

## **Preschool Absenteeism Survey – Executive Summary**

August 30, 2017



### **Introduction**

In the spring of 2017 the Northern Illinois Regional P-20 Network Early Childhood Work group commissioned a survey on the issue of absenteeism in preschools. Absenteeism from early childhood education programs receives little attention, and we don't fully understand the causes. One of our particular concerns is that with excessive absences, children may never realize the potential of their early childhood programs (Ehrlich et al., 2014). The negative effects of chronic absenteeism are especially true for children living in poverty, who are already at risk for educational delays, and are four times more likely to be chronically absent (Attendance Works, 2014).

The impacts of being chronically absent in early childhood result in long-term issues that can affect a child's ability to stay on track throughout their schooling. In fact, chronic absenteeism carried into K-12th grade can mean that children who are ready for kindergarten lose the gains they made from their early childhood programs (Attendance Works, 2011). Absenteeism habits are carried into K-12th grade; chronically absent preschoolers are five times more likely to be chronically absent in 2nd grade. (Ehrlich et al., 2014)

Northern Illinois P20 Network Region Preschool Absenteeism Survey was distributed across the Northern Illinois University region with some statewide distribution. Survey questions included information about the following:

- Characteristics of the programs (locations, staff numbers, etc.)
- Program guidelines/policies
- Consequences for poor attendance
- Documented rates of absenteeism
- Most common reasons for absenteeism
- Most successful ways of addressing absenteeism
- Forms of intervention – successes and challenges

### **Findings**

Participant information showed respondents with a range of program size, type, and geographical distribution. 73 respondents with enrollments ranging from a few students to 2400, staff numbers reported from 1 to 200, and 49 different zip codes.

- Locations noted - 1 City of Chicago, 7 Suburban Cook County, and 63 "other county"
- Program purpose - 20 reporting child care, 1 reporting faith affiliate, 9 Head Start/Early Head Start, 1 Montessori, 22 Preschool, 12 school district 1, special education coop, and 3 other.

When asked about their current program attendance guidelines, 52 of 68 respondents (76%) indicated they had attendance guidelines. Common responses include the following:

- Call parent after 2-3 days of absence
- Some required a doctor's note
- Mentioned requiring 75-80-85% attendance for reimbursement (with 80% per month being referred to as "required by state")
- Many referred to their school district's attendance/truancy process

- Some mentioned that children are dropped after 10 days of consecutive absence (with one program listing 21 days)
- Few made a referral to the family engagement/support personnel

When asked about their attendance consequences, 23 of 65 respondents (36%) reported having consequences. Common consequences listed include these suggestions:

- Attendance contract with parent
- Create an action plan with the family
- Transportation eliminated
- Truancy office referral
- Removed from program
- Placed back on the waiting list

Most common reasons for absences were reported as illness (46), family situation (29), vacation (16) lack of transportation (11), no reason (4), or an appointment (3). A family situations included relative visiting, parent conflict, relative illness (physical and mental), money, emergencies, and general family issues.

When asked about program prevention activities, 27 of 46 respondents (59%) did not distribute information materials to raise awareness. For programs that did, they listed newsletters, enrollment paperwork, and registration forms as commonly used. One respondent commented that “the teachers were able to show the progress the child made when they were in attendance versus what information they did not receive when absent. They correlated the information presented during a child’s absences with a child’s growth in that area. Absenteeism showed that children made less progress when they consistently missed coming to school.”

As far as any future attendance awareness campaigns, 32 of 45 respondents (71%) indicated that they had no plans for absenteeism awareness campaigns in the future. When asked in a follow up question why not, several respondents said that attendance is generally not an issue. A few other more individual reasons included the following:

- We have a preschool handbook that explains attendance and absences.
- We have not had serious cases of children missing class. I don’t have exact numbers of how many children were out; however, most of the time children are out due to illness. There are only a few instances of children missing for vacations.
- At this point, preschool is not required by law, so we do not feel we can address/enforce attendance with the preschool students.
- Not on the list of board priorities.
- The parents pay tuition to attend and pay whether the children are here or not. Parents usually have a valid reason for not bringing their child.
- I would like more ways on how to education parents on this subject.
- My fear is that parents will bring sick children to preschool/childcare if they feel that children must avoid being absent.
- I feel uncomfortable asking parents to bring children when they do not want to since the children are young and should spend time at home.

Respondents were asked about absentee intervention programs, and 28 of 45 respondents (62%) said that they intervene when children are experiencing high rates of absenteeism. Responses included these methods of intervention:

- Parent meeting (20)
- Warning letters (11)
- Transportation work around (8)
- Case management (7)
- Parent info session, conference, contract
- Some comments on the most successful interventions are below:
  - “We have started giving parents information about what their children are missing out on when not attending. Would like to make flyers detailing what absenteeism can lead to.”
  - “Talking! Find out why. Is the child having difficulty transitioning into a bedtime routine? If so, help them to develop a plan and support them while they implement it. Transportation difficulty? Help find a solution”

Some of the responses given by the 17 of 45 respondents (38%) who reported that they are not intervening with high rates of absenteeism included those below:

- Parent reactions have been rather harsh when we have brought up the benefits of attendance.
- The district is implementing attendance consequences with grades 1-12 only currently.
- In need of more information. I have one family who needs intervening, but they always say the student is sick, so not sure how to address this issue.
- Not our business.
- We have good attendance.
- The old director was afraid to make parents upset.

When offered the opportunity to give final comments about absenteeism, respondents submitted these suggestions:

- We would welcome ideas to improve attendance. Transportation would help tremendously, but so would educating parents on the importance of preschool.
- There are some years that children are sicker than others. A simple phone call/email shows parents that we are concerned and care about their child.
- We are a residential program, so most of our children are with us every school day.
- I think that sometimes parents feel that since this is "only" preschool, it is okay for their child to not attend. I believe that as much as parents want their child to go to preschool they just are not recognizing the importance of attendance to make growth.
- Efforts need to continue to have parents realize that these years are just as important to their children's growth as they are the kindergarten/first grade years. Parent education is an important piece of the attendance issue. The other piece is to have our politicians not only state that they value early childhood, but that they also back that up with funding. Only when everyone gets the same message and recognizes the importance of preschool will the attendance issues change!
- I feel that there are not enough programs available. I tried to start up and open one myself, and not one single bank will help me with having CCAP children, plus IL funding is always being talked about negatively.

- Sorry, I don't have quick access to the attendance data, due to the size of the program and the number of sites. I can tell you that out of our full day students, n. 200, half of them had missed 10% or greater by the end of December.

## Recommendations

In considering the results of the survey, major themes were presented throughout the responses.

1. Professional development for administrators, teachers and other staff on prevention and intervention.  
36% of respondents reported having consequences for poor attendance but the consequences lead to worse outcomes – like dropping the child from services altogether or eliminating transportation. Professional development should be offered to directors and teachers to educate them on the importance of good attendance and promote sharing between programs on proven prevention strategies.
2. Early warning systems in programs to identify children needing interventions.  
59% of respondents do not distribute materials designed to prevent absences and those that do commonly discussed attendance procedures during enrollment and open houses instead of throughout the year. 71% of respondents were not planning a future campaign on the importance of attendance. More regular reminders or a focused prevention plan or campaign would be a more-successful in awareness, identification and then early intervention with families of students with attendance issues.
3. Wrap around supports for families and children.  
38% of the respondents do not intervene with poor attendance and several respondents reported that chronic absenteeism is not a concern or “not their business”. Research supports the need to intervene with poor attendance habits early and using a strength-based model of parent education and support would address family needs.

## References

P20 Network Birth-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Work Group Call to Action: Early Childhood Absenteeism  
<http://www.niu.edu/p20network/resources/index.shtml>

Attendance Works. (2011). Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Associations with Student Characteristics, School Readiness, and Third Grade Outcomes. Applied Survey Research.

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