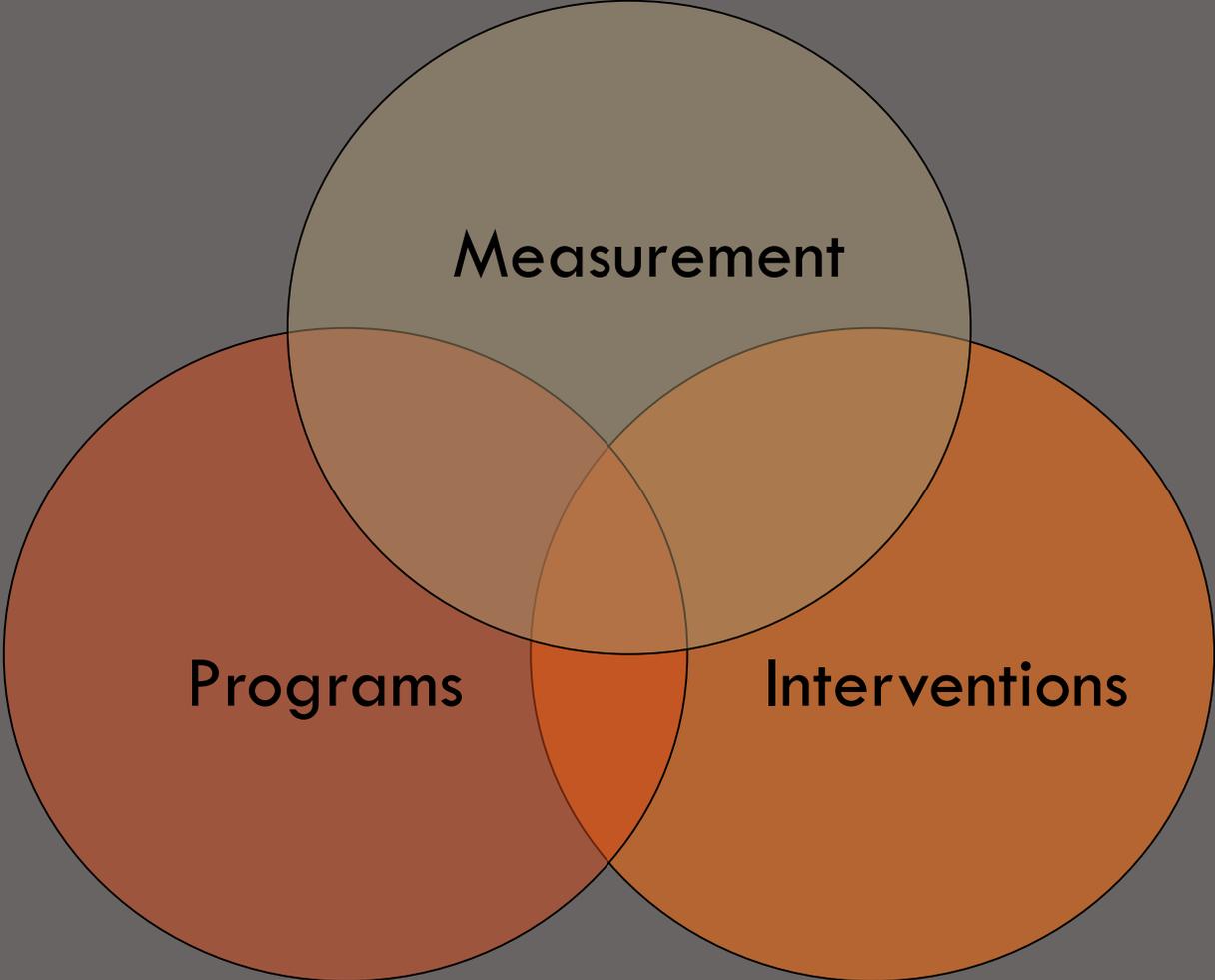
Learning Lesson 1

Measuring absences is sometimes easier and sometimes harder than you thought

- Key findings from the book suggest that every day of absences matters equally (linear effects)
- Additionally, all students are hurt equally by missing school, regardless of ability level

Implication for Policy and Practice

All days of school matter, and there's no need to set thresholds and cutoffs (nothing magical about chronic absence being at 10%)

Learning Lesson 1, cont'd

Yet, huge disparities arise

- Rates are not uniform by race, age, grade, disability, income
- Additionally, most variation occurs by student, not huge differences between classrooms or schools

Implication for Policy and Practice
• Rigid thresholds and targets may unfairly punish certain student groups, setting up for failure • Or schools might try to delegitimize certain groups 'counting' in accountability metrics, much like those w/ disabilities in NCLB • Instead, can schools be more strategic, focusing on the fact that every day of school matters, and targeting good attendance rather than punishing poor absences

Learning Lesson 2

School is not a silo

- We recognize that many factors are beyond school's control
  - Health, housing/mobility, immigration
- Yet, there are many factors that reduce absences that schools can control
  - Breakfast location, offering full-day kindergarten

Implication for Policy and Practice
Only when we think about school as *just* a place for academics (i.e., teacher quality, curriculum, textbooks) does it become a silo • **Instead schools can consider how to best offer programs, connect with community**

Yet, reducing this 'siloness' is not easy

- Funders often want us to build/evaluate tools directly for students
  - Evidence in this book suggests the importance of supporting financially multiple levels of support
- Also need multi-level buy in
  - This is not principals alone developing programs
  - Onus can't strictly be on teachers (i.e., value-added)
  - Instead, commitment needs to come from students, teachers, principals, communities, and families

Learning Lesson 3

Potential power of parents

- This research area is still so young, but the role of parent in reducing absences continues to emerge
  - By this we mean developing school-parent partnerships
- Why?
  - Students benefit when school-parent bond is strong, particularly for low-income families

Implication for Policy and Practice
Parents often do not understand the importance of missing school or consequences of absenteeism • **Starting point: boost knowledge and awareness in school-partner partnership**

Learning Lesson 3, cont'd

What seems to be successful?

- What's not promising
  - Generic, bland, basic: back-to-school nights, flyers sent home, scorecards
- Better: the medium of the message
  - Texting shows significant promise
  - Messages including tools, tips, troubleshooting, not just data points

Implication for Policy and Practice

Not only do programs that feel very "now" seem to be working, but also are much more scalable and replicable

Summary

Absenteeism is gaining traction

- <u>Research</u>: burst of program evaluation and interventions
- <u>Policy</u>: accountability metrics including absences
- <u>Practice</u>: new, unique partnerships involving communities in new ways

Thinking about absenteeism has been a long-standing issue in education, and for good reason: Unequal attendance means unequal educational opportunities. We now have the data and drive to explore these issues now more than ever before

Lingering Questions

For policy

- Of all of the potential data points and metrics, which are the most efficacious at helping to shape policy?

- What mechanisms and interventions feel the most politically palatable?

- How can we help support innovation in absence reduction?

- What about the costs?

Lingering Questions

For practice

- How can we best equip parents with information about absenteeism?

- How do we make the message clear starting from pre-K?

- How can we ensure that we don't blame parents, or teachers, or principals, or district officials?

- How do we create a culture of program buy-in and data usage in our schools?

Thank you!

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