

Why are they not in school? Study says it's acute illness

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by Kim Hilsenbeck

An eight-week study on absenteeism in Hays CISD in the early spring showed that acute illness, including fever, ear aches, vomiting and cold/flu, accounted for half of all reported absences in the district during the study period.



The study, conducted by E3Alliance (E3), a Central Texas nonprofit dedicated to more data-driven efficiency in public education as a means to ensure academic success, in conjunction with Children's Optimal Health (COH), was the first of its kind in the nation, according to E3's Director of Research Amy Wiseman.

She, along with Mohan Rao, spatial data analyst at COH, presented a summary of the findings on June 11 at the Missing School Matters Attendance Summit in Austin.

Chronic illness and family emergencies are the next highest reasons for missing school at five and four percent, respectively. Dental issues and skipping school were three percent each.

The top 10 reasons for missing school accounted for 72 percent of reported absences.

Prior to the study, E3 showed data indicating that more than half of Central Texas students miss six or more days per school year, putting them in the at-risk category for chronic absenteeism. Those students account for 85 percent of all absences.

More than 200 area education, community and business leaders in attendance at the summit also learned that at-risk students – those who are chronically absent and economically disadvantaged, according to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) – have more than their share of absences for multiple reasons. In fact, Wiseman said 42 percent of students in the study area are considered at-risk and those students accounted for 62 percent of all absences recorded.

With public school funding so intricately tied to attendance rather than enrollment, schools across the state need to increase the number of students who show up each day – called Weighted Average Daily Attendance, or WADA. Districts lose money for every day a student is absent. Hays CISD receives \$30 per day for each day of attendance, according to Carter Scherff, assistant superintendent. And in an economic climate where every penny counts, districts receiving fewer pennies when students stay home for unexcused reasons is a problem.

Getting students to attend just three more days a year can bring in significant money for a school district.

Interim Superintendent Carter Scherff told the Hays Free Press last fall that Hays CISD could bring in about \$750,000 in additional state revenue if attendance rates increased just one percent.

According to an E3 analysis of PEIMS data from the UT Education Research Center, Central Texas has more absences than Texas overall, on average, at every grade. The comparison is especially notable at the high school senior level.

Chronic absenteeism, defined as students who are not in school more often than the average number of absences at a particular campus, is also a problem.

However, Wiseman was quick to note that the absenteeism research intended to capture data on all absences, not just chronic episodes or students from low-income families.

Wiseman developed the absenteeism study methodology and analyzed the results. The goal of the research, she said, was to help school districts decide what services and support are needed for families whose children are chronically absent from school.

“We have data on who is absent and when,” she said. “But we were missing the why.”

It was that elusive “why” that drove the research.

Wiseman said the study also aimed to determine if students who miss school for chronic illness, including diabetes, asthma depression, anxiety and dental problems, receive medical treatment for those conditions.

“And if not, we wanted to know why not,” Wiseman said.

While Hays CISD campuses already request data on the reason for a missed day, the study goal was to gather detailed information about each absence, which in some cases was more detail than families normally provide.

Wiseman’s data indicates that among the poorest students, regardless of ethnicity or race – with the exception of Asian students – poverty leads to more absences. Low-income students miss up to three weeks of school on average.

Other findings in the study include the fact that chronic absenteeism is worse in high school than primary or middle school and that chronically absent students account for most chronic illness and mental health absences. Overall, a small number of chronically absent students accounted for most of the reported absences in the two school districts Wiseman studied. She noted that the data can be extrapolated to the larger Central

Texas area since the student population demographics in Hays CISD and Pflugerville ISD closely mirror those in the entire region.

Wiseman also provided data, though not from this study, showing that graduation rates for low-income students in Central Texas are consistently lower than the statewide average.

Maps from COH, the firm that provided the Hays CISD obesity study maps in 2012, revealed a concentration of high absenteeism among students who live just east of Interstate 35 in Kyle between FM 150 and FM 1626/Kyle Parkway.

“This study not only provides actionable information for particular neighborhoods and the Central Texas region as a whole, but is also a seminal pilot study for similar efforts across the country,” said Susan Dawson, E3 Alliance president and executive director.

An example of additional services may include a low or no-cost health care facility for low-income families, according to Wiseman.

The Study Participants

Four Hays CISD schools – two elementary schools, Kyle and Fuentes, along with Chapa Middle School and Lehman High School, comprised the study base along with four schools in the Pflugerville ISD. The schools were chosen for the study because they statistically represent the overall demographics and geography of the Central Texas student population.

During the research phase, Hays CISD recorded 4,259 absences. There were 4,120 students in the district’s study data set.

St. David’s Foundation and Central Health provided the study funding.

Excused absences include funerals, family emergencies, illness/medical visits, weather-related issues and visiting a family member in the military.

Unexcused absences include vacations, missing the bus and taking care of another family member.