

Empty Seats: The Impact of Texas House Bill 2398 on Absence Rates among Low Socioeconomic Status Students in a Rural School District

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Abstract

Chronic absenteeism—the repeated and excessive absence of a student from school for excused or unexcused reasons—affects children, their schools, their futures, and society. In this quantitative study, the researcher compared attendance rates before and after implementation of House Bill 2398 for low socioeconomic status English Language Learner (ELL) between ELL and non-ELL students at the elementary and secondary levels of schooling in a rural Texas school district. A three-way mixed Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant interaction between HB 2398 and ELL status. There was a statistically significant difference in the absence rates before and after passage of House Bill 2398 between ELL and non-ELL students. The study confirmed prior research regarding differences in absenteeism between ELL and non-ELL students. Surprisingly, absence rates generally increased after passage of House Bill 2398, which was intended to improve student attendance by emphasizing proactive rather than reactive approaches to truancy.

Keywords: absenteeism, English Language Learners, House Bill 2398, truancy

Introduction

Absenteeism among K-12 students in the United States negatively impacts student achievement and student life outcomes, and, therefore, carries costs for society at large (Chang & Romero, 2008). School attendance has been shown to have established links to attainment, and research has demonstrated that educational attainment impacts student outcomes such as lifetime earnings, home ownership, rates of criminality, health, and occupational success (Chetty et al., 2011; Sewell & Hauser, 1975; Sheppard, 2009). Chang and Romero (2008) found consistent school attendance to be vital for children's development of a strong foundation for learning.

In 2015, the state of Texas embarked upon an effort to improve student attendance by reducing the punitive treatment of student nonattendance. Previously, Texas school administrators had tended to address truancy reactively, including by filing criminal charges after the fact against students and their guardians in the court

system, as was permitted by existing state law. In 2015, state officials initiated a shift in campus leaders' approaches to dealing with excessive unexcused absences. The 2015 law—House Bill 2398—called for the use of more proactive, preventative methods in dealing with truant students in Texas public schools. This approach, as reflected in Commissioner's Rules promulgated by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in January 2017, required campus leaders to seek ways to intervene before the fact by identifying root causes of student nonattendance (Texas Education Agency, 2017a). The Commissioner's Rules offered best practices for school officials who found themselves in the role of trying to help students and their families improve student attendance (Texas Education Agency, 2017a).

In 2017, as if to highlight the emergence of chronic absenteeism as an area of concern for Texas education officials, the TEA provided a new category of data to school district administrators. As part of its draft formulae for assigning A-F grades to campuses and districts, the TEA shifted from its historical practice of tracking average daily attendance to monitoring an agency-devised chronic absenteeism rate. To determine this new rate, the TEA considered a student in a Texas public school chronically absent if he or she missed more than 10% of the days for which he or she was enrolled. In 2016, federal researchers published a major study of chronic absenteeism in United States schools (US Department of Education, 2016, cover page). Across the US, 6,520,948 students from the overall student population were chronically absent, amounting to a 13.7% chronic absenteeism rate. Groups with lower-than-average chronic absenteeism rates included White students (12.7%), ELLs (11.3%), and Asian students (7.1%). Groups with higher-than-average chronic absenteeism rates included Black students (17.3%), Hispanic students (14.1%), American Indian students (22.5%), Pacific Islander students (21.4%), and students of two or more races (16.4%). Students with disabilities had an 18.9% chronic absenteeism rate, and students without disabilities had a 12.9% chronic absenteeism rate. An anomaly appeared in this data: the relatively low rate of chronic absenteeism among ELLs was only 11.3%, a full 20% lower than the overall rate for all students of 13.7%, compared to the 14% absenteeism rate of non-ELLs (US Department of Education, 2016). The ELL students face significant obstacles in both academics and in society in general and yet are 1.2 times less likely than their English fluent peers to be chronically absent (US Department of Education, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the absence rates of low-SES ELL and non-ELL students in a rural fringe mid-sized public school district in North Texas, both before and after implementation of House Bill 2398. This research study also sought to understand to what extent the absence changes differed between students at elementary and secondary grade levels. As practitioners and policymakers in Texas attempt to reduce chronic absenteeism among students, a clearer understanding is needed related to how (and if) Texas's House Bill 2398, with its emphasis on proactive rather than punitive prescriptions, impacts student attendance rates. With growing numbers of students of low SES sitting in Texas classrooms, it is especially important for district and campus administrators to understand how this law affected these students' school attendance. In addition, given research indicating that the chronic absenteeism rates of ELLs are less pronounced than the rates of non-ELLs, it is important to analyze the impact of the new truancy intervention on positive school attendance behaviors among ELLs and non-ELLs. Furthermore, past research showed that chronic absenteeism rates worsen as students progress from elementary to secondary levels of schooling, practitioners and policymakers in Texas need to know if HB 2398 holds promise to halt this decline and keep students in school as they age—particularly for students from vulnerable populations like low-SES students and ELLs.

Significance of the Study

This study informed practices in school districts working to prevent high rates of absenteeism, including chronic absenteeism. It will help determine whether and to what extent rates of absenteeism among elementary and secondary low-SES students changed after the state of Texas passed House Bill 2398, which prescribed changes to the approaches used by school districts to intervene in students' nonattendance beginning with the 2016-2017 school year. It will further illuminate whether these changes differed according to ELL or non-ELL status, and according to enrollment at an elementary versus a secondary campus. The student demographics of the school district selected for this analysis closely resemble patterns found across Texas rural school districts, thus the analysis of the problem of absenteeism among low-SES students in this district will be relevant to understanding the same problem in similar districts with similar populations around the state and can help students, educators, policymakers, educational organizations, and researchers in similar contexts.

Review of Literature

Chronic Absenteeism

Schooling and its various associated experiences are common cultural touchstones for Americans of several generations. One aspect of schooling in particular—compulsory attendance—is a noteworthy thread in the shared American experience. It is a topic that has found its way into popular culture repeatedly over the years. Chronic absenteeism—which, it should be noted, can include skipping school illicitly or missing for entirely legitimate reasons or a combination of the two—is a problem affecting many families. During the 2013-2014 school year alone, over six million students missed more than 15 days of school; that adds up to fully 14 percent of the US student population (US Department of Education, 2016). At the high school level, one in five students were chronically absent in 2013-2014 (US Department of Education, 2016).

Compulsory attendance laws in Texas date back to 1915 (Richardson, 1980, Table 1) and Texas was one of two states with truancy considered a criminal violation for students (Langford, 2015). After years of changes, chronic absenteeism was defined by Texas officials as “total number of students absent 10 percent or more of the school year” (Texas Education Agency, 2016b, p. 22). Meanwhile, ample past research considered the cause of chronic absenteeism into the broad categories of health-related causes of chronic absenteeism, school-related causes of chronic absenteeism, family- and home-related causes of chronic absenteeism, and other causes of chronic absenteeism (US Department of Education, 2016).

Chronic absenteeism has negative academic consequences for students. Pupils with higher absenteeism rates on average have lower academic performance on national tests (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Caldas, 1993; Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014; Lamdin, 1996; Rumberger, 2011). Chronic absenteeism also has a negative impact on social-emotional skills, student engagement, and eagerness to learn new things (Gottfried, 2014). Chronic absenteeism is also associated with dropouts, violence, juvenile delinquency (Hawkins et al., 1998; Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Robins & Ratcliff, 1980). Kearney (2001) found that chronic refusal to attend school was one of the most disruptive situations possible in the life and development of a child and family. While it may be more prevalent at the high school level, absenteeism is equally harmful to the educational attainment of students across all grade levels. Gottfried (2014) found that absenteeism had powerful negative effects on the test scores from kindergartners to 10th graders.

Chronic Absenteeism, Socioeconomic Status, and Limited English Proficiency

Student absenteeism was found to be related to family economic challenges (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012a; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b; Koepke, Kupczynski & Holland, 2011; Petrick, 2014). For example, family circumstances (i.e., poverty and low rates of parental involvement) correlated with higher absenteeism rates (Gottfried, 2014). Students from low-SES families are at greater risk for absences (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Some students exhibiting high rates of chronic absenteeism have work responsibilities and other economic factors that make regular school attendance challenging for them. In a study of over 3,000 Canadian youth, Taylor, Lokes, Gagnon, Kwan, and Koestner (2012) found that work-school interference was related to dropout intentions. In the U.S., Devadoss and Foltz (1996) posited that working students may allot less time to their studies and suffer academic consequences despite modest part-time work schedules did not interfere with student achievement (Lillydahl, 1990).

The ELL population in American schools “experienced phenomenal growth” in the last decade of the 1900s and in the early 2000s, growing from 3.5 million students to 5.3 million students in just over a decade (McCabe, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that the number of English language learners in US schools increased from 4.3 million students in 2004-2005 to 4.9 million students in 2014-2015; also, a greater percentage of students in lower grades than in higher grades are ELLs and the majority of ELLs in the US have a home language of Spanish (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Nationwide, ELLs have significantly lower rates of chronic absenteeism than several other subpopulations of US students (US Department of Education, 2016). Chronic absenteeism rates for ELLs are three percentage points lower than for non-ELLs (US Department of Education, 2016). National data has revealed that English language learners’ stronger attendance diminishes over time and their attendance rates become worse than their non-ELL peers by the time they reach high school (US Department of Education, 2016). ELL students face major barriers in school and society, including high rates of poverty (US Department of Education, 2016). Poverty is not experienced equally among students in American K-12 schools. ELL immigrant students in the United States are more highly concentrated than their English proficient peers in high-poverty schools

(Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Child poverty increased among the children of immigrants from about 12% in 1970 to 33% in the late 1990s before declining to about 21% in 2000" (Hook, Brown, & Kwenda, 2004).

Truancy reform as called for in Texas's HB 2398, passed in 2015, has created an opportunity and a need for the study of absenteeism in today's Texas public schools. The changes in campus and district administrative behaviors required by the law make this an ideal time to investigate the effects of the proactive measures embedded in HB 2398 on nonattendance. Understanding the effect of dramatic changes in truancy law on subpopulations could help enlighten lawmakers regarding what can or cannot help in reducing chronic absenteeism for these populations. A closer study of the impact of HB 2398 on students of various backgrounds and grade levels could prove beneficial in advancing school leadership and school policy mindsets that affirmatively address the root causes, both social and educational, of too many empty seats in the classroom.

Method

This quasi-experimental quantitative study addressed the research question: to what extent the passage of Texas HB 2398, ELL status, and school level were related to student absence rates among low-SES students in a rural Texas public school district. Absence rates for low-SES students before (the 2015-2016 school year) and after the passage of Texas HB 2398 (the 2016-2017 school years) were examined to determine whether the HB 2398 bill had differing impacts on students attendance at different school levels (elementary vs. secondary level) and between ELL and non-ELL students. For the purposes of this study, elementary was defined as any grade level below seventh grade and secondary as any grade level above sixth grade. The absence rate was determined by dividing the total number of days absent by the total number of days of enrollment (days absent plus days present) then multiplying by 100. Following the Texas Education Agency's methodology used in the A-F accountability system model released in 2016, students must have been enrolled in the school district for at least 83% (otherwise too mobile) each of the school years analyzed to be included in the sample.

In this study, a three-way mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used with three independent variables: ELL status (ELL vs. non-ELL), school level (elementary vs. secondary), and time (before vs. after HB 2398). School level and ELL status were used as between-subjects independent variables and time was used as a within-subjects independent variable to compare the absence rates before and after passage of the HB 2398.

Population and Sample

This study focused on a rural North Texas public school district with a total of 3,262 students in 2016-2017 (Texas Education Agency, 2017b). There were 1,911 (58.6%) elementary students and 1,355 (41.5%) secondary students. 322 (9.9%) of them were ELLs for the 2016-2017 school year and economically disadvantaged students comprised 72.5% (2,365) of the total population. 280 students (8.6%) had some type of disability and 2,089 students (64%) were considered at-risk of dropping out.

The study sample consisted exclusively of students eligible to receive free lunches based upon the federal free and reduced lunch program in both secondary and elementary levels. To be included in this study, students sampled had to 1) enrolled in the public school district during the 2015-2016 school year and remained enrolled in the same school district during the 2016-2017 school year; 2) enrolled for a minimum of 83% of the scheduled student days during each school year; and 3) LEP code had to remain the same in 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years. Using G-power (Faul et al., 2009) with the effect size of 0.25, alpha level of 0.05, power of 0.8, an expected sample size of 112 was obtained. A stratified random sampling approach was used to retrieve 28 students in each group (i.e., elementary non-ELL, elementary ELL, secondary non-ELL, and secondary ELL).

Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining IRB approval and the district permission, data was retrieved from the PEIMS data collection system during the 2015-2016 and the 2016-2017 school years. Student Grade level, ADA Eligibility (to determine full-time status), LEP Code (to determine ELL status), Economically Disadvantaged Code (to determine SES status), days absent, ineligible days (to exclude students with atypical school years), and eligible days were retrieved with their student identification redacted.

Only students data that met the low SES (free or reduced lunch program) standards, held the same LEP code at the same school level in both 2015-2016 and 2016-2017, and remained enrolled for at least 83% of the scheduled student days were included in the analysis of this study. After the screening, twenty-eight students'

data was then randomly selected for each of the elementary ELLs, elementary non-ELLs, secondary non-ELLs, and secondary ELLs groups to meet the power requirement. Subsequently, histograms, Q-Q plots, Shapiro-Wilk normality test, Levene's homogeneity test), and Mauchly's sphericity test were used to check the normality and homogeneity assumptions of the data before the mixed three-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

Results

A three-way mixed ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there was a relationship among school level, ELL status, the passage of House Bill 2398, and student absence rates in a rural fringe Texas public school district. The initial sample consisted of 112 students. Data screening shows normality violation for subgroups, thus data were transformed using LOG10 and outliers were excluded. The final sample size of 103 was used in the ANOVA analysis.

Tests of within-subjects effect on the absence rates indicated a significant main effect of time before ($M = 3.97\%$) and after HB2398 ($M = 6.57\%$), $F(1, 100) = 8.850, p = .004$. Tests of between-subjects effects on the absence rates revealed a significant main effect for ELL status, $F(1, 100) = 6.406, p = .013$ but not on school levels, $F(1, 100) = 2.750, p = .100$. There was a significant interaction between time and ELL status, $F(1, 100) = 4.846, p = .03$, but no interaction between school level and ELL status, $F(1, 100) = .005, p > .05$, nor between time and school level, $F(1, 100) = 1.700, p > .05$. Likewise, there was no significant interaction between time, school level, and ELL, $F(1, 100) = 1.928, p > .05$. The study results indicated that absence rates among the overall students studied had an 2.6% absence rate increase in a statistically significant manner by passage of House Bill 2398, regardless of ELL status and school level. Meanwhile, the significant differences in absence rates before and after passage of HB 2398 were seen related to ELL status (non-ELL before HB 2398 = 5.44%; non-ELL after = 10.08%; ELL before = 2.49%; ELL after = 3.06%).

Conclusions

The study found significant effects related to the passage of HB 2398. The time period examined in this study occurred over two school years, beginning with the 2015-2016 school year and ending with the 2016-2017 school year. The 2015-2016 school year occurred before passage of a new law in Texas—House Bill 2398—which required local education agencies to change their handling of truancy from a largely reactive process to a proactive one that requires school administrators to implement school-based interventions prior to filing charges against parents for contributing to nonattendance (Svitek, 2015).

Aligned with prior research (US Department of Education, 2016), this study found significant differences between the absence rates for low SES students between non-ELL and ELL students in a rural Texas school district. Interestingly, this study revealed that student absenteeism significantly increased after passage of HB 2398 between the years of 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. This may be explained by several potential reasons. One, at the time of the study the law was so new that schools and the justice system were still adjusting to its new requirements and proactive aspects of the law were not fully or adequately implemented. The particular school district used in this study failed to adequately implement the requirements of the new law. A second possibility worth future investigation is whether or not the approaches enshrined in House Bill 2398 would actually promote better attendance of students of different SES and ELL status. It is possible that the reduction in criminal penalties could be seen by some students and parents as an opportunity to miss more school without serious consequences. It is also possible that busy school administrators may find the paperwork and intervention requirements of the bill so onerous that they are doing less to track and enforce student attendance than they did under the previous legal framework. The current study focused exclusively on students receiving free lunches, thus may have missed a different HB 2398 outcome on the other student population.

An interesting question invited by this study relates to educational conscientiousness. That is, does the data indicate that families of ELL students—many of them immigrant families—exhibit higher levels of educational conscientiousness than non-ELL families? Based on this study and prior research (Marsiglia, Parsai, & Kulis, 2009; Morcillo, et al., 2011; Valenzuela & Dombusch, 1994), those families appear to ensure, at higher rates than non-ELL students' families, that their students attend school regularly. This is especially true at the elementary level. A series of questions thus are elicited by this finding: Is the comparatively better attendance among ELL students due to familism supporting pro-social behaviors, or is it because ELL/immigrant families value education more highly while native-born American families take education for granted? Or might comparatively better student attendance simply be caused by the fact that immigrant parents often work in jobs where they are unable to take a day off to stay home with a sick child and they

therefore have no choice but to send their children to school even when they are ill? Do immigrant and ELL parents ensure that their students study more, in addition to attending school more regularly? Do they also ensure that their students complete their homework assignments more often? Do they ensure that their students adhere more closely to a school's code of conduct?

Parents and guardians have a great deal of influence over student absenteeism, particularly with elementary students. They likewise have a great deal of influence over a student's study habits, homework completion, and in-school behaviors. Plentiful student data exists related to student attendance, student behavior, and student assignment completion. Through a careful examination of such data, enterprising researchers might discover the extent to which familial educational conscientiousness drives student achievement. Having a proxy for educational conscientious could usher in an era where it is as common for education researchers study the parent as a significant out-of-school factor as it is for them to study the teacher as a significant in-school factor impacting student learning outcomes. Such research could give American education policy-makers a clearer picture of the American student, and it could help to break the stalemate between educators and education reformers who often explain unsatisfactory academic performance of American schoolchildren by pointing, respectively, to daunting out-of-school challenges faced by students or to inadequate instructional practices affecting them in the classroom.

Limitations of the Study

In this study, the initial sample of 112 students was reduced to 103 after the removal of outliers. The smaller number of sample size could adversely impact the robustness of the study. The focus of this study on low SES students only and the small size of the rural district may also set limits in applying the study results to statewide demographic realities. Analyses of racial and ethnic subpopulations, the special education population, and the at-risk population could provide a more comprehensive and informative result. Another limitation of the study is its exclusively quantitative nature. A mixed method approach could help answer questions with richer information.

Recommendations for Future Research

Follow-up studies, having allowed more time for complete implementation of the HB 2398 to take root, might help answer the question of this study and help us understand and explain the increasing absence rates found in this study. In the case of a district failing to adequately implement the requirements of the new law, using additional school districts from a variety of geographical areas and school sizes could help clarify whether the increase in absence rates can be applied in all realities impacting different groups of student populations. Further research could utilize qualitative research to learn why changes in absence rates have occurred in the aftermath of passage of House Bill 2398. A potentially valuable mixed methods analysis could build on this study by reviewing the absence rates of ELL and non-ELL elementary and secondary students of multiple socioeconomic statuses across multiple school districts while also examining administrators, teachers, parents, and students of their impressions of the new law's effectiveness. Further research is also needed to determine why ELL students tend to have better school attendance than non-ELL students. The intersection between familism and absenteeism might hold a key to better understanding differences in absenteeism rates of ELL and non-ELL students. Likewise, research into the relationships between familistic attitudes, attendance patterns, and achievement patterns among students from across the spectrum of student subpopulations could be valuable in informing education policy and practice.

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