

Excused and Unexcused—The value of labeling an absence

Prior briefs in this series focused on chronic absenteeism because research shows that students who attend school regularly do better academically, regardless of the reason for the absence.^{i,ii,iii} However, schools often focus primarily on excused versus unexcused absences in order to be in compliance with state law. This brief explores the variation in excused and unexcused absence rates among student groups from 13 sample schools.

Legal Requirement to Record Excused and Unexcused Absences

Schools vary widely on how they address excused and unexcused absences. For the 13 schools that reported data on excused and unexcused absences, most absences were recorded as excused. Oregon law allows a principal to exercise considerable discretion when characterizing an absence as excused or unexcused. According to ORS 339.065 (2), “...an absence may be excused by a principal or teacher if the absence is caused by the pupil’s sickness, by the sickness of some member of the pupil’s family or by an emergency. A principal or teacher may also excuse absences for other reasons where satisfactory arrangements are made in advance of the absence.”

In addition, “Any pupil may be excused from attendance by the district school board for a period not to exceed five days in a term of three months or not to exceed 10 days in any term of at least six months (ORS 339.065 (3)).”

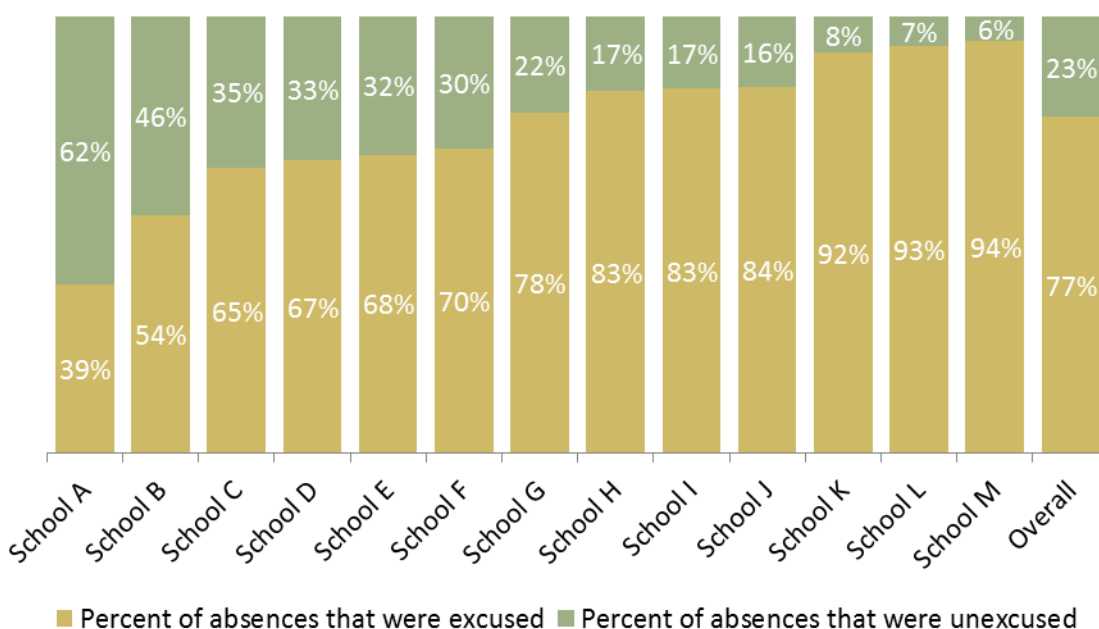
Most schools analyzed in this study report a much smaller percentage of student absences as being unexcused. Unexcused absences include all those absences not covered under the excused absence policy. Oregon law includes a tiered system of penalties for students who have “irregular attendance.” Irregular attendance is defined as “eight unexcused one-half day absences in any four-week period during which the school is in session (ORS 339.065).”

Sample schools have a wide variety of policies when it comes to classifying absences as excused or unexcused

In interviews with participating schools, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) found broad variation in what schools consider an excused or unexcused absence. Two schools considered all absences excused, due to the young age of the students. The schools argued that elementary students cannot be responsible for getting themselves to school, and therefore should not be held responsible for absences (these schools are omitted from the following analysis). Many schools appeared to consider any absence for which the parents were reached and gave a reason as excused. One school excluded vacation as a valid reason to excuse an absence, and typically only accepted illness-related absences as excused.

Figure 1 shows the percent of absences from each school that were excused and unexcused. The percent excused ranged from just 39 percent to 94 percent. On average, about 77 percent of absences were excused across the sample schools.

Figure 1: Excused and unexcused absence rates vary widely for participating schools

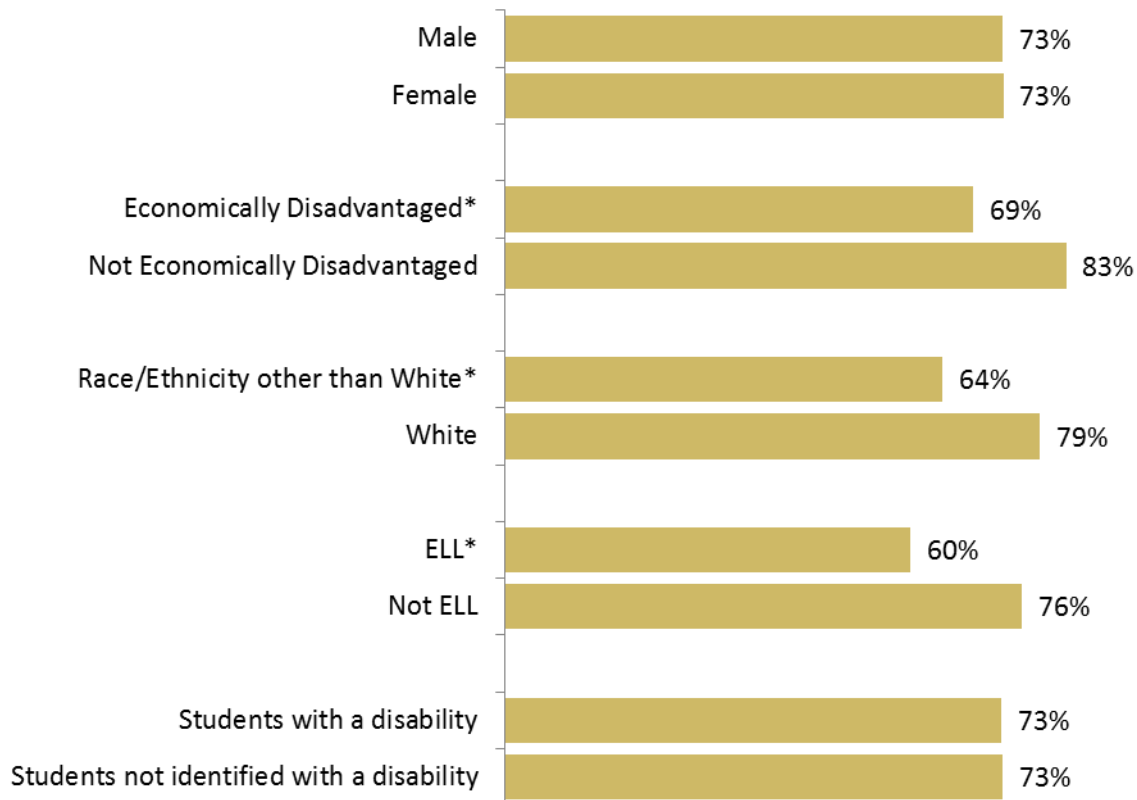


Source: Attendance data from 13 K-5 elementary schools, 2014-15 school year

Differing Rates of Excused and Unexcused Absences

About 77 percent of all full day absences across the 13 sample schools were excused absences. Figure 2 shows significant variation in the percent of excused absences across student groups. No significant differences were found between male and female students or students with a disability and their peers. However, a significantly lower percentage of absences were excused for economically disadvantaged students, students with a race or ethnicity other than White, and English Language Learners (ELL), than their peers.

Figure 2: Significant differences exist between the percentage of excused absences for economically disadvantaged students, students with a race/ethnicity other than White, and English Language Learners (ELL) and their peers



Source: Attendance data from 13 K-5 elementary schools, 2014-15 school year. N=5,524.
*Indicates statistically significant difference between groups.

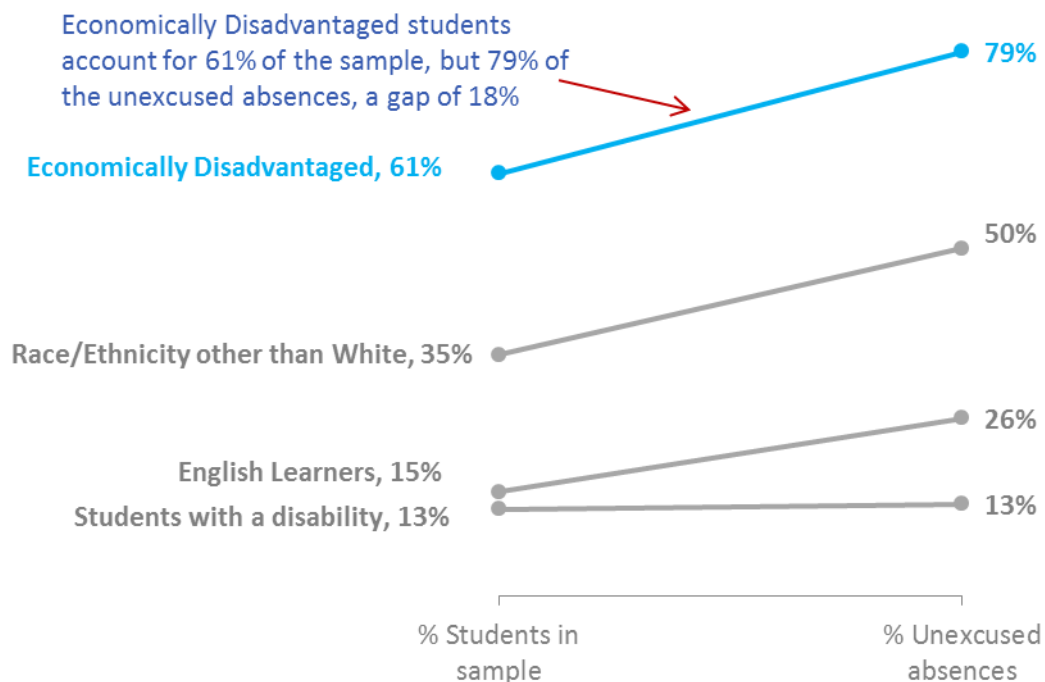
Certain student groups have a higher proportion of unexcused absences than their peers

Figure 3 shows the difference between the proportion of students in the sample from each student group and the proportion of unexcused absences attributed to students in that group. Of all unexcused absences in the 13 sample schools, 79 percent were for absences of economically

disadvantaged students, despite this group only making up 61 percent of the sample. Similarly, students with a race or ethnicity other than white make up about 35 percent of the sample, but incurred about 50 percent of unexcused absences. ELL's were about 15 percent of the sample, but account for 26 percent of unexcused absences.

Students with disabilities had about the same proportions of unexcused absences as their respective proportions in the population.

Figure 3: Economically disadvantaged students with a race/ethnicity other than White, and English Language Learner students all have a high proportion of unexcused absences compared to their proportion of the student sample



Source: Attendance data from 13 K-5 elementary schools, 2014-15 school year.

Further Research on Excused and Unexcused Absences

The data analyzed in this section represent a small sample of Oregon elementary school students (about 5,500) and are not necessarily representative of all elementary school students. They do suggest that certain student groups within a school may be more likely to receive unexcused absences. As stated earlier, patterns of unexcused absences may lead to serious consequences for students and families, including court appearances and fines. Due to these potential penalties, it is important to consider why some groups may be more likely to accumulate unexcused absences and look for ways to help these students make it to school whenever possible. Some questions that further research may address around excused and unexcused absences include:

1. Why do student groups have varying rates of excused and unexcused absences?
2. What are the effects of higher unexcused absence rates on specific student groups?
3. How do different policies around excused and unexcused absence rates effect student attendance and chronic absenteeism rates?

Using Data to Understand Chronic Absenteeism in Elementary Schools in Oregon

This series of research briefs summarized detailed analysis of attendance and chronic absenteeism in Oregon. Brief 1 highlighted the importance of tracking chronic absenteeism rather than average daily attendance. About 14 percent of K-5 students were chronically absent in Oregon during the 2014-15 school year. The second brief in this series focused on student outcomes and attendance. Research suggests, and Oregon Department of Education data confirm, that chronically absent students have poorer academic outcomes and graduate at lower rates than their peers. Using aggregate data is helpful to frame the nature of this problem. The third brief highlighted the ability of schools to use daily attendance data to find trends and patterns that are relevant to students in their building. Finally, the fourth brief gave an overview of some of the challenges presented by focusing too much on excused and unexcused absences. Data from the sample schools suggest that certain student groups, like economically disadvantaged students, students with a race or ethnicity other than White, students and English Language Learners, may be more likely to have unexcused absences than their peers.

Continued analysis of attendance data can both unpack concerning attendance trends statewide and assist principals in addressing specific attendance issues within their buildings.

ⁱ Chronically absent students missed more than 10 percent of school days. See Brief 1 of this series for a more detailed discussion of this measure.

ⁱⁱ Balfanz, Robert and Byrnes, Vaughan. *Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism*, Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University School of Education, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.edweek.org/media/chronicabsence-15chang.pdf>.