Chronic Absenteeism in Virginia and the Challenged School Divisions: A Descriptive Analysis of Patterns and Correlates

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Summary

- Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of a school year or at least 18 days of the standard 180-day year.
- In 2014-15, 1 in 10 Virginia students were chronically absent with even higher rates in Norfolk (1 in 7) and in Richmond and Petersburg (1 in 5).
- Chronic absenteeism rates have declined since 2004-05 in Virginia statewide as well as in Petersburg and Richmond.
- Chronically absent students are less likely to meet academic performance benchmarks than are non-chronically absent students.
- Students who change schools are more likely to be chronically absent.

Background

Schools play a vital role in providing youth with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in whatever future endeavors they pursue. The beneficial impact of schooling on students’ lives, however, is severely curtailed if students are persistently absent from school. The importance of school attendance to students’ success is borne out by the research. Being absent from school predicts lower test scores, increased likelihood of being retained in grade and dropping out of high school, and increased risky behaviors.

The Virginia Governor’s Children’s Cabinet commissioned this report to provide a rich descriptive picture of the chronic absenteeism in Virginia and in the three Challenged School Divisions in particular—Norfolk, Petersburg, and Richmond. We begin with an exploration of how chronic absenteeism varies across the divisions and grades and how it has changed since the 2004-05 school year and then examine the relationship of chronic absenteeism with student academic performance, students changing schools, and school climate.

Data & Methods

We analyze data obtained through the Virginia Longitudinal Data System spanning the school years 2004-05 to 2014-15. We link these enrollment records to information on student performance on statewide assessments (the PALS and SOL exams) and to school-level aggregated information on school safety collected through the annual Discipline, Crime, and Violence data collection. The analytic database consists of more than 14.5 million student-by-school-by-year enrollment records.

The analysis is descriptive. It is intended to highlight policy-relevant patterns and correlations between student and school characteristics and chronic absenteeism. This analysis is not designed to highlight the causal effect of any of these characteristics on chronic absenteeism.

Findings

Slightly more than 10% of Virginia students were chronically absent from school in 2014-15 which is in line with national estimates that between 10 and 15% of students are chronically absent. Meaningfully more students are chronically absent in the three Challenged School Divisions: 15% in Norfolk, 20% in Richmond, and 22% in Petersburg. Chronic absenteeism is most pronounced among high school students: 15% statewide, 25% in Norfolk, 38% in Petersburg, and 39% in Richmond.

The rate of chronic absenteeism among all Virginia students declined 2 percentage points (15%) since 2004-05 (Figure 1). Petersburg and Richmond experienced larger declines of 7 and 5 percentage points respectively.
points (24 and 21%), respectively. There has been very little change in Norfolk over this period. The reduction in chronic absenteeism was largest among middle school students.

Chronic absenteeism is associated with poor performance on standardized exams at all grade levels. This negative relationship is stronger among middle school students than elementary students. The mathematics proficiency rate among chronically absent Virginia middle school students is 28 percentage points less than that of non-chronically absent students. Among Virginia elementary students, the difference is 21 percentage points, a 25% smaller gap. With respect to reading proficiency, the gap among elementary school students is 14 percentage points, a third smaller than the 21-point gap among middle school students.

Changing schools from one year to the next is correlated with a higher risk of being chronically absent. Among elementary students, students who change schools are roughly 60% more likely than students who do not change schools to be chronically absent in Norfolk and Richmond and 50% more likely in Petersburg. Among middle and high school students, students who change schools for non-structural reasons (i.e., their former school serves their current grade) are at the greatest risk of being chronically absent.

The relationship between school safety and chronic absenteeism is not consistent across Virginia and the three divisions. For example, among elementary and middle schools, chronic absenteeism is most prevalent in the least safe schools in Virginia, Norfolk, and Richmond. The opposite is true in Petersburg where the safest schools have the highest chronic absenteeism rates.

**Policy Implications**

This report provides an initial look at chronic absenteeism in Virginia and in the three Challenged School Divisions in particular. While particularly high rates were found for certain groups of students, the results offer encouragement in that the risk of being chronically absent has lessened over the last decade in each division for at least some students, middle school students, for example. Additional research can highlight the strategies divisions and schools are using to reduce absenteeism and determine how they may be replicated in other divisions.

The findings in this report have value even absent additional research. They inform the nascent policy and research agenda focused on helping students show up to school ready to learn each and every day. They describe the context in which any intervention would be designed to influence, they highlight observable factors associated with chronic absenteeism which could be used to target these interventions, and they serve as a benchmark against which the effectiveness of such interventions will be judged.