

REFEREED ARTICLE

School Ghost Towns: Combating the Increasing Number of Absences in Schools

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Abstract

Student absenteeism is a prevailing issue for schools, impacting academic performance and social-emotional development. This article explores the definitions, rates, and causes of absenteeism. Through analysis of existing literature, it proposes a comprehensive approach to address the problem. Drawing on concepts of trauma-informed education and Response to Intervention (Rtl), the author endorses a framework with a tiered structure of supports to create safe and supportive environments, alongside a more targeted approach to address individual root causes. By combining trauma-informed practices with the tiered approach of Rtl, schools can address absenteeism and promote well-being.

Attendance and student absenteeism is a serious issue facing schools today. The purpose of this paper is to define absenteeism, deepen understanding of the scope of the problem, discover possible causes of this problem, and explore the impact of absenteeism on student learning. The goal is ultimately to explore existing literature centered around attendance and student absenteeism to identify potential solutions that can be implemented within the context of my urban Manitoba school. To address student absenteeism, I advocate a school wide trauma-based approach embedded within existing support structures such as Response to Intervention (Rtl).

Absenteeism in the Literature

Student absences are categorized into (a) explained absences of which parents/guardians are aware, such as illness, quarantine (particularly important in recent years due to pandemic restrictions), injuries, or medical appointments; and (b) unexplained absences of which parents/guardians are unaware, which includes any reason where absences have not received approval (Aucejo & Romano, 2016). The term *truancy* is sometimes used when relating to students with unexplained absences. Truancy describes multiple unexplained absences that last full school days, as willful behaviour of either the student or their parents choosing to be noncompliant with the school system (Shute & Cooper, 2015). In this article, school absenteeism is quantified as a percentage that reflects the relationship between the total number of school days missed, encompassing both explained and unexplained absences (truancy), and the total number of school days possible in a given year.

Prevalence

A sharp increase in school absenteeism has been experienced in recent years. Dee (2023) gathered extensive data on school absences, encompassing 40 states and 92% of all K-12 public school students in the U.S. from 2022. Examining this data, Dee suggested that on an average day in the 2022-2023 school year almost 10% of kindergarten to grade 12 students were absent. This issue is also reflected by local data in Manitoba, from the Louis Riel School Division (LRSD) where during the first 3 months of the 2022-2023 school year there was an overall absenteeism rate of 11.8%, almost double the 6.3% pre-pandemic rate seen in 2016-2017 (Louis Riel School Division [LRSD], 2022).

These rates are further developed using the term chronically absent, which is defined as a student missing more than 10% of the total school year. When drilling down into the data regarding chronically absent students, there was an increase in the 2021-2022 school year to 28.3% from the pre-pandemic 2018-2019 school year of 14.8% (Dee, 2023). LRSD (2022) reported an even higher percentage, with almost 40% of students in LRSD qualifying for chronic absenteeism. These international and local absence percentages are strikingly similar when analyzing school-based data within one of the schools in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Data gathered through student information systems where teachers were required to report daily attendance show a 30% daily absenteeism rate for the 2022-2023 school year in that particular school. Putting these numbers into context, almost 100 of the 300 students in this school were missing on any given day and 33 students inside those daily absences were likely from the same grouping of chronically absent students.

Causes

Discussing possible causes of absenteeism assumes that there is a reason for students missing school. The functional model of unexcused absences “poses that youths miss school to avoid school-based stimuli that provoke negative affectivity, escape from aversive school-based social and/or evaluative situations, pursue attention from significant others, and/or pursue tangible rewards outside of school” (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013, p. 4). Finding one exact cause for the sharp increase in absenteeism is difficult. The changes in the data from recent pre-pandemic years to pandemic years indicate that a shift occurred during this period. Taylor (2021) extensively explored the classification of COVID-19 as a disaster due to its profound psychological impacts and implications for schools. Taylor explained,

Worldwide, education has been disrupted in 188 countries for approximately 1.5 billion children and youth ... as the pandemic was in the early days, school employees reported anecdotal evidence that some students were struggling with the changes to their normal routines, exhibiting behaviours such as remaining inside their own rooms, refusing to shower, eat or even get out of bed. (p. 125)

During the pandemic the social aspects of schools were greatly disrupted through public health measures designed to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus, through physical distancing, remote learning, and cohorting which physically kept students apart. Even with the return to in person learning, masking disrupted the ability to read social cues affecting approachability and trust, important for social interactions (Carbon, 2020; Bylianto & Chan, 2022).

Taylor (2021) outlined three key criteria that influence a child’s response to disasters: the extent of their exposure to the event, the amount of support during and after the event, and the degree of personal loss and social disruption experienced. The pandemic produced a general level of disruptions and increased stress for all, but given the wide range of experience amongst the three indicators outlined by Taylor and given the different level of resources of each family, it would be difficult to determine a causal effect on attendance. Interestingly, Dee (2023) found no statistical differences between states with stricter distancing mandates, mandatory masking regulations, and higher rates of COVID-19 – which suggests that the pandemic itself is not a predicting factor of school absenteeism. Instead, Dee pointed to declining youth mental health and disengagement as biproducts of the pandemic as contributing factors for student absenteeism remaining high with the return to regular in-person learning.

Kipp (2022) indicated that current research into absenteeism does not adequately account for students’ personal decisions. To explore the daily decisions students make about their school attendance, Kipp employed an ecological agency theoretical framework to capture the intricate relationship between the environment, the individual, and the decision-making process, analyzing how school dynamics impact these decisions. In gathering data for this model, Kipp conducted exhaustive case studies of two students, using a mix of interviews, relational maps, drawings, and extended observations. From this research, Kipp concluded that experiences

within the schools themselves amplified anxiety, and that social factors such as peer relationships and bullying have the greatest impacts on attendance.

Effects

School absenteeism affects students' social-emotional and academic learning. Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study 2010-2011, Gottfried (2014) explored the effect of absenteeism on academic and social emotional outcomes for 10,000 kindergarten students in the U.S. He compared attendance rates with academic success on two achievement tests for Math and English, four teacher-rated social scales, and two behavioural scales. Students with chronic absenteeism tended to exhibit lower academic scores, reduced educational engagement, and increased social disengagement.

These learning loss trends were demonstrated at later grades in a study by Santibañez and Guarino (2021) using data from over 600,000 kindergarten to grade 12 students in California. Comparing absence rates with test scores from the Smarter Balanced Assessment in ELA and Math survey data measuring self-management, growth mind-set, self-efficacy, and social awareness, Santibañez and Guarino found that absenteeism negatively affects student outcomes and harms social-emotional learning especially in social awareness, self-efficacy, and self-management. Interestingly, this study shows that absenteeism has a statistically greater impact on both academic and social-emotional learning in later grades than in early ones.

Trauma-Rooted Response to Intervention as a Solution for Absenteeism in an Urban Manitoba School

The following considerations had to be accounted for when looking for solutions that could be implemented within my urban Manitoba school: the limitations within an already overburdened school system, minimal financial cost involved, and the use and adaption of existing structures of support. Solutions had to address root causes identified (i.e., trauma caused by COVID-19, anxiety of students, and relationships), and they had to be broad enough to cover all students yet flexible enough to target specific high-problem areas. With these limitations in mind, I recommend using a trauma-informed approach embedded within existing support structures of our Student Intensity Scale framework called Response to Intervention (Rtl) to support, monitor, and assess attendance interventions in my school.

Rtl "refers to a systematic and hierarchical decision-making process to assign evidence-based strategies based on student need and in accordance with regular progress monitoring" (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013, p. 3). In Rtl, the interventions progress from Tier 1 universal support targeting 80-90% of learners requiring monitoring attendance data twice a month, to Tier 2 targeted interventions for a smaller group of 5-10% of students requiring weekly monitoring of attendance data, to Tier 3 requiring intensive strategies for individuals making up the final 1-5% of students with daily monitoring (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). This framework offers easy and specific monitoring intervals to assess student growth with specific interventions that can be scaled up or down depending on student need. Given the widespread prevalence of varying degrees of attendance problems amongst the student population, there is need to deploy a comprehensive strategy that can reach all students while still having Rtl's flexibility for targeted interventions (Taylor, 2021). The framework is also commonly used within the school and division that I work in and therefore all school-based stakeholders are familiar with the format and language, requiring no additional professional development for teachers or support staff.

Trauma-informed education takes into consideration the effects that stress and trauma have on the brain and the extraordinary impacts they have on learning. Bath (2008) explained that traumatic experiences rewire the pathways in the brain to be hypersensitive, protecting the individual from future distress. This heightened reactivity triggers the body's stress response system, even in non-threatening situations, leading to challenging and unexpected behaviors. It

is crucial to recognize that for students to engage in effective learning, efforts must be made to deactivate this response system. At the root of trauma, students grapple with a sense of powerlessness and seek out ways to evaluate the safety of their surroundings and relationships (Dombo & Sabatino, 2019). To address trauma, Bath (2008) offered three pillars: safety, connection, and managing emotions. In alignment with these pillars, Dombo and Sabatino (2019) highlighted the importance of healing through relationships built on the principles of empathy, support, and curiosity, thus aiding in the identification of trauma triggers for students. Taylor (2021) offered a series of steps for schools to integrate trauma informed care: taking inventory of current practices in schools, ensuring all stakeholders know the effects of trauma on the brain and how they impact student learning and behavior, reviewing existing policy, and building connections for families to mental health supports.

Specific strategies within a trauma informed Rtl response to absenteeism would include a flexible but escalating response dictated by student need and absence rates. A whole-school level response, incorporating the lens of Rtl Tier 1 supports and the lens of trauma informed education, would involve building connections with adults and teachers, increasing connections between peers, increasing teacher knowledge of how trauma effects the brain, and increasing safety within the classroom. Dombo and Sabatino (2019) advised that clear expectations, well-defined routines, time for transitions, choices whenever possible, and attuned teachers contribute to safe classrooms. At Tier 1, Kearney and Graczyk (2013) suggested increasing access to health services within the school system, including mental health supports, prioritizing social emotional learning in classrooms, and increasing parental involvement.

Layering in trauma informed education at Tier 2 would involve considerations of individual students' specific triggers to trauma within the school/classroom and increased coregulation with an adult to help students calm (Dombo & Sabatino). Dombo and Sabatino suggested coregulating through labeling emotions, focusing on emotions behind challenging behaviours, and teaching calming and mindfulness exercises. At Tier 2, Kearney and Graczyk suggested using problem solving with students and families to identify the barriers to attendance, increasing academic support or tutoring for this group of students to target gaps in learning, working with clinical teams to pursue testing for learning disabilities, working with medical doctors to diagnose and treat psychological reasons for absenteeism like anxiety, and increasing engagement.

Finally, at Tier 3, Kearney and Graczyk suggested incorporating clinician staff on the school team, changing attendance plans by offering reduced time in school, use of alternative spaces, smaller class sizes, and increasing engagement through offering vocational programming – which are also supported by trauma informed practices. At this level of support, it becomes increasingly crucial to have students build trust with an adult, thus having a safe relationship to serve as a secure base. To foster this relationship building it is important to designate a point person within the school team, who will be responsible for the increased monitoring required for Tier 3 support along with working towards building the required relationship so that students can begin to feel comfortable identifying the barriers that are stopping them from attending school.

Conclusion

Exploring the literature around attendance and student absenteeism clarifies the scope of this problem and the urgency with which school systems must respond in order to support their students and families. I advocate addressing the problem by using a trauma-informed approach within the framework of Rtl, which offers a flexible way to react with a structured monitoring and assessment schedule. As a school, the suggestions offered through both of these lenses are practical and easily implemented. Future research into the effectiveness of this approach would involve a pretest posttest method, comparing attendance numbers by using student information systems (such as Power Bi), before the targeted intervention years and after implementation.

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Adam Dobriansky is a Master of Education student at Brandon University, with a focus in educational administration. He is a vice principal, husband, and father of four children. Adam is passionate about alternative education and finding practical solutions to improve the school experience, well-being, and academic success of students.