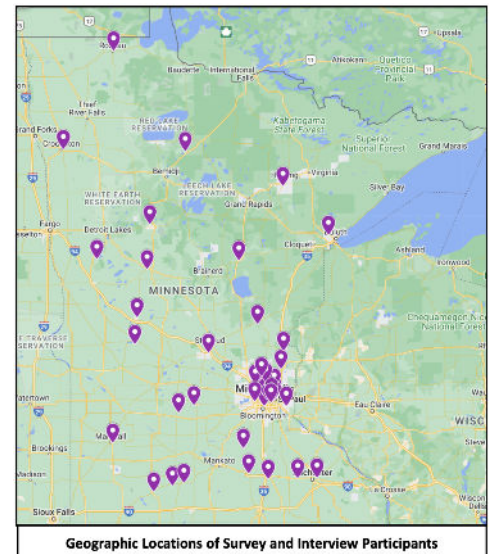


Investigating Kindergarten Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism in Minnesota

About the Study

In May 2024, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) partnered with Creation in Common to investigate kindergarten attendance and chronic absenteeism in Minnesota. The study aimed to uncover the root causes of absenteeism, identify barriers families face, and explore how education systems can better support consistent attendance.

The research engaged 97 participants, including 77 survey respondents and 20 interviewees. These individuals represented diverse school settings—from large urban districts to small rural schools—and offered perspectives from roles such as teachers, counselors, social workers, attendance secretaries, administrators, and family liaisons.



Key Findings

Complex Drivers of Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic kindergarten absenteeism is influenced by a wide range of interconnected and systemic factors, including:

- Health issues, such as physical illnesses, mental health struggles, and lingering COVID-19 concerns, were cited by 69% of respondents as the top reason for kindergarten absenteeism. Chronic conditions like asthma and frequent illnesses in younger children amplify the problem. Families sometimes lack access to preventive care or face difficulties navigating medical systems, leaving health-related absences unresolved.
- Socioeconomic challenges, such as housing and food insecurity, unreliable transportation, and family instability, were reported by over 60% of respondents. Families dealing with these challenges often prioritize immediate survival needs over school attendance. Schools often lack the necessary time and staff capacity to consistently connect families to community resources—making it harder to address these issues effectively.
- Family obligations and crises, including caregiving demands, job instability, and family emergencies, were identified by 56% of respondents as barriers to attendance. Families in these situations often face conflicting responsibilities, such as caring for a sick relative while managing a housing situation or juggling a work schedule that conflicts with bussing or school drop-off times.
- Ambivalence about kindergarten, often due to misconceptions about the importance of kindergarten, cultural differences in beliefs about early education, and parents/caregiver concerns about developmentally inappropriate expectations, was called out by nearly half of respondents. Participants reiterated how early school absences often set patterns that can lead to chronic absenteeism in later years. They felt that families may not always have awareness or understanding of short and long-term academic and social-emotional benefits of consistent kindergarten attendance.

- Transportation barriers were identified by over 40% of participants as a major contributor to inconsistent attendance. In rural areas, missing the bus can mean a missed full day of school due to the lack of alternative transportation. Urban families may struggle to coordinate public transit schedules with school start times, particularly if young children need adult accompaniment.

The findings highlighted disparities in absenteeism, with students from historically underserved communities—such as immigrant families, low-income households, and rural areas—being disproportionately affected.

Promising Practices and Interventions

Respondents shared that effective intervention relies heavily on personal connections with families. They noted the need for adequate staffing and training to meaningfully engage families when attendance issues arise, as well as systems integrating attendance data with other family support information like health and housing needs. Several strategies emerged as particularly impactful:

- Personalized family outreach—such as phone calls, emails, texts, and face-to-face meetings—received the highest effectiveness rating from survey respondents. Direct, empathetic outreach can help foster trust, especially for families navigating language or systemic challenges. Partnering with community liaisons or interpreters may make outreach even more effective.
 - Home visits were highlighted by 52% of respondents as a critical tool for building relationships and identifying barriers. Connecting with families in their own environment helps create trust and understanding. Proactive home visits at the beginning of the school year can lead to improved attendance by making families feel supported from the start.
- Attendance incentive programs, ranging from small prizes to school-wide celebrations, were reported as widely used. While these programs do create excitement about attendance, it's critical to recognize and address the inequities incentive programs can perpetuate. Participants underscored the importance of focusing on improvement rather than perfection and, since incentives don't address underlying issues, pairing programs with deeper interventions.
- Transportation assistance interventions, such as providing bus passes, school vans, or carpools, were reported by 50% of participants. Schools emphasized the necessity of flexible solutions that can adapt to shifting family needs, such as temporary housing changes.
- Attendance teams consisting of teachers, administrators, counselors, family liaisons, nurses, and social workers were identified as a best practice. Teams meet regularly to analyze data, identify at-risk students, and develop targeted interventions. Clear roles and consistent follow-through are critical for team success.
- Community partnerships are a vital tool for addressing systemic barriers. Collaborations with local organizations can help bridge culture and language differences—creating a stronger safety net for families and helping to improve attendance over time. These partnerships are most impactful when built with intention and structure, with clearly identified shared goals.

Acknowledgment of Participants

This research reflects the collective wisdom of those on the frontlines of education, whose work supports students and families every day. Their contributions will guide future efforts to build stronger, more equitable systems for improving attendance.

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