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COMMENTARY

Can Center-based Childcare Reduce the Odds of Early Chronic Absenteeism?

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In elementary school, chronic absenteeism is highest in kindergarten. Consequently, a growing body of research has sought to identify factors driving such high rates of early absences. Most research has focused on student- and family-level drivers. At the student level, significant factors have been identified as educational disengagement and alienation from school. At the family level, significant factors have been identified as family structure, maternal employment, household size, parental involvement, parental mental health, and socioeconomic status.

Knowing how these contextual factors relate to early absenteeism is certainly important. However, research into the drivers of chronic absenteeism have generally been limited to documenting the presence of these individual and family factors. Surprisingly, little has been established about what school programs and practices in early childhood might influence these early bouts of absenteeism. To address this gap, I examined how going to center-based care in prekindergarten might be linked to chronic absenteeism once in kindergarten. Prekindergarten is often touted as a way for children to become engaged children in school-like activities prior to actual kindergarten entry; it is also supported as a way for families to get an early start on addressing the logistical demands of having their children regularly leave the home. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to assume that a link might exist between early school-like experiences and later school attendance.

In this study, relying on the most currently-available nationally-representative dataset of kindergarteners (from the 2010–2011 school year), I found that children who attended center-based care in the year before kindergarten had a lower probability of being chronically absent once in kindergarten. This finding was robust to multiple analytic methods and to multiple definitions of chronic absenteeism. The findings became more nuanced, however: I also tested for whether going to center-based care before/after the school day during the kindergarten year was linked to chronic absenteeism. But, there was no link. Center-based care before/after the kindergarten day may not add significant value above-and-beyond the skills children are already acquiring during the kindergarten school day itself. Therefore, the importance of center-based care on chronic absenteeism might be driven by prior-to-kindergarten development of school-going skills for both students and their parents rather than as concurrent reinforcement.

Chronic absenteeism has a widespread negative effect across California, impacting not only the educational, legal, justice, and social service systems, but individuals, families, and communities—particularly those in low-income areas. More so, high rates of absenteeism limits the potential of California's children and costs school districts and the state billions of dollars each year. In order to combat this truancy and chronic absenteeism crisis, many policy leaders including the Attorney General of California have been involved in a series of truancy reduction initiatives to identify the best intervention and prevention efforts.

The information gained from this study provides critical data regarding truancy and the influential role of early childhood

programs. From my findings, we can move the conversation away from strictly identifying contextual factors and processes towards a discussion of tangible, early ways to intervene and prevent the spread of the consequences arising from this damaging behavior.

The full study is in Michael A. Gottfried, "Can center-based childcare reduce the odds of early chronic absenteeism?" Early Childhood Research Quarterly, forthcoming.

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