

Attendance and Disability: A Conversation with Principals in Iowa and Puerto Rico

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Background:

Students who miss 15 or more days of school are considered chronically absent, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Many states, including Iowa, define chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of school, for any reason, excused or unexcused.¹ The Department of Education in Puerto Rico established the following as a uniform policy for the whole territory: if a child misses 3 days of school, the teacher must contact the parents and explore the reason(s) for the absences. If a child is absent for 10 or more days, the school's social worker will contact the parents. If the parents don't respond, the case is referred to the Department of Families of Puerto Rico.

Students with disabilities miss school more than their peers. The U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection data (2013-2014) shows 18.5% of students with disabilities are chronically absent, compared to 14% of all students. More recent data from Connecticut (2017) shows a higher disparity where 18% of students with disabilities were chronically absent, compared to 9.6 percent overall¹. Another study followed autistic students for 4 weeks and found they missed 6 days compared to peers who only missed 1-1.4 days. That is a 30% absenteeism rate².

Multiple factors contribute to higher rates of absenteeism¹:

- Chronic health conditions
- Emotional disturbances
- Medication side effects
- Anxiety due to bullying
- Inappropriate or inadequate special education
- Related services, trauma, food, transportation and housing insecurity
- Private therapies

A problem exists in how absences related to disability are perceived by school administration. Unexcused absences put families and children at risk of being charged with truancy. An author of this study has experienced being charged with truancy when her autistic daughter refused to attend school, due to anxiety. It was not seen as an excused absence. Legislation was introduced in Iowa (2023) to ensure that absences for attending doctor appointments and therapies are excused by school administration³; unfortunately, it did not pass.

Objective:

Interview school principals (working or retired) from Iowa and Puerto Rico to explore attendance policies, understand the process administrators follow when determining a student truant, and determine whether special considerations/steps are taken when a student has a disability that may contribute to absences.

Method:

Utilizing a general qualitative framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals (working or retired) in Iowa and Puerto Rico. Interviews were transcribed and compared using a thematic analysis to identify common themes and highlight cultural and governmental differences.

Results:Common themes:

- Importance of relationships with families/students
- Creative strategies to improve attendance and support families
- Truancy charges uncommon ("last resort")
- Equality vs Equity approach

Observations:

- Uniform attendance protocols exist in Puerto Rico, but standards vary between districts in Iowa and from state to state
- "We can't look at attendance in isolation of a child's disability" (Iowa Principal with special education background)
- Students that have a sibling with a disability can miss 30-40 days of school because parent takes both children to sibling's medical appointments (Puerto Rico)
- Influencing socioeconomic factors in Puerto Rico: "I worked in a community that didn't really care, they were absent a lot" and "We are fighting against children who see that their parents don't work and have better cars, amenities, and luxuries than their teachers and principal who do work. So, they think why do I have to study if my parents without studies have everything?"
- "50% of my school's students were registered in special education program – everyone has ADHD" (Principal from Puerto Rico)
- "In the past, the Department of Families would take very seriously an absenteeism referral; it was very hard for the parent. But now it's very flexible and they don't want to attend the cases." (Principal in Puerto Rico)

Discussion:

Administrators must determine whether a child's absence is excused or unexcused. Principals interviewed discussed the importance of building relationships with families and students, then leveraging those relationships to "work together" to improve student attendance. Strategies were supportive rather than punitive. Truancy was a "last resort." These findings suggest hiring internal candidates, principals who have established relationships in the community they will work in, may be a good practice.

These findings suggest that absences occur in a sociocultural and health-related context. It may be beneficial for school administrators to utilize creative strategies to promote attendance, including meeting with the parents to educate them on the consequences of repeated absences and to explore the root causes and identify possible solutions. In future research on this topic, a bigger sample of participants is recommended to better understand this phenomenon. Also, it would be important to research this topic in high schools, and the factors that should be taken into consideration at this age range, such as transition to adulthood, challenging behaviors, and resources available for teenagers with a disability.

Examples of Creative strategies implemented:

- A personal “wake up call” for a parent working multiple jobs, so she wouldn’t oversleep (Iowa)
- Alarm clocks were purchased for children with no parents at home before school, to ensure they woke up and left for school at appropriate times (Iowa)
- School staff would pick up kids who missed the bus
- Driving around looking for kids skipping school (Iowa and Puerto Rico)
- Forming relationships with neighborhood drug dealers (Puerto Rico)
- Excusing weekly absences for child to visit father in prison; supporting the cultural value of family (Puerto Rico)
- Influence of COVID on attendance:
 - Families’ vacation “whenever they want” now. “This is not an excused absence. It’s a problem.” (Puerto Rico)
 - In Iowa, attendance was not a focus during COVID

The principal who was also a certified special education teacher approached all absences with a disability lens; “I am always thinking, is this a child we need to look at as a disability suspect.” She also emphasized that, “we can’t look at attendance in isolation of a child’s disability.” Perhaps this is a more equitable approach to attendance, when considering that disabilities can affect one’s attendance. Training principals to think with this “lens” may be beneficial to students and families.

References:

1. NCEO Brief Number 15. *Students with Disabilities & Chronic Absenteeism* (April 2018)
2. Adams (2021)
3. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=90&ba=HF610>