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Analyzing the Relationships between State School Policies and Absenteeism Rates for 9-12th Grade Students in Texas-Mexico Border Districts

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ABSTRACT

Chronic absenteeism can impact high school students' long- and short-term development, especially in socio-economically challenged areas such as the Texas-Mexico border. We aimed to identify effective public school absenteeism policies and provide a roadmap for further investigation and state policy advocacy. This study analyzed four district-level school absenteeism policies in 88 public school districts along the Texas-Mexico border: requiring parental notification after one absence, offering incentives for student attendance, assignment of a Truancy Prevention Facilitator, and punishing students for absenteeism. District policies were collected through a review of district websites, student handbooks, codes of conduct, District Improvement Plans, and District of Innovation Plans. The chronic absenteeism and emergent bilingual/English learner (EB/EL) absenteeism rates reported in Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Reports for grades 9-12 were utilized as attendance indicators. Hierarchical linear modeling, an ordinary least square regression-based analysis, was used to examine association relationships between the policies as independent variables and absenteeism rates as the dependent variables. School districts that do not offer attendance incentives and assign officers as truancy prevention facilitators have the highest predicted total chronic absenteeism rate; districts that do not offer attendance incentives and assign support services personnel as truancy prevention facilitators have the highest predicted EB/EL absenteeism rate. Districts with attendance incentives also are associated with higher EB/EL absenteeism. Identifying effective school policies to reduce chronic absenteeism will help districts better tailor the implementation of state policies and promote access to education and services.

KEYWORDS

School absenteeism; state policy; Texas-Mexico border.

BACKGROUND

The link between chronic school absenteeism and poor health outcomes warrants a careful analysis of school policies and practices. Students who are chronically absent from school perform worse academically. Students with lower academic performance are more likely to engage in poor short- and long-term health behaviors, including substance use, low physical activity, violence, and suicide-related behaviors (Garcia, E., 2018; Hammond, C. et al., 2007; Rasberry et al., 2017). Adults with more education have higher paying and more consistent jobs, healthier working conditions, and better health insurance coverage than those with less education (The Relationship between School Attendance and Health, 2016). In addition, school-based preventive health interventions address physical activity, nutrition and obesity, risk behavior, and other skills building (19 Tex. Admin. Code §129.1045, 2017; Dobbins et al., 2013; Garrett et al., 2019; Gonzalez-Suarez et al., 2009; Tamiru & Belachew, 2017).

In Texas, students are most likely to miss school due to acute or chronic illness, skipping, family emergencies, health care or dental appointments, mental health issues, and family responsibilities (Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting a Course for Student Success, 2015). Low-income students, students with disabilities, and indigenous, Latine, and African American students are more likely to be chronically absent and have worse outcomes related to missing school (Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting a Course for Student Success, 2015). Chronic absenteeism correlates to lower educational attainment, and lower educational attainment can predict poor health later in life. In Texas, 44.2% of adults with less than a high school degree experience obesity, and 37.7% of adults with less than a high school degree have diabetes (Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFFS) 2011-2020 Data Table, 2020). Risk factors for chronic absenteeism manifest in the Texas-Mexico border region: 32.8% of adults do not have a high school diploma, a rate nearly double that of adults in the rest of Texas (Texas-Mexico Border, 2021). Low-income students are four times more likely to be chronically absent than are middle-class students (Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting a Course for Student Success, 2015). These factors support a heightened effort to examine absenteeism policies and improve educational attainment in the border region (Texas-Mexico Border, 2021).

The Texas-Mexico border region exhibits high rates of poverty, low access to health care, and high rates of diabetes and obesity (Texas-Mexico Border, 2021). Almost 90% of the Texas-Mexico border population is Latine, and nearly 1 in 3 border residents live below the poverty level (Poverty Thresholds for 2020 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children under 18 Years, n.d.; Texas-Mexico Border, 2021). In the 2019-2020 school year, border districts reported 83.1% economically disadvantaged students; across Texas that year, 60.3% of students are economically disadvantaged. Children who are Emergent Bilingual/English Learner (EB/EL) students require additional support to achieve language proficiency and connect with school content. Absenteeism among these students is higher in border area schools (6.5%) than in Texas as a whole (5.9%). Table 1 illustrates how Texas-Mexico border districts compare to all Texas districts combined.

This study aimed to understand the association of different state absenteeism policies with total and EB/EL chronic absenteeism rates for 9-12th grade students in school districts along the Texas-Mexico. To do so, this study identified state policies aimed to curb student absenteeism and truancy and the implementation of those policies in border districts. It then examined different combinations of existing state absenteeism policies to ascertain how the policies or combination of policies are associated with absenteeism rates in those districts.

Texas School Attendance Laws

Texas districts operate under statewide policies for compulsory attendance and truancy that are implemented at the school and district levels. Truancy refers specifically to unexcused absences, and chronic absenteeism measures the amount of school missed for any reason, including both excused and unexcused absences (Flannery et al., 2012). In 2015, the Texas legislature decriminalized truancy and gave school districts more power over truancy and chronic absenteeism, leaving the court as the last resort (Langford, 2015). The 2015 law defines compulsory attendance and sets standards for notifying parents about absences and for truancy prevention measures.

Compulsory attendance requires that all young people aged 6 through 19 attend school every day that instruction is given in Texas public schools (2 Tex. Educ Code §25.085, 2019). Section 25.092 of the Texas Education Code requires that students attend 90% of class instruction to receive credit for the course (Attendance, Admission, Enrollment Records, and Tuition – August 2017, 2017). In some instances, absences can be excused (e.g., religious holiday, healthcare appointment, etc.), and districts may decide whether students can be excused for other types of absences (2 Tex. Educ. Code §25.087, 2019). If a student has three or more unexcused absences within a four-week period, school districts are required to notify parents (or guardians) that they are responsible for ensuring their student attends school, that the student will start truancy prevention measures, and that the parent will be required to have a conference with school officials to discuss the students' unexcused absences (*Districts of Innovation Overview*, n.d.). Chronic absenteeism is calculated by dividing the total number of students enrolled for at least 10 days and absent for at least 10% of the school year by the total number of students enrolled for at least 10 days (Coughenour et al., 2021).

Outlined in Section 22.0915 of the Texas Education Code, the minimum standards for Truancy Prevention Measures (TPM) include identifying and addressing the root cause of a student's unexcused absences, staying in contact with the student and their parents about the student's attendance issues, staying on a reasonable timeline, and having a procedure in place for students with disabilities (2 Tex. Educ. Code §25.0915, 2019). TPM aim to address truancy before referring the student to truancy court or filing a complaint against the student's parent (19 Tex. Admin Code §129.1043, 2017). Under Section 25.0915, districts are required to identify a Truancy Prevention Facilitator (TPF) who is responsible for implementing TPM and serves as the liaison between the district, student, and the truancy court case manager. Districts can

utilize an existing employee as the TPF or hire a new employee to fill this role (2 Tex. Educ. Code §25.0915, 2019).

METHODS

This study analyzed four attendance and truancy policies in Texas-Mexico border districts alongside chronic absenteeism rates using 2020-2021 Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR) demographic and attendance indicators for grades 9-12. The Texas Department of State Health Services' definition of the Texas-Mexico border region was used to identify the 32 counties that comprise the Texas border region (*Office of Border Public Health | Texas DSHS*, n.d.; *Search School Districts by County*, n.d.). The Houston Realtor Information Service's "List of School Districts by County in Texas" was used to identify all public-school districts in each of the 32 border region counties (*Search School Districts by County*, n.d.).

Each school district's policies regarding absenteeism and truancy were collected through a review of publicly available sources, including district websites, student handbooks, codes of conduct, District Improvement Plans, and District of Innovation Plans. Data for each district in the sample were organized according to district policies and attendance indicators. For each district, attendance indicators included total chronic absenteeism rate (2019-2020) and EB/EL chronic absenteeism rate (2019-2020). Four policies were examined: (1) Parental Notification; (2) Punishment for Truancy, (3) Attendance Incentives, and (4) TPF position (who the district assigned as its TPF, indicated as TPF=[position]). Table 2 displays the number of districts by policies analyzed and the number of students captured by those districts.

Central tendency and frequency distributions were analyzed to show the characteristics of the study sample. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), which is an ordinary least square (OLS) regression-based analysis, was adopted to examine association relationships between the policies as independent variables and chronic absenteeism or EB/EL absenteeism rates as the dependent variable. Parental Notification is reported as notification after 1 or 3 absences. Punishment for Truancy and Attendance Incentives policies are each categorized as "Yes" or "No." TPF are categorized into four options: Campus Administrator, District Administrator, Support Services, and Officer. OLS regression was used to analyze the interaction effects between the Attendance Incentives policy and TPF=Campus Administrators on chronic absenteeism rates. The independent variables are the three policies and TPF designee. The dependent variable is the chronic absenteeism rate or EB/EL absenteeism rate. This study uses Cronbach's alpha to examine the reliability and Pearson Correlation Coefficient to test the validity.

This study did not involve primary research or data collection involving human subjects, and therefore, no institutional review board examination or approval was required.

RESULTS

There were not statistically significant association relationships between the policies studied and chronic absenteeism rate (Table 3). However, the interaction effect between districts with Attendance Incentives and TPF=Campus Administrators is statistically significant on chronic absenteeism rate. Compared to school districts without Attendance Incentives and with TPF=Campus Administrator, districts without Attendance Incentives and with TPF=Officer have 4% higher chronic absenteeism rates. These interaction effects are visually displayed in Figure 1. Consistent with the results in Table 3, school districts without Attendance Incentives and with TPF=Officers designated as TPF have the highest predicted total chronic absenteeism rate.

The same analysis bears different results for EB/EL absenteeism. There is a statistically significant association relationship between Attendance Incentives and the EB/EL absenteeism rate. Compared to school districts without Attendance Incentives, school districts with that offer Attendance Incentives have a statistically higher EB/EL absenteeism rate by 3%. Additionally, the interaction effect between the Attendance Incentives policy and TPF=Campus Administrator is statistically significant on the EB/EL absenteeism rate. Compared to school districts without Attendance Incentives and with TPF=Campus Administrator, school districts without Attendance Incentives and with TPF=Support Services have statistically 6% higher EB/EL absenteeism rates. Compared to school districts without Attendance Incentives and with TPF=Campus Administrator, school districts with Attendance Incentives and TPF=Campus Administrator have statistically 4% higher EB/EL absenteeism rate. These interaction effects are also visually displayed in Figure B. Consistent with the results in Table 4, school districts without Attendance Incentives and with TPF=Support Services have the highest predicted EB/EL absenteeism rate.

DISCUSSION

This study collected and examined data on school absenteeism policies for 88 districts along the Texas-Mexico border. School districts without Attendance Incentives and with TPF=Officers have the highest predicted total chronic absenteeism rate. School districts without Attendance Incentives and with TPF=Support Services have the highest predicted EB/EL absenteeism rate. Findings on attendance incentive programs are mixed, and yet, perfect attendance incentives are used by nearly 70% of districts and are a recommended truancy prevention measure in the Texas Education Code (Allan & Fryer, 2011). Many districts choose to use these incentives due to their low cost (Allan & Fryer, 2011; Eklund et al., 2022). Incentives can be used to improve student outcomes, such as achievements in specific topics; however, incentives for attendance rarely provide statistically significant improvements (The Impact and Effectiveness of Student Attendance Policies, 2013). Best practices for attendance incentives include using data to target specific populations and coordinating attendance incentives with more comprehensive strategies, such as community and family engagement programs (The Impact and Effectiveness of Student Attendance Policies, 2013). The results of this study show that, when considered in

conjunction with other district absenteeism policies, Attendance Incentives are not associated with higher total chronic absenteeism rates, but Texas-Mexico border districts with Attendance Incentives are associated with higher EB/EL absenteeism.

Understanding the approaches taken by Campus Administrators and other TPFs in implementing TPM will further districts' knowledge of how to effectively reduce chronic absenteeism. More study of the role and practices of TPF by position and their approaches in implementing required truancy and absenteeism prevention measures is needed. Their activities include imposing a behavior improvement plan or school-based community service or referring the student to counseling, mediation, mentoring, a teen court program, community-based services, or other in-school or out-of-school services (2 Tex. Educ. Code §25.0915, 2019). For students in Texas-Mexico border districts, TPF=Officer is associated with higher rates of absenteeism in districts that offer Attendance Incentives. For EB/EL students in those districts, TPM=Support Services indicates higher rates of absenteeism. To better understand why Officers and Support Services staff who are designated TPFs, future investigations should consider how different TPFs approach absenteeism and truancy prevention and punishment.

Research supports the use of early warning systems for chronically absent students, and recommendations for multi-tiered interventions have included early warning systems and nimble response to school absences (Cook et al., 2017; Flannery et al., 2012; 2 Tex. Educ. Code §25.095, 2019). In this study, implementing an early notification practice, where it is required that parents or guardians are notified of a student's first absence, rather than the third, was not associated with lower total or EB/EL chronic absenteeism in Texas-Mexico border districts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Studies on chronic absenteeism have largely examined its links to student achievement and its association with health and social causes, including asthma, obesity, influenza infections, bullying, and school connectedness (2020-21 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) Glossary, n.d.; Ginsberg et al., 2014; Gottfried, 2019). Less research has focused on the efficacy of policies to address chronic absenteeism, and even fewer consider the application of absenteeism policies in the context of intersecting and complex community characteristics (Gottfried, 2019). This study identified the school absenteeism policies that deserve attention and further investigation into their application in border districts. Implementing policies that suit community needs and characteristics will serve Texas children and families while working to mitigate disparities and the possible long-term consequences of chronic absenteeism.

Data collection for this research was limited to publicly available information on district and campus websites and state reports. District-level information is not uniformly shared, so unreported nuances may not be clearly captured. The data also does not capture any ad hoc practices at districts or schools. In addition, data was analyzed without consideration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attendance, chronic absenteeism, and school

performance across the state. Last, children with disabilities and migrant students may have specific needs, and analysis of these student segments were outside the scope of this study.

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APPENDIXES

Table 1.

Comparison of Texas-Mexico Border Districts to All Texas Districts (2019-2020)

	All Texas Districts	**Texas Border Districts**
School Districts (%)	1,027 (100%)	88 (8.6%)
Students (%)	5,359,040 (100%)	576,815 (10.8%)
Economically Disadvantaged Students	60.3%	83.1%
At-Risk Students	49.2%	55.7%
Migrant Students	0.03%	1.9%
Chronic Absenteeism EB/EL	5.9%	6.5%
Chronic Absenteeism (total)	6.7%	7.1%

Table 2.

Texas-Mexico Border Districts and Students by Policy Approach (2019-2020)

	Policy Approach	Border Districts (n=88)	Border Students (n=576,815)
Truancy & Absenteeism Prevention Policies	Punishment for Truancy	25 (28%)	349,818 (60%)
	Attendance Incentives	61 (69%)	531,804 (92%)
	Parental Notification After 1 Absence	16 (18%)	212,177 (36%)
Truancy Prevention Facilitator (TPF)	Campus Administrator	23 (26%)	74,486 (13%)
	District Administrator	27 (30%)	233,940 (41%)
	Officer	15 (17%)	144,155 (25%)
	Support Services	11 (13%)	51,776 (9%)

Table 3.

Association relationships between policies examined and total chronic absenteeism rate

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Parental Notification	0.004	0.004	0.005	0.005	0.005
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Punishment for Truancy		-0.004	-0.006	-0.012	-0.012
		(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Attendance Incentives			0.012	0.012	
			(0.008)	(0.009)	
Truancy Prevention Facilitator (Compared to TPF=Campus Administrator): TPF=District Administrator				0.002 (0.010)	
TPF=Support Services				0.008 (0.012)	
TPF=Officer				0.007 (0.011)	
Attendance Incentives* Truancy Prevention Facilitator (Compared to No Attendance Incentives & TPF=Campus Administrator):					
No Attendance Incentives & TPF=District Administrator					<0.001 (0.016)
No Attendance Incentives & TPF=Support Services					0.008 (0.024)
No Attendance Incentives & TPF=Officer					0.043* (0.021)
Attendance Incentives & TPF=Campus Administrator					0.021 (0.013)
Attendance Incentives & TPF=District Administrator					0.020 (0.012)
Attendance Incentives & TPF=Support Services					0.025
					(0.014)
Attendance Incentives & TPF=Officer					0.015 (0.013)
Constant	0.061***	0.063***	0.052**	0.049**	0.045*
	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)
Observations	88	88	88	76	76

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Figure 1.

Interaction effect between border districts that offer Attendance Incentives and designate a Campus Administrator as their TPF on chronic absenteeism rate (based on Model 5)

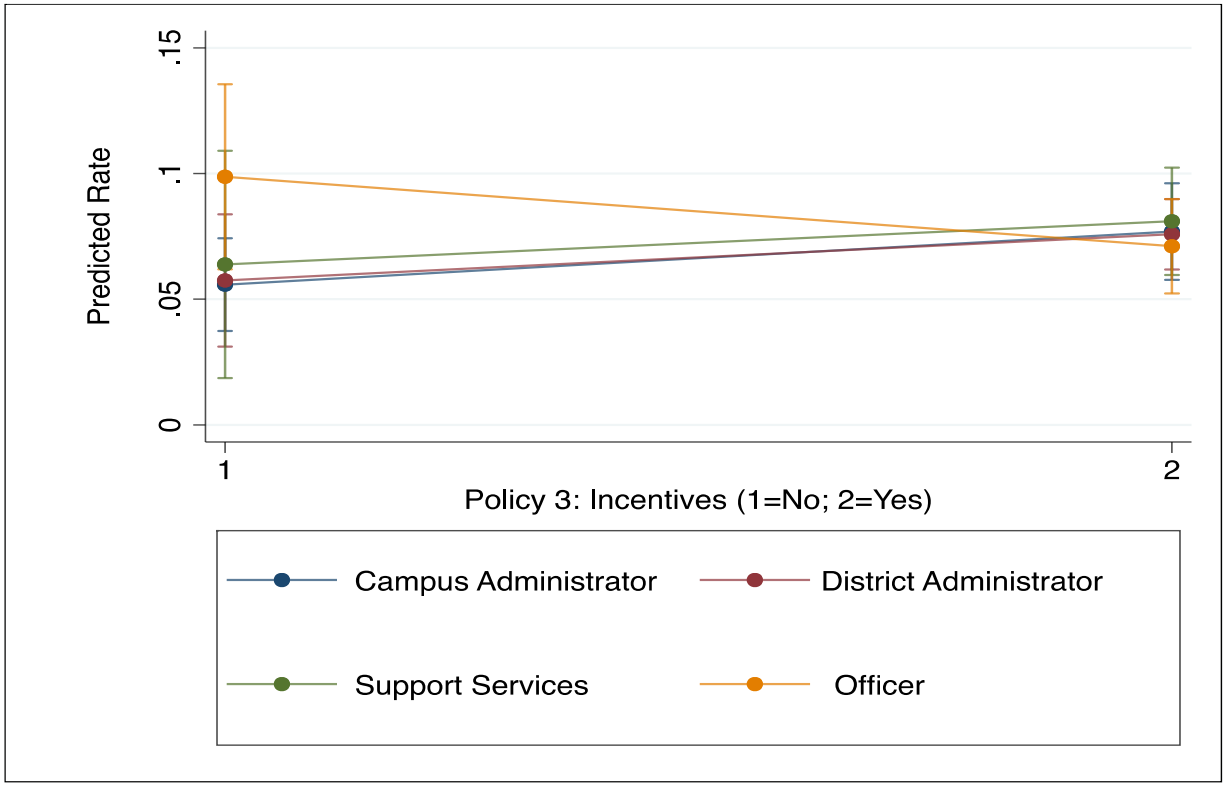

Table 4.

Association relationships between policies examined and EB/EL absenteeism rate

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Parental Notification	0.002	0.003	0.005	0.003	0.002
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Punishment for Truancy		0.008	0.004	-0.002	-0.002
		(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Attendance Incentives			0.025*	0.027*	
			(0.010)	(0.011)	
Truancy Prevention Facilitator (Compared to TPF=Campus Administrator): TPF=District Administrator				0.002 (0.012)	
TPF=Support Services				0.007 (0.016)	
TPF=Officer				0.010 (0.015)	
Attendance Incentives * TPF (Compared to No Attendance Incentives & TPF=Campus Administrator):					-0.025 (0.020)
No Attendance Incentives & TPF=District Administrator					0.031 (0.030)
No Attendance Incentives & TPF=Support Services					0.062* (0.026)
No Attendance Incentives & TPF=Officer					0.031 (0.017)
Attendance Incentives & TPF=Campus Administrator					0.039** (0.015)
Attendance Incentives & TPF=District Administrator					0.031 (0.018)
Attendance Incentives & TPF=Support Services					0.026 (0.016)
Constant	0.057***	0.053***	0.030	0.033	0.032
	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.021)
Observations	88	88	88	76	76
R-squared	0.002	0.009	0.074	0.104	0.233

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Figure 2.

The interaction effect between border districts that offer Attendance Incentives and designate a Campus Administrator as their TPF on EB/EL absenteeism rate (based on Model 5)