

To Research The Correlation Between School Attendance and Student Achievement

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INTRODUCTION:

There is a critical link between successful educational outcomes by students and their attendance at school. Students have to be present and engaged in order to learn. Research and observations through an extended career in the education system clearly indicate being at school consistently is important to ensuring children have a good foundation for subsequent learning. Research shows that students, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status or ethnicity, lose out when they have poor attendance and their achievement is affected.

As well as being a factor for individual achievement research also indicates that school wide patterns of attendance can have an impact on the achievement overall of students within a class, year level or even a school. Dealing with irregular learning patterns can have an influence on class teaching and support programmes that need to be implemented across a school.

Research also indicates that poor attendance can lead to a range of other factors that indirectly can have an impact on the achievement of students. Studies have established that a lack of commitment to school and truancy are risk factors for substance abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquent behaviour and school drop out.

While parents are primarily responsible for getting children to school every day, schools and their communities have a role to play in recognizing and addressing the barriers and challenges that affect attendance by individuals and groups of students. It requires a successful partnership between the school and its families to address these wider issues.

METHODOLOGY:

For the purpose of this study I have researched and read a range of articles on previous investigations of the correlation of achievement and attendance. There have been some extensive research done in this area within the USA, with most local research currently in New Zealand tending to look at procedures schools have put in place to improve attendance. By putting these two aspects together I hopefully can put together some ideas that maybe of use to schools as they develop their own procedures and communicate to their communities the real importance of regular attendance for students to achieve and reach their full potential.

As well I have used data from my own and other schools that shows a correlation between attendance rates and the number of students who are involved in school support programmes that are put in place to help support and raise students achievement.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

New York Study 2011:

This study focusses on how school absences undermine student and school performance in New York City. As stated the concern was that you can never close the achievement gap, even with improved curriculum and instruction, if students are not showing up for school.

It also makes the point that even a child with good attendance suffers a small loss academically when the school has a high absentee rate, suggesting that excessive absences across the board can undermine the quality of instruction for all students by meaning teachers spend considerable teaching time in review and on remediation.

The research is focussed on the connection between student's third and fourth grade attendance and their performance in the New York State Testing Programme grade 4 assessments. It confirms that student attendance is a statistically significant predictor of performance.

Attendance data provides an indicator of students and schools at risk with the identification of those missing 10 percent of the school year having high numbers of students at greater risk of educational failure. Previous related studies had revealed that attendance as early as kindergarten and first grade were strong indicators of performance further through a child's schooling.

The study shows an indication that the achievement in mathematics is an area that can be affected possibly more than other curriculum areas by lower attendance. It is felt that this could be related to the fact that mathematics is inclined to have a greater level of teaching that builds on previous learning further up the school.

Improved attendance can reduce the achievement gap, suggesting that this can help reduce the achievement gaps among ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

Reducing chronic absence is essential to turning around under – performing schools. Improvements in curriculum and instruction are critical to school reform. But they aren't going to help if students aren't in the classroom. Students in the schools with the highest attendance received 18 days more instruction in a year, compared with those schools with the lowest attendance.

Ohio Schools Study 2000:

This study uses the data from the Proficiency Test and compares the achievement in relation to attendance at grades 4, 6, 9 and 12. A state standard attendance rate of 93 percent annual attendance average has been established and is used in the study.

Student absences are seen as being justified if for personal illness or a death in the family. All others are seen as being unjustified such as: good weather, vacations, peer group pressure excuses which tend to influence attendance rates more than illness or a family death.

At all levels there was a correlation between the attendance rate and the performance rate of students. The 9th grade results showed the greatest variance indicating that poor attendance can widen the achievement gap as student's progress through the school. Grade 12 figures were influenced by the fact that at this stage, students with poor attendance by this stage have started to leave the system having gone beyond the age where attendance is compulsory.

When comparing school results, there was a correlation between school average attendance rates and the Proficiency Test results for the schools. The results affirming a strong positive relationship between student achievement and school attendance averages.

Local Study:

By using my own and a couple of other local schools I studied the percentage of students who were receiving some form of in school support who also had an attendance rate of less than 90 percent. The data for the last two years was used and all schools were decile 8 or above.

Table: Students With Less Than 90% Receiving Additional In School Support

| | School 1 | | School 2 | | School 3 | |
|----------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
| | 2011 | 2012 | 2011 | 2012 | 2011 | 2012 |
| % student < 90% attendance | 14 | 9 | 10 | 13 | 10 | 13 |
| % receiving support | 31 | 39 | 48 | 35 | 30 | 39 |
| % above Maori | N/A | N/A | 60 | 40 | 33 | 50 |

Across the schools there is an average of 11.5 percent of students who had attendance of less than 90 percent over the two years. 37 percent of the students who had poor attendance were receiving some form of additional support in their school. Although School No 1 did not have data available in relation to Maori students the data from the other two schools reveals that an average of 45.75 percent of students with less than 90 percent attendance who were receiving support were Maori.

The information above indicates a correlation between attendance and the need for additional learning support with the added factor that the percentage of Maori students is higher than the overall figures for the schools involved.

DEFINITIONS:

If schools and the Ministry of Education are going to carry out any analysis of attendance to target student attendance rates as a means of improving student performance then it would be worthwhile using consistent definitions for what is an acceptable level of attendance in

any school year. As well it needs to be determined what is seen as justified and acceptable reasons for no attendance at school. I put forward the following to be used:

Acceptable Attendance: This to be anything above 90 percent for the number of days a school is open for instruction within a school year. In the case of Secondary Schools this would be the days prior to leaving for the sitting of external exams for those in the senior years.

Justified Absence: Acceptable absence from school, should only be for personal medical needs or to attend a family funeral. All other situations, to be classified as unjustified absence.

KEY FINDINGS:

The research confirms that student performance is related to school attendance. The attendance rates within a school can have an impact on the achievement overall of the students attending that school.

There is a range of research in relation to when the impact of attendance is greatest on student's learning. In the early years this can be a key factor when it is considered that a considerable amount of the learning is building on the previous day's work. Further up the school it can be influenced by what learning has been missed. As indicated in the New York study Mathematics is seen as a curriculum area that could be most affected by poor rates of attendance

Students who master more of the learning at a level have a better foundation for further achievement. We may expect that the achievement gap between persistently low and high attending students will widen over time.

It needs to be acknowledged that at times a substantial increase in attendance is required to obtain moderate increases in performance. The key factor being that student's who attend school regularly, receive more instruction.

It is likely that the association between attendance and performance will vary from student to student. The performance decrement caused by missing a day will vary depending on a range of factors such as: what relevant instruction did the student miss? Were missed lessons made up? What did the student do while out of school? Teachers are more likely to assist students with justified absences than those with an unjustified reason for non attendance.

Studies can be viewed for a range of factors but at the end it does come back to the fact that to achieve well at school students need to be engaged and attending school.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Value High Attendance:

Schools need to value the fact that there is a high correlation between both individual attendance and that of schools overall in relation to student performance. Principal, staff and communities need to all be made aware of this fact. Use the 90 percent figure as a guide.

Use an Attendance Tracking System:

It is important that there are systems in place to track attendance of individuals, families, groups. Someone needs responsibility for this and data collected can drive procedures based on careful analysis.

Develop and Implement Policies:

Use these to identify students and their families to determine the reasons for absences. Especially focus in the early years. Identify students who miss school because of health and safety reasons or unreliable transportation.

Minimize The Effect of Missing School:

Consider how students can make up for missed work and are kept on track toward acquiring the key skills and knowledge they require.

Climate:

Schools need to create a climate in which all staff, students, Board of Trustees and families understand the importance of attendance and work towards minimizing absences.

CONCLUSION:

The relationship between attendance and student achievement is only one area that impacts on performance. It is however a key factor with sufficient evidence and research to back up this concern. Schools need to place high priority on their procedures for monitoring and analysing patterns of attendance. A study of parental attitudes toward student attendance at school could also be a useful area of information to research. The key is that students need to be present at school to learn.

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