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An Analysis of Truancy and Academic Performance Among Elementary Students at a Public Chartered School In New Orleans, Louisiana

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the relationship between truancy and academic performance among elementary students at a public charter school in New Orleans during the 2022-2023 and 2023- 2024 academic years. The study examines how chronic truancy impact student outcomes on the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) tests in Mathematics and Language Arts. The sample includes 159 truant students out of 550 enrolled. The dataset was secondary in nature, which captured truancy records and academic performance and were retrieved from the archives of one public charter school with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Descriptive analyses and ordinal logistic regression were conducted. Results indicated that students with chronic truancy were significantly less likely to fall into a higher Language Arts (β= -2.116, $p < 0.001$) or Mathematics (β = -2 .047, $p < 0.001$) LEAP projection category, compared to students with nonchronic truancy. These findings emphasize chronic truancy as a key driver of academic underperformance, by highlighting the need for stricter attendance policies, increased parental involvement, and additional academic support for at-risk students.
KEYWORDS: Truancy, LEAP Projections, Academic Performance, Mathematics, Language Arts, Charter Schools, Elementary, Academic Support.
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INTRODUCTION:

Truancy is a persistent issue in American education, affecting students at all levels. Truancy is defined as having five or more unexcused absences or tardies in one semester and sometimes signals that the student is in danger of eventually dropping out (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). Meanwhile, excessive absenteeism and chronic absence are other terms often used interchangeably with truancy, with truancy being the more frequently used term. Recent data shows that chronic absenteeism remains a major issue in early education. The U.S. Department of Education (2024) reported that approximately 31% of students nationwide were chronically absent during the 2021–2022 school year, missing at least 10% of school days for any reason. While this rate declined slightly to 28% in the 2022–2023 school year, younger students remain particularly affected. Research indicates that children who experience chronic absenteeism from preschool to second grade are significantly less likely to achieve grade-level reading proficiency by third grade, emphasizing the vital role of consistent attendance in academic success (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Truancy has both direct and indirect effects on students' academic performance. Research consistently demonstrates that chronic absenteeism in early grades leads to lower proficiency in reading and mathematics, widening achievement gaps over time (Chang & Romero, 2008). For example, students who miss more than 10% of school days in kindergarten and first grade are significantly less likely to meet third-grade reading benchmarks, a critical predictor of future academic success (Chang et al., 2018). Missing school disrupts students' ability to develop foundational skills, leading to lower test scores, increased likelihood of academic failure, and a higher probability of dropping out (Gottfried, 2010). The impact is particularly severe for minority and low-income students, with Latino and Black kindergarteners who experience chronic absenteeism exhibiting significantly lower academic performance compared to their peers (Chang & Romero, 2008).

In New Orleans, truancy is particularly concerning, given the city's high percentage of low-income students who face barriers such as housing instability, transportation difficulties, and economic struggles (Babineau et al., 2019). The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 led to a complete restructuring of the public

education system, which resulted in one of the most extensive charter school networks in the country (Babineau et al., 2019). While some charter schools have implemented innovative attendance strategies—such as personalized learning plans and community engagement programs—others continue to face significant challenges in enforcing attendance policies. Reports from the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) highlight persistent truancy concerns among elementary students in New Orleans charter schools, often due to inconsistencies in tracking and addressing absenteeism (LDOE, 2021).

While extensive research has examined the effects of truancy on academic performance, there remains a critical gap in literature specifically focusing on New Orleans' public charter schools among elementary students. Most existing studies have explored absenteeism in traditional public schools or broader educational contexts (Chang & Romero, 2008; Smith et al., 2021; Johnson & Lee, 2022). However, the unique governance structures and policies of charter schools—particularly in post-Katrina New Orleans—has introduced distinct challenges and intervention strategies that have yet to be fully explored. Additionally, previous research, such as studies by Gottfried (2014) and Balfanz & Byrnes (2012), suggested that chronic truancy have more severe and long-lasting consequences on academic achievement, while non-chronic truancy also have more sporadic challenges that could be mitigated through targeted interventions. However, there is a lack of research directly comparing these two categories, particularly among early-grade students in charter school settings. As a result, a more targeted analysis is necessary to understand how chronic absenteeism or truancy affects key academic domains. Furthermore, prior research often examines the impact of truancy on overall academic performance without differentiating between subject-specific outcomes, such as language and mathematics achievement.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the relationship between truancy type (chronic vs. non-chronic) and academic performance in language and mathematics among Pre-K to fourth-grade students in a New Orleans public charter school. We focused on language and mathematics because early proficiency in language skills is essential for literacy development, critical thinking, and effective communication, which are foundational for learning across all subjects (Snow et al., 2007). Similarly, mathematics proficiency in the early grades is also strongly correlated with later academic achievement, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Duncan et al., 2007). Therefore, by focusing on these two subjects captured in LEAP projections, this study aims to provide insights into how truancy may impact key developmental milestones in early education. The findings will be valuable for policymakers, educators, and school administrators in developing targeted interventions to mitigate absenteeism, support at-risk students, and enhance overall student success. Additionally, these insights can inform the design of evidence-based attendance policies and instructional support systems tailored to the needs of early-grade learners in charter school settings.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data

This study employs a quantitative, descriptive-correlational design to examine the relationship between truancy and academic performance among elementary school students in a public charter school in New Orleans, Louisiana, during the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 academic years. The research relies on secondary data obtained from the school's administrative records, including attendance reports, Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) assessment scores in language and mathematics, and demographic information. The study focuses on students from Pre-Kindergarten through fourth grade, ranging in age from 4 to 9 or 10 years, all of whom are English-speaking. The selection criteria required that participants (1) be enrolled at the school during the study period, (2) be in Pre-K through fourth grade, and (3) be classified as either chronic or non-chronic truants according to the school's attendance records. The study specifically targets students classified as chronic or non-chronic truants within the public charter school, which has an approximate total enrollment of 550 students. Based on attendance records, 159 students were identified as truant, and all were included in the study to provide a comprehensive assessment of truancy's impact on academic performance. IRB approval was secured.

Measurements

Truancy was based on school attendance records and categorized into two groups: chronic truancy, defined as missing 10% or more of instructional days in an academic year (excused or unexcused), and non-chronic truancy, defined as missing less than 10% of instructional days (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Academic performance was measured using LEAP projections in Language Arts and Mathematics, with five proficiency levels, which included- Unsatisfactory (significantly below grade-level expectations), Approaching Basic (partial but inconsistent mastery of required skills), Basic (fundamental knowledge with potential need for support), Mastery (competency at or above grade level), and Advanced (competency above mastery) (Bendily, 2023; Louisiana Department of Education, 2023). The LEAP evaluates student learning in public schools across the state from third grade through high school. According to the Louisiana Department of Education (2023) and Bendily (2023), LEAP results provide valuable insights for families and educators, indicating the extent to which students have mastered key concepts in English language arts, math, science, and social studies or where additional support may be needed. Gender was recorded as either male or female. Race/ethnicity was categorized into three groups: Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and White.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 20.0. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the student demographics and performance. Ordinal logistic regression was applied to explore the relationship between truancy and academic performance, while controlling for gender and ethnicity.

RESULTS

The total sample size for this study consisted of 159 participants. Among the 159 participants, 45.9% (n=73) were female and 54.1% (n=86) were male. In terms of race/ethnicity, most participants (n=147, 92.5%) identified as Black/African American. Eleven participants (6.9%) identified as Hispanic/Latino, while just one participant (0.6%) identified as White. Nearly half of the sample (n=75, 47.2%) were classified as students with chronic truancy, while the other half (n=84, 52.8%) were classified as student with non-chronic truancy.

Table 1

LEAP Projection for both Language Arts and Mathematics by truancy type.

LEAP Projections	*Language Arts*		*Mathematics*	
	CT (n=75)	*NCT (n=84)*	*CT(n=75)*	*NCT(n=84)*
Advanced	0 (0%)	4 (4.7%)	-	-
Mastery	6 (8.0%)	16 (19.4%)	0 (0%)	15 (17.9%)
Basic	19 (25.4%)	30 (35.6%)	14 (18.7%)	26 (31.0%)
Approaching Basic	10 (13.3%)	33 (39.2%)	15(20.0%)	41(48.8%)
Unsatisfactory	40 (53.3%)	1 (1.1%)	46 (61.3%)	2 (2.3%)

Note: CT=chronic truant, NCT=non-chronic truant

Table 1 presents crosstabulation results of LEAP Projections for Language Arts and Mathematics among truant students, which is categorized into Chronic Truancy (CT) and Non-Chronic Truancy (NCT). In the case of Language Arts, Table 1 reveals that no students with chronic truancy scored at the Advanced level, while 4 students (4.7%) with non-chronic truancy did. For Mastery, 6 CT students (8.0%) reached this Mastery level, compared to 16 NCT students (10.1%) who also did reach the Mastery level. At the Basic level, 19 CT students (19.4%) scored in this Basic level range, while 30 NCT students (35.6%) also scored at this Basic level. Additionally, 10 CT students (13.3%) were categorized as Approaching Basic, compared to 33 NCT students (39.2%) who were also classified as Approaching Basic level. A substantial difference is also seen at the Unsatisfactory level, with 40 CT students (representing 53.3%) scoring in this category, in contrast to just 1 NCT student (1.1%).

With regards to Mathematics LEAP Projection model, Table 1 further reveals that no students reached the Advanced level. For Mastery, none of the CT students achieved this Mastery level, while 15 NCT students (17.9%) did. At the Basic level, 14 CT students (18.7%) scored in this range, compared to 26 NCT students (31%). Similarly, 15 CT students (representing 20.0%) were categorized as Approaching Basic, while 41 NCT students (representing 48.8%) fell into Approaching Basic level category. The Unsatisfactory level displayed the most significant disparity, with 46 CT students (61.3%) receiving this classification, compared to just 2 NCT students (2.3%). Overall, chronic truancy is associated with poorer academic performance, with a larger proportion of CT students scoring at the Unsatisfactory level. While, on the other hand, NCT students demonstrated relatively better academic outcomes, particularly in Mathematics, with more achieving Mastery and Basic levels.

Ordinal Regression Results

Table 2
Parameter Estimates for Ordinary Logistics Regression Test for Language Arts & Mathematics LEAP Projections and Truancy

		Language Arts LEAP Projections				*Math LEAP Projections*			
		Estimate	*SE*	*P-values*	*Confidence Interval*	*Estimate*	*SE*	*P-values*	*Confidence Interval*
Threshold	Unsatisfactory	1.608	1.900	0.834	-0.123 - 1.834	1.401	1.122	0.844	-0.798 – 3.600
	Approaching Basic	2.639	1.837	0.058	0.234 - 3.834	2.784	1.723	0.646	-0.592 – 6.160
	Basic	3.910	0.437	0.034	3.053 - 4.767	3.364	1.786	0.049	2.956 - 4.839
	Mastery	4.730	1.842	0.028	1.122 – 8.338	4.268	1.734	0.037	0.871 – 7.665
Location	**Gender**								
	Male	0							
	Female	0.136	0.653	0.653	-0.456 - 0.727	0.242	0.311	0.437	-0.368 – 0.851
	Race/Ethnicity								
	White	0							
	Black/African-American	-0.521	1.830	0.776	-4.108 - 3.065	-0.533	1.832	0.771	-4.123 – 3.058
	Hispanic/Latino	-0.973	1.899	0.609	-4.694 - 2.749	-1.034	1.907	0.588	-4.772 - 2.705
	Truancy type								
	Non-Chronic Truancy	0							
	Chronic Truancy	-2.116	0.330	0.001	-3.102 to -1.142	-2.047	0.327	0.000	-3.221 to -0.873

Table 2 presents the parameter estimates of the ordinary logistic regression test investigating truancy type's relationships with Language Arts and Mathematics LEAP projections. Results indicated that students with chronic truancy were significantly less likely to fall into a higher Language Arts (β= -2.116, $p < 0.000$) or Mathematics (β = -2 .047, $p < 0.000$) LEAP projection category, compared to students with non-chronic truancy.

DISCUSSION:

The findings from the truant data underscore the significant academic challenges faced by chronically truant students. We found that students with chronic truancy tend to have lower achievement in Language Arts and Mathematics compared to their peers with non-chronic truancy. About 81.3% of chronic truant students in Mathematics fall into both the Unsatisfactory and Approaching Basic categories, while only 18.7% attain Basic.

These results align with prior research by Aucejo & Romano (2016) and Gershenson, Jacknowitz, & Brannegan (2017), which demonstrate that absenteeism negatively impacts academic performance, particularly in mathematics, where continuous learning is crucial. Similarly, over half (66.6%) of chronic truant students face challenges with literacy, as evidenced by the students' academic performance at the Unsatisfactory and Approaching Basic levels. This suggests a significant correlation between truancy and underachievement in literacy, thereby highlighting the potential academic impact of frequent absenteeism. This reinforces the idea that chronic absenteeism hinders literacy development and overall academic achievement. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions such as structured attendance policies, literacy support programs, and individualized academic assistance. This approach aligns with Attendance Works (2006, 2016), which emphasizes early intervention and family engagement as key strategies for reducing absenteeism. Additionally, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, multilevel interventions involving families, schools, and communities are critical for fostering student success.

This study contributes to the growing body of evidence linking truancy with poorer academic outcomes and underscores the importance of early interventions to reduce absenteeism. As chronic truancy was identified as a critical predictor of low academic performance, educational policies and practices must focus on improving attendance through proactive strategies, such as mentorship programs, social services, and academic support systems. These interventions should address not only the immediate academic needs of truant students but also the broader socio-environmental factors that contribute to absenteeism, in line with Bronfenbrenner's holistic approach to child development. Further research could explore additional factors influencing truancy and its impact on academic performance to develop more comprehensive interventions for at-risk students. Addressing truancy is essential for improving student performance and overall educational success. The findings highlight the need for early intervention strategies, community support, and school-based initiatives to mitigate absenteeism and enhance academic achievement. By implementing these policy measures, schools and education stakeholders can work collaboratively to reduce truancy rates, improve student academic performance, and foster long-term educational success for elementary students in New Orleans.

Towards this end, and based on the study's findings, we therefore recommend that schools should adopt comprehensive early-warning systems to identify and support at-risk students through targeted interventions such as mentorship, counseling, and parental engagement. Additionally, policymakers should focus on strengthening home-school partnerships with parent workshops, attendance incentives, and outreach initiatives, to help in reinforcing the importance of regular attendance and provide families with the tools they need to support their children. Moreover, schools should implement academic support programs—such as after-school tutoring and individualized interventions. These initiatives will aid in addressing the learning gaps caused by absenteeism. Policymakers must ensure that attendance policies are both enforceable and empathetic, as well as incorporating support services like transportation aid and mental health resources to remove systemic barriers. Finally, further research should examine the long-term effects of truancy on student achievement, and schools should leverage on data-driven approaches to monitor attendance trends and academic performance of all students including truant students.

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