

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

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## Background

Students with disabilities miss school more than their peers. Multiple factors contribute to higher absences<sup>1</sup>:

- Chronic health conditions
  - Emotional disturbances
  - Medication side effects
  - Private therapies
  - Anxiety due to bullying
  - Inappropriate or inadequate special education
  - Related services, trauma, food, transportation and housing insecurity
- 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 was charged with truancy when her autistic daughter refused to attend school, due to anxiety. It was not seen as an excused absence. Legislation was proposed in Iowa (2023) to ensure schools excuse doctor appointments and therapies<sup>2</sup>; it did not pass.

## Objective

The focus of this project was to:

- Explore Attendance policies
- Understand process administrators follow when determining a student truant
- Determine if special considerations are taken when a student has a disability that may contribute to absences



## Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four principals; two from Iowa and two from Puerto Rico. After transcribing the interviews, a qualitative thematic analysis of interview data was used to identify common themes and highlight cultural and governmental differences.

## Summary of Findings

### Common themes:

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

### Observations:

- PR has uniform attendance protocols, but standards vary between school districts in Iowa
- "We can't look at attendance in isolation of a child's disability." (Administrator with special education background)
- Influencing socioeconomic factors
- "I have a lot of empathy for them because I'm a product of that community. I know what they go through, how their homes are, and the help and push they need." (PR administrator)

### Future directions:

- Implementation of creative strategies with families
- Absences occur in a sociocultural and health-related context

## References

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