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FOR 1 IN 10, IT’S NOT EXACTLY BACK TO SCHOOL  
Researchers: Chronic Absenteeism Threatens Children’s Future But Can be Prevented

New York City – Nationwide, one in 10 kindergarten and first grade students will miss a month or more of school this year – with troubling impact on their short and long-term academic performance, especially if they are poor.

“It’s an issue that’s often overlooked by educators, policymakers, and researchers,” says Mariajosé Romero, PhD, senior research associate at the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), based at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. “Efforts to improve early learning ought to focus not only on access and quality but also on attendance. If children are not in school, the odds that they will succeed are greatly reduced.” Romero co-authored the report “Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades,” with researcher Hedy N. Chang. Their study was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“There’s a natural assumption so widely understood that it is rarely invoked: students have to be present and engaged in order to learn,” says Chang. “So it is remarkable that thousands of our youngest students are academically at-risk because of extended absences when they first embark upon their school careers.”

Chronic early absence matters, say the researchers, because it adversely affects academic successes and affects large numbers of children, especially in some communities and schools. NCCP’s national data analysis found that chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade for all children regardless of gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

Reasons children are absent vary, but poor and low-income children are especially vulnerable because their families often lack resources such as transportation, food, clothing, and social supports that help ensure regular attendance. “Families may also simply be unaware of the adverse impact of chronic early absence,” adds Romero.

Other common contributors to absenteeism include teen motherhood, single motherhood, low maternal education, welfare, unemployment, food insecurity, poor maternal health, having multiple siblings, or other serious family concerns (such as mental illness, homelessness, child or domestic abuse, incarceration of a parent) that make school attendance difficult for children.

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According to the report, “Attendance suffers when families are struggling to keep up with the routine of school despite the lack of reliable transportation, working long hours in poorly paid jobs with little flexibility, unstable and unaffordable housing, inadequate health care and escalating community violence.”

So what can be done?

Attendance is higher, say the researchers, in areas where “schools provide a rich, engaging learning experience, have stable, experienced and skilled teachers and actively engage parents in their children’s education.”

Absenteeism decreases “when educational institutions and communities actively communicate the importance of going to school regularly to all students and their parents, and reach out to families when their children begin to show patterns of excessive absence…. …communities can help lower chronic absence by providing early childhood experiences that prepare children and families for entry into formal education.”

Romero and Chang recommend that schools partner with community agencies and families to understand the factors contributing to early absence to develop appropriate responses tailored to their realities. They point to a school district in their study with the lowest level of chronic early absence among those localities examined. Each school in that district has an attendance team that sees to it that families are contacted as soon as students miss three days of school. Home visits occur after five days. In the past four years, chronic early absence in the district fell from 10 percent to five percent among young students living in high poverty neighborhoods. And, unlike all other localities examined, students from high poverty neighborhoods had better attendance than their peers living in other parts of town.

“Schools and communities have a choice,” says Chang. “We can work together early on to ensure families get their children to class consistently or we can pay later for failing to intervene before problems are more difficult and costly to fix.”

The full report can be found online at: http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_837.html

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The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation’s leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health and well-being of America’s low-income families and children. Part of Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, NCCP uses research to inform policy and practice with the goal of ensuring positive outcomes for the next generation.