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Chronic Absenteeism and its Effects in the Virtual Classroom?

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Rationale

Absenteeism is a continuously growing issue in American public-school systems. More than 7 million students missed more than 15 days of school in one year of pre-pandemic (US Dept of Education, 2015-16). In the District of Columbia Public Schools 1 in 4 students were chronically absent missing 10% or more of a school year pre-pandemic (District of Columbia Public Schools). Retrieved: <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/dcps-glance-attendance>

In March of 2020, school districts and households across the nation found themselves thrust into a world of virtual learning. Teachers were challenged to learn virtual platforms instantly while leading students in a new uncharted territory amid a world pandemic. In February 2021, WUSA9 reported in a breaking story, “School Districts Struggle to Find Missing Students Not Logging into Class”. This report covered the growing challenge of students failing to log in for virtual class sessions. It went on to state that the District of Columbia Public Schools recommended more than 7300 students to support teams due to chronic absences. (Geller, L., Knier, B., 2021)

The purpose of this explorative research study is to gain an understanding of what impact has the COVID-19 Pandemic and virtual learning had on achievement. Two central research questions guided this study: What impact has the COVID-19 Pandemic and virtual learning had on achievement? Has chronic absenteeism increased due to the district moving to a fully virtual learning environment? This study aims to not only identify how student achievement has been affected by COVID-19 and virtual learning but also identify what possible solutions can be offered to remedy this ongoing crisis.

Literature Review

Obscure and seemingly appearing from out of nowhere, school districts across the nation have been struggling with the growing reality of chronic absenteeism, and its impact on student achievement, the school, and the educational community altogether.

There is a vast amount of research presenting the short- and long-term negative effects of chronic absenteeism on academic achievement. (Bauer et al., 2018; Keyworth, et. Al., 2019; University of Delaware, 2018) According to the University of Delaware, chronic absenteeism can lead to low academic achievement due to missing critical instruction especially for low-income and marginalized students. Furthermore, chronic absenteeism is a major factor leading to school dropout. (University of Delaware, 2018; Gubbels, et. Al., 2019)

One in 10 schools experience extreme chronic absenteeism—where more than 30% of the student body is chronically absent—and, as a result, are less likely to achieve or improve upon measures of academic achievement (Bauer et al., 2018; Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates Center, 2017).

Chronic Absenteeism is a multidimensional issue that contains many factors, which not only impact them academically, but also affect the students’ mental, social, emotional, psychological, and physical growth. (Keyworth, et al., 2019; Katz, et al., 2015)

There are many complex factors related to chronic absenteeism, these problems include significant family challenges (homelessness, family instability, physical or mental health issues), community challenges (neighborhood safety), and challenges with specific classrooms or schools (school climate, quality, safety, and relationships with parents). (Katz, et al., 2015)

Methodology/Data Analysis

The tool used to acquire data was a survey sent through Survey Monkey, to local high school teachers. A total of thirty-two (32) responses were collected before the cut-off date. Assessing the survey data, I discovered a wide array of responses to what chronic absenteeism is? Nearly 60% (59.38 actual) of teachers presumed that any student with five or more consecutive absences categorized a student as being chronically absent.

Teachers were asked to choose their top three factors that they felt contributed to chronic absences: 24 out of 32 teachers or 77% of teacher responses felt as though students' lack of interest was the major contributing factor of chronic absenteeism while 74% of responses assumed the students' home environment ranked second in being a contributing factor. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 42% of responses submitted claimed that student productivity greatly decreased, while 32% claimed productivity decreased slightly.

Strategies used to meet the needs of students who were chronically absent varied greatly from personal phone calls and emails; to parental contact; one on one conferencing with students; working with social workers and attendance departments; tutoring on weekends to provide students with multiple opportunities to achieve their goals.

Lastly, teachers were asked to provide resolutions that could address chronic absenteeism, the results once again varied ranging from offering more wrap-around support services to families, to offering home visits, to suggesting that the issue of chronic absenteeism was bigger than the school level and should be addressed by the district. Others suggested that training needed to be available to all stakeholders, while some even admitted to not having a clue of what could be offered to help this growing issue.

Recommendations

To provide a more conclusive outcome, it is recommended that further research be done to gain a further understanding of what chronic absenteeism is. Due to this newly identified problem, and the multiple components of it, no clear path can be chartered until every area has been assessed and "clearly" defined. Based on the data collected there were varying perspectives on what "chronic absenteeism" is, with a large percentage recommending that this was a district-level problem.

Below are two recommended solutions to combat the growing problem of chronic absenteeism:

District-Wide Training

The data suggest varying perspectives exist on the definition of chronic absenteeism and the number of days required. Of the 32 participants, 12 agreed that this was a district-level problem. A clearly defined plan with easily identifiable criteria and/or triggers is needed and can be used to empower staff to identify students at risk of being chronically absent.

A Multi-Partner Approach

Due to the multiple dimensions of chronic absenteeism, it is recommended that the District initiate a coalition of various partnerships to address all levels and factors involved to address the WHOLE child.

Understanding criteria/triggers that identify those most at risk, can initiate better student outcomes. Distinguishing what forces drive a student's decision to drop out can turn the tide in battling this crisis.

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