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## Anti-Truancy Efforts Notch High Marks

### New Study Finds Students Can Turn Things Around if They Show Up to Class

By

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As it turns out, students really do better in school if they actually go to school.

A study to be released Wednesday found that New York City students with major attendance problems were able to turn things around academically if they started showing up to class.

Students who started missing school 10% of the time—chronically absent—saw their average grades fall to 67% in the 2011-12 school year from 72% in the 2009-10 school year.

At the same time, students who had been chronically absent but turned things around saw their average grades rise slightly, from 72% to 73% over the same time frame, according to the report from the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University.

"This shows that if we can actually get kids to go to school, we can reverse some of these academic outcomes," study co-author Robert Balfanz said.

Mr. Balfanz said it was the first time researchers had been able to follow individual students over the years and track their absentee patterns. Previously, researchers had largely noted that students with absence issues had lower test scores than students who showed up.

The study focused on a Bloomberg administration push to fix the problem of chronic absenteeism. Three years ago, the administration launched an effort to focus the attention of a variety of city agencies—including schools, police and homeless services—on students who missed at least 20 days of school in an academic year.



Dominique Broccoli and student Corey Allow, 17, at the High School of Computers and Technology in the Bronx on Tuesday. *Craig Warga for The Wall Street Journal*

The city commissioned the report, and Mr. Balfanz said he gave the city technical advice during the project. Though Mayor Michael Bloomberg has given more than \$1 billion to Johns Hopkins, Mr. Balfanz said the center he runs hadn't received any donations. His brother, Jim Balfanz, is the president of City Year, a nonprofit organization that worked with the city on the project by providing mentors to chronically absent children.

Poor students who attended schools in the city program were 15% less likely to be chronically absent than poor students at similar schools, the report said. Homeless students in the program were 31% less likely to be chronically absent than comparison students.

The city started with 25 schools in 2010-11 and expanded to 100 schools last year, out of about 1,600 city district schools.

Students would work with mentors, get prizes for good attendance, and receive recorded wake-up calls from celebrities such as former Mets shortstop Jose Reyes.

About 15% of New York City middle-school students and 26% of high-school students missed more than 20 days of school last year. Teachers and researchers cite a variety of reasons. Homeless or poor students sometimes move frequently, making it difficult for parents to develop a routine or have time for them to attend school.

Some students stay home because of health problems; asthma is a major problem among city schoolchildren, principals say. Sometimes parents take children out of school on extended family vacations, such as trips to home countries in Africa, Asia or the Caribbean.

By focusing on students' absentee data, teachers were able to spot trends.

"Some kids just think it's OK to take every Wednesday off," said Dominique Broccoli, 28, a Spanish and math teacher at the High School of Computers and Technology in the Bronx. The school uses incentives such as digital dollars toward free prizes to encourage students.

"If the students realize that somebody cares about them, it's almost like you're trying to prove that you can do it," she said.

Wanda Cabrera, a parent coordinator at the Hunts Point School, a middle school, said the phone calls from celebrities would excite students. "The kids were like, 'You know who called me? Jay-Z called me! He said I had to come to school,'" she said. (Jay-Z didn't record a call, but another songwriter and rapper, Trey Songz, did.)

The city effort launched after a critical report in 2008 from the New School focused on the problem of chronic absenteeism, specifically in elementary school. One of the report's authors, Kim Nauer, said the city's steps have shown encouraging signs.

"If you can do the detective work with the little kids and their parents to figure out what is keeping them from school, and then—and this is the important part—you have to have some solution for them, it really is that simple," she said.

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