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Daily Attendance Data

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) partnered with 15 elementary schools to obtain and analyze student-level daily attendance records for 6,390 students. Schools ranged in size from just over 100 students to more than 600 students. Geographic locations also varied with 4 schools located in a city, 4 in a suburb, 4 in a town, and 3 in a rural area. In seven schools, more than 50 percent of students were economically disadvantaged in the 2013-14 school year.[i] The following sections highlight the value of closely examining school-level attendance data. While the sample includes a diverse selection of schools, the graphs in this brief should not be thought of as representative of all elementary schools in Oregon. Rather, the purpose is to give readers different tools to look at their own data.

Scheduling and Attendance

Obtaining daily attendance data allowed ODE to analyze attendance by day, week and month across schools over an entire school year. This analysis revealed three overarching themes in scheduling and attendance. These three themes are depicted in the example graphics to follow,

which are taken from different schools participating in this study.

Theme 1: The average number of daily absences significantly varies by month

The data show that the average number of full-day absences significantly varied by month. The average number of daily absences in studied schools was the lowest at the beginning of the school year. For example, Figure 1 shows that there was an average of 9 students absent per day during September. Similarly, there was an average of 10 students absent per day during October. However, these averages abruptly increased for subsequent months. Absences peaked in November and February with an average of 19 students absent per day. Absences peak in different months for different schools. Out of the 15 schools studied, peak months ranged from November to April. Attendance figures improved near the end of the school year in most schools, yet they never fully returned to rates observed at the beginning of the year.

Figure 1: Attendance is at its best at the beginning of the school year
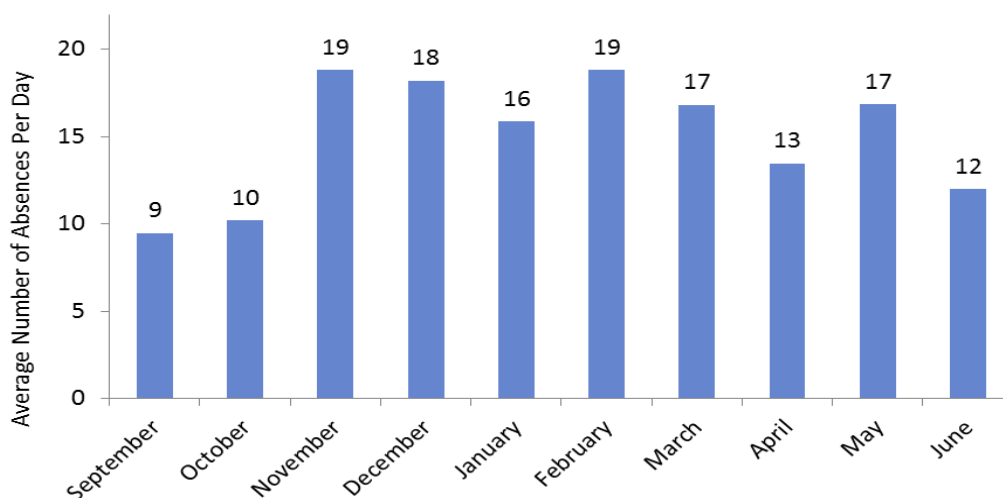
Source: School attendance data from school participating in study, 2014-15. N varies from 313 in September to 300 in June.

Theme 2. Students tend to miss days that extend holiday breaks and other scheduled time off

Two notable examples of predictably high absence rates are around Thanksgiving and Spring Break (Figure 2). These patterns are consistent across all schools studied and highlight a serious challenge for teachers trying to provide meaningful instruction on each school day. Similarly, nearly all schools have more absences on Mondays and Fridays and fewer absences during the middle of the week. Communication with students and parents may help schools improve attendance on these high absence days, when little can be done to adjust the school calendar.

Yet, some of the days with the highest rates of absenteeism may be avoided with changes to the school calendar. One example of this type of high absence day is shown in Figure 2 around Veterans Day.

In this instance, Tuesday, Veterans Day, was a holiday with no school. However school was in session on Monday. Nearly 10 percent of students missed the Monday before Veteran's Day.

In another example, a district offered a half-day on the day before Thanksgiving. The rate of absenteeism was very high in this case as well. Districts may be able to adjust school calendars to help minimize these high absence days.

It is also important to look at days with low absenteeism. In Figure 2, very few students were absent on the Friday before Valentine's Day. This particular bright spot was unique to this school. Yet every school may benefit by identifying days with low absence rates to better understand trends, both positive and negative, in their community. Plotting school data over the course of the year can help reveal both strong and weak points in school-wide attendance.

Figure 2: Plotting annual data helps identify days with strong and weak attendance rates
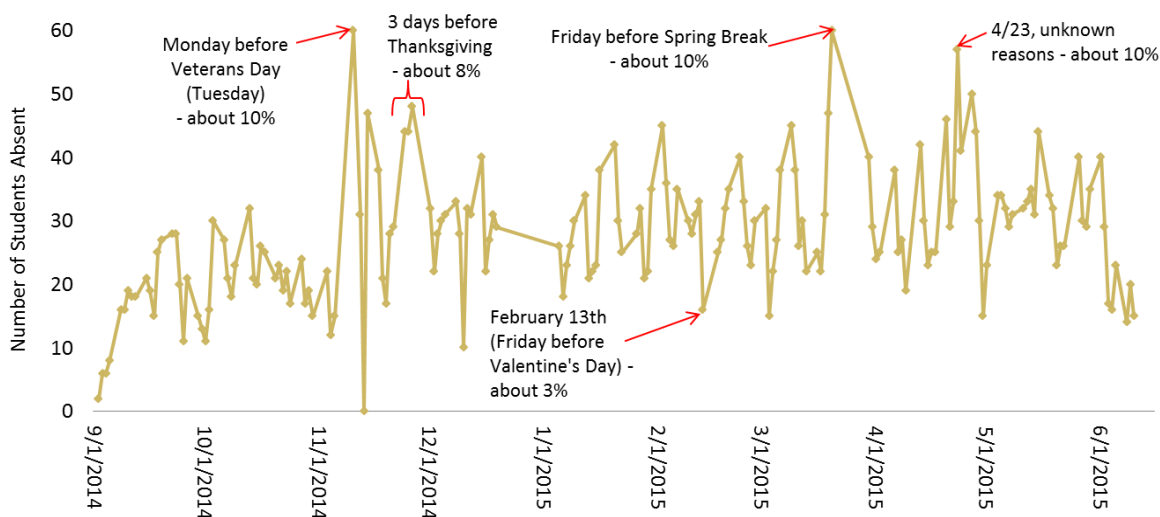
Source: School attendance data from school participating in study, 2014-15

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**Theme 3: Schoolwide absence trends vary for chronically absent and not chronically absent students**

Absenteeism can be a complex issue within a school building, with students facing a variety of barriers to making it to school. Mapping different students groups' daily attendance may help schools identify different patterns and strategies to address the diverse set of barriers that students face.

Figures 3 compares the number of chronically absent students' absences to all students' absences. It shows that spikes in absences vary between these groups and may be linked to different types of events. Analysis of this sample school revealed a correlation between spikes in absences for all students and school athletic events at the high school level.

Spikes in absences for chronically absent students were not correlated with any particular day of the week, but were correlated with Mondays and Fridays for all students.

Figure 3 only examines the trends of two student groups. Comparing other groups may help schools identify different patterns in absences and strategies to address those patterns. For example, schools may want to compare excused and unexcused absences, absences for students who have access to bus transportation and those who do not, or daily absences across grades.

Figure 3: Mapping daily attendance may help schools identify specific barriers to regular attendance that different student groups face during the school year.
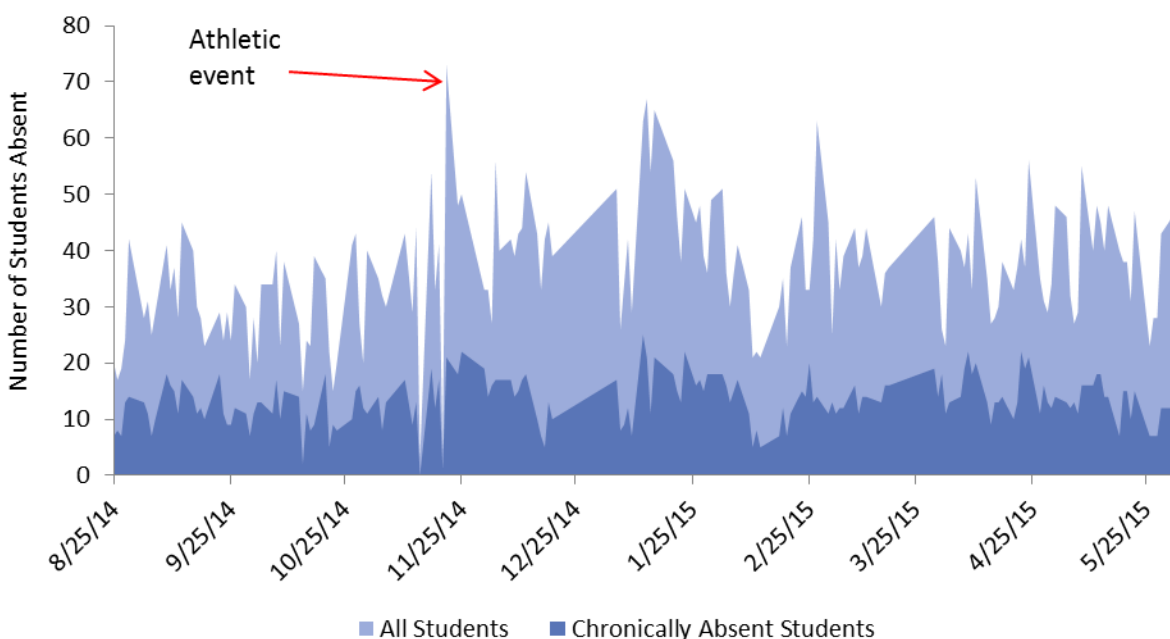
Source: School attendance data from school participating in study, 2014-15.

Reasons for absences offer schools additional ways to use daily attendance data

Research done by Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) finds that most of the reasons students miss school fall into three categories: Can't go, Won't go, Don't go. Sometimes students can't attend school because they must be somewhere else during the school day due to circumstances or other obligations (e.g. illness, housing instability). Sometimes students won't go to school because they are actively avoiding a circumstance or event at or in route to school (e.g. bullying, fear of a specific tasks like reading aloud, weather). Finally, sometimes students don't go to school because they would prefer to be elsewhere or students and families do not make the effort required to get to school (e.g. family may not see the value of attendance).[ii]

Several participating schools categorized every student absence over the course of the year. The school highlighted in Figure 4 used 7 categories: illness, family vacation, medical/doctor appointment, family emergency, suspension, and uncategorized excused and unexcused. Collecting reasons for absences in any consistent categories

may help schools identify patterns in and strategies to address absenteeism.

In Figure 4, the categories are condensed into six major reasons. Illness is the leading cause of absences in every month. Uncategorized excused and unexcused absences were typically the second and third leading causes.

One way schools might use this data is to identify points of emphasis for each month to be used to communicate with staff and families. For example, in months where the excused absences are particularly high relative to other months, schools may want to emphasize the importance of coming to school every day and thank parents for communicating when their student will miss school. In the months with particularly high percent of absences due to illness, schools may want to partner with local public health officials to create messaging and strategies around health and wellness. Data organized by category allows schools to identify points of emphasis for each month.

Figure 4: Graphing reasons for absences by month helps identify different trends driving absenteeism
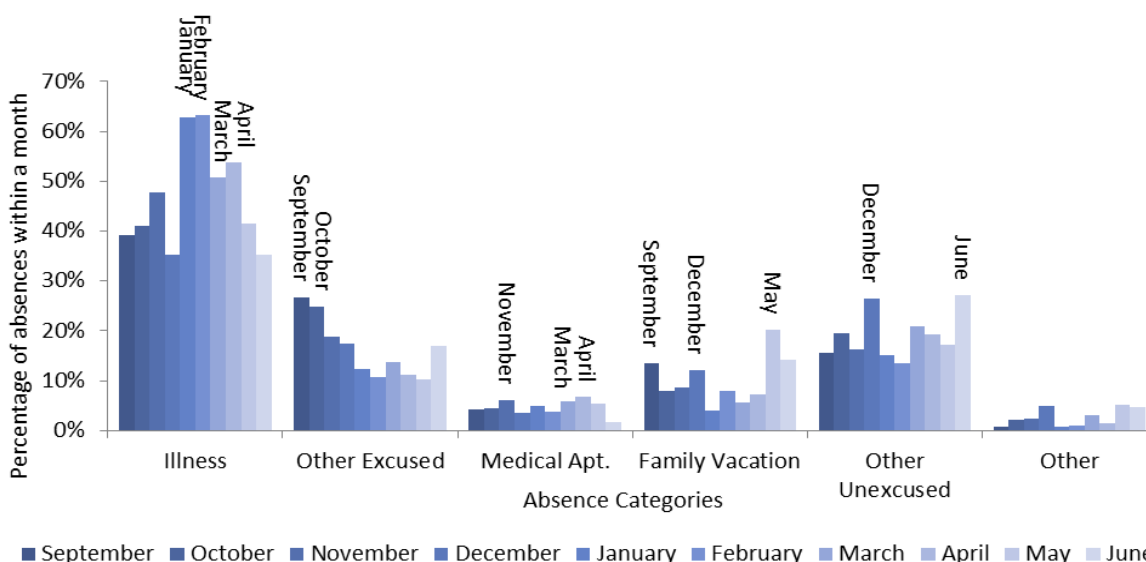
Source: School attendance data from school participating in study, 2014-15. Analysis of full-day absences only.
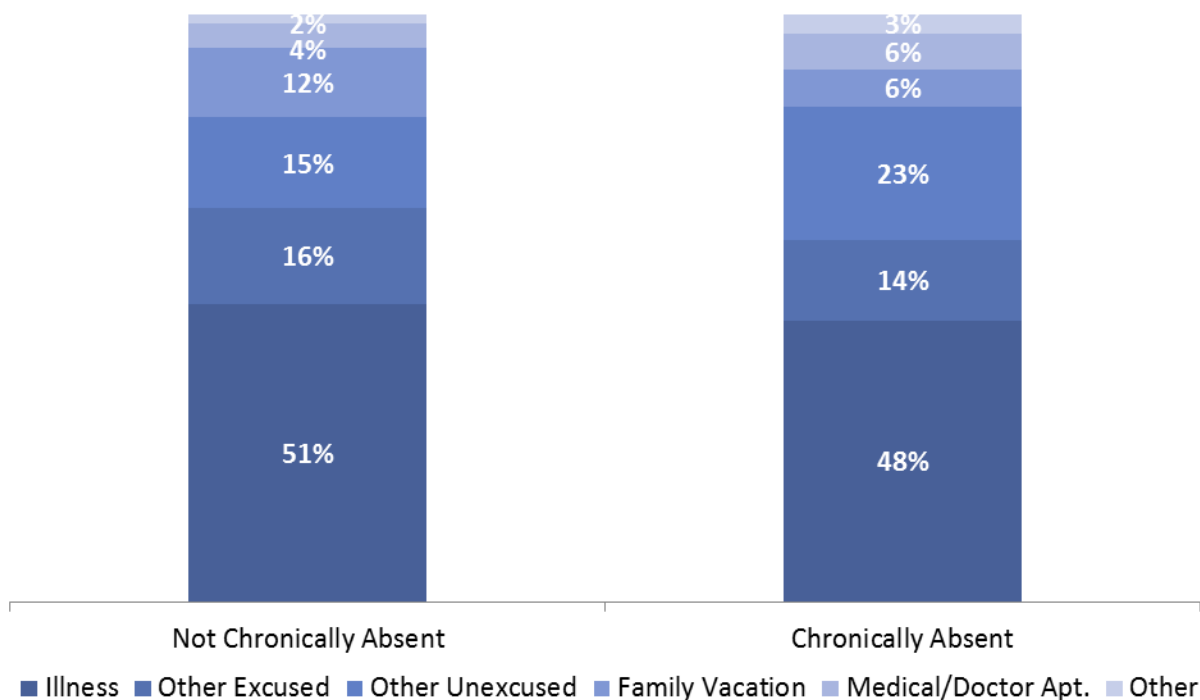
Reasons for absences can help identify different challenges by student groups

Figure 5 divides absences into two columns based on students' chronic absenteeism status. The Figure shows that, as a percent of all absences, students who are chronically absent have a slightly higher proportion of unexcused absences. Students who are not chronically absent have a high proportion of absences for family vacations. Understanding yearlong reasons for absences may help administrators and teachers identify the best strategies to meet the needs of their students and community.

The next brief in this series will explore the use of data on excused and unexcused absences.

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[i] Schools were selected and contacted prior to the availability of final 2014-15 numbers. Thus, the selection criteria included data from the 2013-14 school year.
[ii] Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

Figure 5: Chronically absent students often have different reported reasons for absence than their counterparts

Source: School attendance data from school participating in study, 2014-15. N=313.