



Preschool Attendance in Supervisorial District 2 of Los Angeles County

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Introduction

An extensive body of research indicates that dropping out of school is a process of disengagement that begins early for many students (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Just how early it begins is a question that researchers continue to explore. Student attendance is one of the key indicators of dropout that have emerged from the existing literature. Studies conducted nationally and within major U.S. cities (e.g., Chicago, Baltimore, San Francisco, and Philadelphia) indicate that there is a strong link between the likelihood that a student will drop out and his or her attendance in middle and high school (Allensworth, Gwynne, Moore, & de la Torre, 2014; Kurlaender, Reardon, & Jackson, 2008; Balfanz, Herzog, & Maclver, 2007; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Baltimore Education Research Consortium, 2011; Roderick, 1993).

Additional research has traced the link between dropout and student attendance even further back, to elementary school. For example, Schoenberger (2011) examined students in a large school district, and found a group of students who had low rates of attendance in early elementary school but improved rates of attendance in later elementary and middle school. This group of students, which Schoenberger called Early Truants, was found to have higher rates of dropout than students who had high rates of attendance throughout school; the high absence rates among Early Truants served as a signal of the likelihood that they would drop out much later in middle or high school. Additional studies by Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani (2001) and Roderick (1993) have shown that students' attendance in elementary school predicts their later likelihood of dropping out of school.

Given the importance of attendance in early elementary school, one might ask what constitutes an acceptable level of attendance, or conversely, what constitutes an unacceptably high level of absence. Most research on attendance defines chronic absence as missing 10% or more of school, regardless of the reason for the absence (Ehrlich, Gwynne, Pareja, & Allensworth, 2014; Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). On average, a student who is chronically absent is not in school for at least one day out of every two weeks. Children with attendance rates of 5-9% may be considered to be at risk for chronic absence (Dubay & Holla, 2015; Applied Survey Research, 2011).

Chronic absence is a problem not only for high school students, but also for students in the early grades. Rates of absence typically follow the same pattern: the proportion of students who are chronically absent is high in preschool and kindergarten, declines each year through third or fourth grade, and then increases throughout middle and high school. In kindergarten, the rate of chronic absence is estimated to be in the range of 10-15% (Balfanz et al., 2012; Attendance Works, 2015). The national rate of chronic absence for preschool is unknown, but research within the past five years suggests that it may be much higher than the kindergarten rate. In Chicago, 36% of four-year-olds were chronically absent from preschool, while in Washington, D.C., 27-32% of students were chronically absent (Ehrlich et al., 2014; Dubay et al., 2015). The Chicago study found that over one-third of students were chronically absent, and that certain subgroups of children, including African Americans and those living in high-poverty neighborhoods, had even higher rates of chronic absence (Ehrlich et al., 2014).

Chronic absence in preschool and kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance later in elementary school. Ehrlich et al. (2014) found that absenteeism in preschool was associated with lower scores in reading, math, and socio-emotional development, even after controlling for students' backgrounds and incoming skills. In kindergarten, chronically absent students had lower math and reading scores in subsequent grades, as well as higher rates of retention than students with high attendance (Gottfried, 2009; Gottfried, 2011; Gottfried, 2014; Connolly & Olson, 2012; Applied Survey Research, 2011; Chang & Romero, 2008). The effects of chronic absence were also higher for at-risk subgroups: for students living in poverty, chronically absent students scored lower than students with high attendance in both reading and math by fifth grade, and for Latinos, chronically absent students scored significantly lower than their high-attending peers in reading by first grade (Chang et al., 2008).

While chronic absence in preschool leads to worse outcomes, high levels of attendance can be of considerable benefit to children's cognitive development if the preschool is of high quality. Two studies (Logan, Piasta, Justice, Schatschneider, & Petrill, 2011; Hubbs-Tait, McDonald Culp, Huey, Culp, Starost, & Hare, 2002) found that high attendance in a high-quality preschool was associated with greater gains in expressive language and vocabulary among at-risk children. In a study of English preschools, Hall, Sylva, Sammons, Melhuish,

Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart (2012) distinguished between two types of quality: (1) structural quality, e.g., staff-child ratio and staff qualifications; and (2) process quality, e.g., teacher-child interactions and physical environment. Preschools with high process quality offered protection of at-risk children's development regardless of their attendance rate. However, preschools having only high structural quality offered protection of at-risk children's development for high-attending students only. Together, these studies indicate that both children's attendance and the specific features of their preschool programs combine to create a significant impact on the benefits that children receive from their participation in these high-quality preschool programs.

Finally, a study by Gottfried (2015) found that chronic absenteeism in kindergarten was lower among children who had participated in center-based care prior to entering kindergarten. It is unclear why this finding emerged. One possible reason is suggested by Côté, Petitclerc, Raynault, Xu, Falissard, Boivin, & Tremblay (2010), who found that children up to the age of 2.5 years who were placed in large group settings were more likely to become sick than children cared for at home, but were less likely to be sick in later years (due to acquired immunity). If children who attend early center-based care experience less absenteeism in kindergarten, then participation in a center-based preschool program may have a beneficial impact on a child's kindergarten attendance, which research suggests is of critical importance for a child's success in school.

Current study

Mark Ridley-Thomas, the Supervisor of the Second Supervisorial District (SD 2) of Los Angeles County, requested this study, which is designed to provide attendance and chronic absence rates for preschool students in SD 2. Although preschool attendance rates have been reported for other large cities, this is the first known study to do so for the Los Angeles area. Drawing upon the work conducted in Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington D.C. (e.g., Ehrlich et al., 2014; Connolly et al., 2014; Dubay et al., 2015), this study will also examine parental attitudes towards preschool attendance, as well as how providers monitor attendance and how they engage with parents around the issue of student attendance.

Prior research indicates that certain student subgroups are particularly at-risk of chronic absence. In both Chicago and Washington DC, African Americans were up to two times more likely to be chronically absent than Latinos, Whites, and Asians (e.g., Ehrlich et al., 2014; Dubay et al., 2015). Given these findings, and the fact that African Americans makeup over one-third of the population in SD 2, this study focused on preschool attendance and parent attitudes towards attendance in the African American population. Higher rates of chronic attendance have also been reported for the following subgroups: students living in poverty, students whose primary home language is English, students with disabilities, and children from single parent households (e.g., Ehrlich et al., 2014; Connolly et al., 2014; and Dubay et al., 2015). Attendance rates were examined separately for each of these at-risk subgroups.

Below are the research questions for this study:

1. What are the patterns of attendance for students enrolled in LAUP preschools in SD 2, and do they differ for at-risk subgroups?
2. What are the attitudes and beliefs of African American parents regarding student attendance in preschool?
3. Which attendance practices and policies are utilized by child care providers in SD 2?

Methods

Participants

Providers. Providers were randomly selected from the population of licensed child care providers located in SD 2. In order to create a sample of providers that was as representative as possible, we downloaded the list of child care providers located in Los Angeles County from California's website for the Department of Social Services. The dataset included the name and contact information for all licensed care centers (centers) serving children ages 2-5, as well as all large family child care homes (FCCs) serving up to 14 children. Because street addresses are not publicly available for FCCs, we selected the population of providers based on their zip code, including only those providers with a zip code that was wholly contained within SD 2. Child care providers within a school district typically follow the same policies regarding student attendance, so we selected at most one site from each of the school districts. We also sampled an equal proportion of FCCs and centers. From our random sample of 115 SD 2 providers, we were able to successfully contact 73 sites (63.5%), and completed interviews with 36 of the sites we contacted (49.3%). The final sample included 20 large FCCs and

17 centers, of which 13 were private and four were public centers.

Parents. Parents were randomly sampled from the population of African American families with a child enrolled in an LAUP preschool for 2015-16. Our sample consisted solely of LAUP parents, because it was the only population of parents for whom we had contact information and permission to contact. It is unclear how representative LAUP parents are of all parents whose children are in child care. However, the LAUP network spans the entire County and includes a diverse set of providers. In 2015-16, the network consisted of 257 child care providers, of which 55 providers (40 centers and 15 FCCs) were located throughout SD 2. Therefore, the results of the parent surveys can be viewed as representative for a large subset of SD 2 providers.

All African American parents in our sample gave LAUP permission to contact them at the time that they enrolled their child in preschool. We attempted to contact 201 parents; out of the numbers called, 44 (21.9%) were disconnected or wrong numbers, 68 resulted in completed calls (33.8%), and 89 messages were left, but not returned (44.3%). Most of the parents lived in SD 2, but we sampled from the entire county to obtain an adequate sample size. The results were combined, since there were no significant differences between parents in SD 2 and the rest of the County. The demographics for the parent sample are displayed in Table 1.

Students. We created a database containing the 2014-15 student attendance records for all SD 2 providers who recorded attendance in LAUP's internal database. We excluded from our analysis any student who was enrolled for fewer than 20 days. The final sample included a total of 739 students enrolled in 21 of the 55 LAUP providers in SD 2 (38.2%). A total of 19 of the sites (90.5%) were centers, and the remaining two sites were FCCs (9.5%). The student demographics are displayed in Table 2. The results of the analysis of student records should be viewed as representative of only those SD 2 providers in the LAUP network.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Parent Sample (N=68)

Demographic Characteristics	% of respondents
Parent	
Mother	92.6%
Father	4.4%
Grandparent	1.5%
Foster parent	1.5%
Household income	
<\$25,000	46.9%
\$25,000-\$49,999	40.8%
\$50,000-\$74,999	6.1%
Over \$75,000	6.1%
Number of missing	19
Number of adults in household	
1	42.6%
2+	57.4%
Number of missing	7
Child's characteristics	
Child's primary language is English	100.0%
Has IFSP/IEP	1.5%
Number of missing IFSP/IEP data	3
Mother's education	
High school graduate	22.6%
Some college	37.1%
Associates degree	11.3%
Bachelor's degree	22.6%
Graduate degree	6.5%
Number of missing	6
Father's education	
High school graduate	31.9%
Some college	23.4%
Associates degree	19.1%
Bachelor's degree	19.1%
Graduate degree	6.4%
Number of missing	21
Number of forms of assistance received	
0	48.4%
1	29.7%
2	21.9%
Number of missing	4

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Student Sample (N=739)

Demographic Characteristic	% of respondents
Child's ethnicity	
African American	8.3%
Asian	0.4%
Latino	83.0%
White	1.3%
Other	7.0%
Number of missing	42
Household income	
<\$25,000	61.6%
\$25,000-\$49,999	30.9%
\$50,000-\$74,999	4.7%
Over \$75,000	2.8%
Number of missing	267
Number of adults in household	
1	13.0%
2+	87.0%
Number of missing	4
Child's primary language	
English	49.0%
Spanish	49.9%
Other	0.1%
Number of missing	10
Mother's education	
Less than high school grad	31.5%
High school graduate	31.9%
Some college	19.4%
Associates degree	10.8%
Bachelor's degree	4.9%
Graduate degree	1.5%
Number of missing	83
Father's education	
Less than high school grad	40.4%
High school graduate	33.7%
Some college	13.4%
Associates degree	6.4%
Bachelor's degree	4.1%
Graduate degree	2.0%
Number of missing	149
Child's IFSP/IEP	
Child has or had an IFSP/IEP	1.9%
Number of missing	17
Number of forms of assistance received	
0	36.1%
1	47.4%
2	16.5%
Number of missing	72

Materials

A survey instrument was developed for parents (see Appendix B), and an interview protocol was developed for providers (see Appendix C). The goals of the parent survey were to assess parents' attitudes towards preschool attendance, to discover the reasons for their child's absences from preschool, and to inquire as to the extent to which providers asked about their child's absences from school. The provider interview was developed to assess the extent to which providers had attendance policies in place, to understand how providers monitored attendance, and to determine any policies that providers had in place for reducing chronic absences.

Procedure

Both parents and providers were contacted by phone and asked to participate. Each parent survey took 5-10 minutes to complete, and each provider interview took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Parents who completed the survey were sent a \$20 Ralph's gift card in the mail. Providers were thanked for their participation.

Analysis

A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the provider interviews, which were coded to help key concepts emerge. For the parent survey results, crosstabs were calculated and chi-square tests calculated as appropriate.

The student attendance rates were calculated for several at-risk groups: African Americans, students whose primary language was English, students whose families received multiple forms of financial support, single-parent households, and children who had an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Comparisons were made to groups not shown to be at-risk by previous research (e.g., Ehrlich et al., 2014, and Dubay et al., 2015). T-tests and chi-square tests were used to compare groups.

Findings

The majority of providers interviewed had an attendance policy in place. Overall, nearly three-fourths of providers reported having an attendance policy. As shown in Table 1, the proportion of providers that reported having an attendance policy was similar for centers and large FCCs.

Table 3. Provider Responses to "Does your site have an attendance policy?"

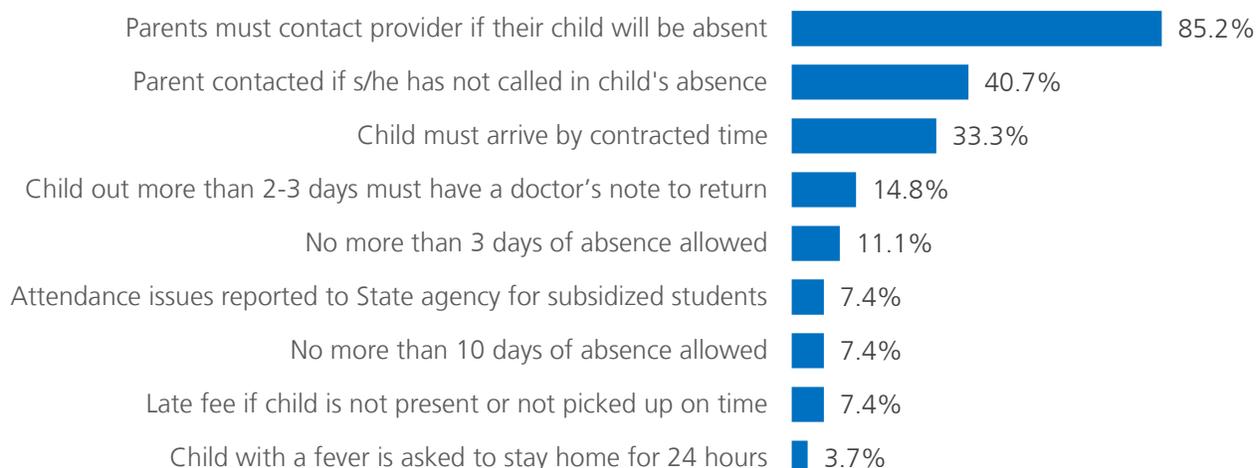
	Centers (N=17)	Large FCCs (N=20)	Total (N=37)
Yes	76.5%	70.0%	73.0%
No	23.0%	30.0%	27.0%

The majority of providers with an attendance policy (70.4%) reported that they communicate the policy in written form, e.g., via the parent contract or a parent handbook/handout. Four providers (14.8%) said they communicate the policy verbally, and an additional four providers (14.8%) said they communicate the policy both in writing and verbally.

Most providers with an attendance policy expected parents to let them know as soon as possible if their child was going to be absent from school. The most frequently cited aspect of a provider's attendance policy was the need for parents to let the center know when their child would be absent. As shown in Figure 1, 85.2% of providers expressed the expectation that a parent would call or text them in the case of absence. Providers also indicated a desire for timely notification of an absence; as one provider said, "I ask parents to call me ASAP if their child will be out sick – 'don't wait to call at 3:00 PM.'"

Providers' emphasis on prompt reporting may be at least partially attributable to their need to comply with child care operating guidelines set forth by the State of California. Two providers (7.4%) cited the need for appropriate child/staff ratios as the reason for having parents report absences as soon as possible, while one provider (3.7%) cited the need to have an adequate amount of food for the children. When a child is absent and the parent has not called in, 40.7% of providers said that they reach out to the parent either the same day or within two to three days.

Figure 1. Aspects of Attendance Policy Cited by Providers (N=27)



Note: Percentages do not add to 100% because many providers cited multiple aspects of their attendance policy.

Many providers with an attendance policy reported that they had no problems with student attendance. As one provider said, “I have working parents or they [parents] are in school, so I don’t have a problem with attendance, really.” When asked how they address infractions of the policy, 44.0% of providers simply stated that they had no issues. The remaining providers indicated that they would contact the parent to discuss any potential issues and see if they could be addressed, prior to severing the parent’s contract.

The majority of providers without an attendance policy expected parents to notify them of their child’s absence. Like providers with an attendance policy, providers without an attendance policy expected parents to call or text them to report child absences. Of the ten providers without an attendance policy, 80.0% of them said that parents called them if their child would not be coming to school. However, none of these providers expressed a strong need to have parents report their child’s absence by a certain time. As one site said, “I don’t really have a time limit [for the parent contacting her regarding a child’s absence]. You want them to come because it’s your livelihood.” Two of the sites (20.0%) stated that parents pay whether the children come or not, while one provider (10.0%) said attendance is not an issue for her because her parents pay by the day. In the event that parents do not contact the provider when a child is absent, three of the providers (30%) said that they typically contact the parent within two to three days.

Nearly all providers, both centers and FCCs, said that they record attendance daily using a sign-in sheet, but centers were more likely to also record attendance electronically. All providers reported that they use a daily sign-in sheet to record attendance. As shown in Table 4, centers were more likely than large FCCs to use a dual system of a sign-in sheet combined with an electronic system (17.6% vs. 5.3%).

Perhaps due to their larger size, centers were also more likely to have a range of staff monitoring attendance. Directors and classroom teachers were cited by an equal proportion of centers (35.3%) as the primary monitors of student attendance. Office staff were the primary monitors for 23.5% of providers, and Family Support Specialists monitored attendance for 5.9% of sites. In contrast, at FCCs, attendance was monitored by the FCC director for all but one site (94.7%), for which the classroom teacher monitored attendance (5.3%).

Table 4. Provider Responses to “How do you monitor attendance?”

	Centers (N=17)	Large FCCs (N=19)	Total
Sign-in sheet	82.4%	94.7%	89.2%
Sign-in sheet + Electronic system	17.6%	5.3%	10.8%

Note: Excludes data for one FCC director who declined to answer the question.

Few providers had access to supports or resources designed to help assist chronically absent students and their families. Two of the centers (11.8%) had access to resources that could help students with health issues or could help families obtain bus passes for transportation. None of the other centers or FCCs had in-house resources or partnerships with outside agencies to help address student needs, but one director mentioned (perhaps echoing a popular sentiment), “I wish we did.”

Centers were more likely than large FCCs to offer incentives for good attendance. Most providers did not offer incentives for good attendance. However, one FCC (5.0%) recognized children with good attendance at the end of the year. In addition, five of the centers (38.5%) offered a good attendance reward on a weekly, monthly, or semester basis.

Most parents surveyed felt that their child’s attendance at preschool was important. As shown in Table 5, over 90% of parents surveyed felt that their child’s attendance was as important in preschool as it would be when their child reached kindergarten. Nevertheless, a small percentage of parents felt that their child’s attendance would be more important once they reached kindergarten.

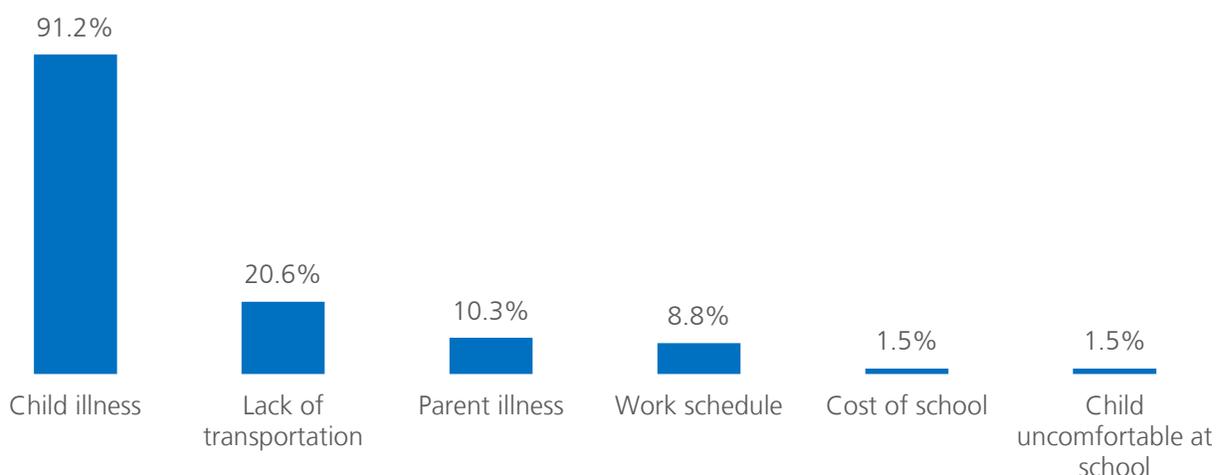
Although providers indicated a strong desire to know when a child was going to be absent from school, nearly 40% of parents indicated that providers did not always ask them why their child was absent. Similar to what providers told us, parents reported that most preschools (73.1%) did not offer incentives for good attendance.

Table 5. Results of the Parent Survey Regarding Student Attendance (N=68)

Question	% of Respondents
How important has it been to you that your child attend preschool every day?	
Very important -- it’s as important that my child regularly attend preschool as it will be in kindergarten.	91.2%
Important -- but not as important as it will be when my child gets older.	8.8%
Not important -- preschool is optional, and regular attendance won’t be important until my child goes to elementary school.	0.0%
Does your preschool offer incentives for attendance, i.e., “Student of the Month”?	
Yes	26.9%
No	73.1%
When your child is absent, does your preschool ask you why?	
Yes, they always ask	61.2%
Sometimes they ask	16.4%
No, they never ask	22.4%

Most parents surveyed said that their child missed preschool due to illness. As shown in Figure 2, over 90% of parents reported that their child’s absences from preschool were due to illness. Multiple parents also reported the following barriers to their child’s preschool attendance: lack of transportation, parent illness, and work schedule.

Figure 2. Reasons Parents Reported their Child was Absent from Preschool (N=68)



Note: These percentages may add to more than 100%, because parents could select more than one reason for their child's absence.

The preschool attendance rate was significantly lower than the average among several at-risk student groups. Overall, the average attendance rate was 90.94% (SD=9.14%). However, as shown in Table 6, the average attendance rate was lower than 90% among the following student groups: African Americans, children whose families received two or more forms of financial support, children whose primary language was English, and children who had ever had an IFSP or IEP at the time that they enrolled in preschool.

Table 6. Average Attendance Rates by Student Demographic Group, 2014-15

Demographic Group	Attendance Rate (%)		
	N	M	SD
Child Ethnicity (N=713)			
African American	59	87.3	15.44
All other ethnicities	654	91.30***	8.33
Number of forms of financial support received by family ¹ (N=672)			
0	241	91.65	7.56
1	316	91.24	9.62
2	110	87.17***	11.51
Number of adults living in household (N=654)			
1	85	90.49	11.62
1+	569	90.77	9.02
Child's primary language (N=723)			
English	364	89.77	10.11
Language other than English	359	92.26***	7.74
Child has or had an IFSP or IEP (N=722)			
No	708	91.06	8.89
Yes	14	85.25**	18.86

¹Financial supports include the following: child support, unemployment compensation, Supplemental Security Income Program (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance Program (SSDI), CalWORKs/Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), child support, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food stamps, and other financial assistance. Differences from the first group within each category significant at the following levels: *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01

The proportion of students who were chronically absent was greater for children whose primary language was English. Overall, 22.3% of the students were chronically absent. As shown in Table 7, there were no significant differences within the demographic groups in the proportion of children with chronic absence, with the exception of primary child language. Children whose primary language was English were 1.3 times as likely to miss 1-2 days of preschool every two weeks.²

Table 7. Student Demographic Group by Attendance Category, 2014-15

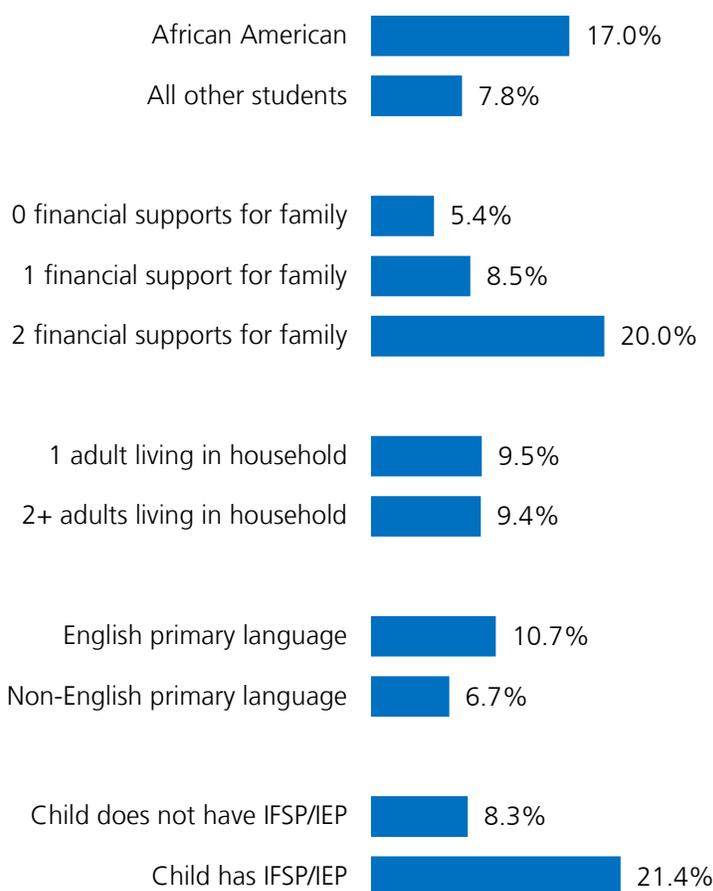
Demographic Group	N	Severely Chronically Absent (Less than or equal to 80%)	Chronically Absent (Between 81% to 90%)	Not Chronically Absent (More than 90%)
Child Ethnicity (N=713)				
African American	59	17.0%	20.3%	62.7%
All other students	654	7.8%**	22.5%	69.7%
Number of financial supports received by family ³ (N=672)				
0	241	5.4%	24.9%	69.7%
1	316	8.5%	20.9%	70.6%
2+	110	20.0%***	22.7%	57.3%
Number of adults living in the household (N=654)				
1	569	9.5%	23.7%	66.8%
More than 1	85	9.4%	17.7%	72.9%
Primary child language (N=723)				
English	364	10.7%	24.7%	64.6%
Language other than English	359	6.7%*	18.7%**	74.6%
Child has or had an IFSP or IEP (N=722)				
No	708	8.3%	22.5%	69.2%
Yes	14	21.4%*	7.2%	71.4%

³Financial supports include the following: child support, unemployment compensation, Supplemental Security Income Program (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance Program (SSDI), CalWORKs/Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), child support, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food stamps, and other financial assistance. Differences from the first group within each demographic group significant using a χ^2 test at the following levels: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

The proportion of students who were severely chronically absent was significantly higher among several at-risk student groups. For all students, the rate of severe chronic absence was 8.7%. As shown in Figure 3, the proportion of students who were severely chronically absent (i.e., who were absent an average of at least one day a week) was over twice as high among African-Americans as among students of other ethnicities. In addition, the proportion of students who were severely chronically absent was over three times as high among students whose families received two or more forms of financial support as among those who received no financial support, and over one and a half times as high among students whose primary language was English as among those whose primary language was not English. Overall, the proportion of students who were severely chronically absent was the highest among the following groups: African Americans, children whose families received two or more forms of financial support, and children with an IFSP/IEP.

²The effect of children’s primary language remained significant when we controlled for the child’s ethnicity and number of financial supports. Given the current research design, we were unable to explore why children whose primary language is English were more at risk of chronic absence. Additional research is needed to explore this finding. One possible explanation is that English-speaking parents may have more flexible work hours or larger social networks, allowing them to make alternate care arrangements when their child is ill.

Figure 3. Proportion of Students Who Were Severely Chronically Absent by Demographic Group, 2014-15



However, the results of a multivariate regression indicated that the likelihood of being severely chronically absent was not significantly different for African Americans when other variables were controlled. A multivariate logistic regression was performed to predict the likelihood of being severely chronically absent. The results, which are displayed in Table A1, indicate that children with English as their primary language and children whose families received two or more forms of financial assistance were significantly more likely to be severely chronically absent. Once primary language and forms of financial support were accounted for, however, there was no longer a significant difference between African Americans and children of other ethnicities.

Discussion

The findings of this study are largely consistent with those of previous studies on preschool attendance. Overall, the rate of absence was 9.1% for students enrolled in preschools in Los Angeles Supervisorial District 2. In addition, close to one in three students (31.0%) were chronically absent or severely chronically absent; that is, they were absent for at least one day out of every two weeks. Although this rate of chronic absence is high, it is comparable to rates in other large cities (e.g., Chicago and Washington, DC).

The question remains as to whether rates of absence can be reduced among young children attending preschool. Fortunately, there is reason to be optimistic. Washington, D.C. public schools' Head Start programs found notable improvements in student attendance after they began utilizing family services teams to increase family engagement (Dubay et al., 2015). Although the interventions have not completely resolved the problem of low attendance for these schools, they nevertheless suggest a concrete set of actions that might improve attendance for Los Angeles preschools.

According to parents, illness was the major reason for children’s absences from preschool. Similarly, Ehrlich et al. (2014) carefully examined the reasons for child absences in the Chicago public schools, and found that nearly all students were likely to be sick at least once during the year. Côté et al. (2010) found that children up to the age of 2.5 years who were placed in large group settings were more likely to become sick than children cared for at home. Although the researchers found that children did not suffer long-term consequences as a result of being placed in large group child care settings—in fact, the children showed a decreased likelihood to become sick relative to their peers when they reached elementary school—their findings highlight the frequency of illness among young children. In working to improve the attendance rate among preschool age children, it is important to factor in their typical rates of illness.

As was found in previous studies (e.g., Ehrlich et al., 2014; Dubay et al., 2015), several student groups were found to be at greater risk for absence from preschool. Here, these groups included African Americans, children whose families received multiple forms of financial assistance, and children with special needs. One important caveat to the greater risk of absence for African Americans was the additional finding that once we had controlled for parents receiving multiple forms of financial support, African American children were no longer significantly more likely to be absent. Differences in the findings between univariate and multivariate analyses highlight the need to assess risk of absence across multiple dimensions. Because children may be in several at-risk categories, they may benefit from a comprehensive array of supports to help them attend school more regularly.

The current study had several limitations. First, we were unable to analyze the attendance rates for students not enrolled in an LAUP preschool. LAUP preschools may have higher or lower attendance rates than other preschools, and may have different patterns within subgroups. Parents were also selected only from the LAUP network, so barriers to student attendance and perceptions about the importance of student attendance may differ from those observed in non-LAUP network providers. The extent to which the study is representative of all providers in SD 2 is unfortunately not a question that we can meaningfully address. However, the findings can be viewed as representative of the LAUP network of 55-60 preschool providers, which in turn represents a fairly large group of providers within SD 2.

Recommendations

Centers may consider tracking students’ attendance electronically, to help staff discern patterns of attendance and intervene to help struggling families. In this study, centers were more likely than FCCs to track student attendance electronically, but less than 20% of them did so. FCCs often have a small enough number of students to enable staff to quickly respond to a family that is struggling with logistical issues; however, it is difficult to see how centers, particularly those with multiple classrooms, could quickly identify all attendance patterns among their students. For example, it may be obvious when a child is out for several days in a row, but it may be less obvious that a particular child always tends to be out on a Monday or a Friday. Dubay et al. (2015) analyzed patterns of attendance in D.C. public schools, and found numerous significant differences by day of the week, by month, and by season, among other differences. Having an electronic monitoring system that easily produces meaningful reports on students’ attendance may help to improve the overall attendance rate, by alerting providers to patterns of absence.

Providers may consider creating a tiered system of interventions to help improve children’s attendance in preschool. Several researchers (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Chang & Romero, 2008; Ehrlich et al., 2014) have recommended a response to intervention (RtI) framework that could be used to help all students with their attendance. An RtI system typically has several tiers of support, with the first tier consisting of supports that are universal and offered to all children. Chang & Romero (2008) suggested that all children have access to preventative health care, and be offered incentives for good attendance. For children at a greater risk of absence, or those families shown to struggle with attendance, more targeted support is encouraged, in terms of coordinating public agency support for families. While the majority of parents in the current study said that their child was absent due to illness, there were also numerous families who reported logistical issues, e.g., lack of transportation. Katz, Adams, and Johnson (2015) provide several strategies for working with families to improve attendance.

Providers may wish to stress to families the importance of children’s attendance, emphasizing the role that regular attendance plays in the child’s long-term academic success. Stressing the importance of attendance would ideally entail more than focusing on the compliance or contractual aspects of attendance; it would also emphasize the long-term benefits for the child’s academic future. Ehlich et al. (2014) found that students’ attendance was lower if their parents believed that preschool attendance was less important than it would be once their children reached kindergarten. In the current study, a small proportion of parents indicated that preschool attendance was of less importance than kindergarten attendance. For these parents and others like them, a greater awareness of the role of attendance in their child’s education may help to improve their attendance rates. The Attendance Works toolkit (2013) can be used to raise awareness of the importance of attendance among parents, students, and members of the community. To engage African-American parents specifically, providers may also wish to review the work of Huang & Mason (2008), who conducted a small study of urban African-American preschool parents and identified several needs underlying parents’ motivations for involvement in their children’s education.

Providers receiving support from LAUP may wish to ask their Family Engagement Specialists to prioritize their support in carefully tracking attendance and conducting interventions with families at risk of absence. In the DCPS Head Start programs, family services staff were instrumental in working with families to improve children’s preschool attendance (Katz et al., 2015). In the LAUP network, many providers are assigned a Family Engagement Specialist, who could fulfill a similar role by helping parents address logistical and personal challenges that impede their child’s attendance. Family Engagement Specialists could also help providers identify health services that could serve their population, which might ultimately lower the rate of illness among children (Attendance Works, 2015).

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Appendix A. Rates of Chronic Absence by Demographic Group, 2014-15

Demographic Group	N	Unadjusted Attendance Rate	Adjusted Attendance Rate ⁴
Child Ethnicity			
African American	59		
All other students	654	-7.00%	4.10%
Number of financial supports received by family ⁵			
0	241		
1	316	-0.90%	-1.00%
2+	110	12.40%	13.6% **
Number of adults living in the household			
1	569		
More than 1	85	-6.10%	3.50%
Primary child language			
English	364		
Language other than English	359	-10.00%	-12.2% ***

R²=.03

Deviance $\chi^2(13, N=584)=1.06, p=.39$

⁴Results of logistic regression to predict likelihood of chronic absence.

⁵Financial supports include the following: child support, unemployment compensation, Supplemental Security Income Program (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance Program (SSDI), CalWORKs/Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), child support, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food stamps, and other financial assistance. Differences from the first group within each category significant using a χ^2 test at the following levels: ** $p<.05$; *** $p<.01$

Appendix B. Parent Survey

Hello, my name is _____, and I'm calling from LAUP. May I please speak to [guardian's name]? Your LA County Supervisor, Mark Ridley-Thomas, has asked LAUP to conduct a study of attendance practices among preschools in his district. For your participation, we will be sending you a Ralph's gift card for \$20. The interview will take no more than 20 minutes. You may stop participating at any time, and we can skip any questions you wish to skip. Your responses will be kept confidential and will not be shared with your child's preschool. Please remember to answer these questions only for [child's name]. Are you willing to participate?

1. How satisfied are you with the education received by your child? Would you say that you are:
 - (1) Very satisfied
 - (2) Satisfied
 - (3) Unsatisfied
 - (4) Very unsatisfied
 - (5) Refuse to answer

2. Have you as a parent felt welcome at your child's preschool?
 - (1) Yes, I always felt welcome
 - (2) Somewhat—I sometimes felt welcome, but other times did not
 - (3) No, I did not feel welcome
 - (4) Refuse to answer

3. How important has it been to you that your child attend preschool every day?
 - (1) Very important—it's as important that my child regularly attend preschool as it will be in kindergarten.
 - (2) Important-but not as important as it will be when my child gets older.
 - (3) Not important-preschool is optional, and regular attendance won't be important until my child goes to elementary school.

4. When your child had to miss a day of preschool, what were the reasons for your child being absent? (Ask parent to explain)
 - Child sickness?
 - Parent sickness?
 - Lack of transportation?
 - No one to take the child to school or bring child home?
 - Preschool asked child not to bring child to school that day?
 - Safety concerns?
 - Work schedule?
 - Felt uncomfortable at the school?
 - Language barrier?

5. Does your preschool offer incentives for attendance, i.e., "Student of the Month"?
 - (1) Yes
 - (2) No
 - (3) Refuse to answer

6. When your child is absent, does your preschool ask you why?
 - (1) Yes, they always ask
 - (2) Sometimes they ask
 - (3) No, they never ask
 - (4) Refuse to answer

Thank you very much for answering our questions. To receive your gift card, let's confirm your address. Is your address [insert parent's address here]? You should receive your gift card within the next 1-2 weeks. Thank you for your time!

Appendix C. Provider Interview

Hello, my name is _____, and I'm calling from LAUP. May I please speak to [provider's name]? Your LA County Supervisor, Mark Ridley-Thomas, has asked LAUP to conduct a study of attendance practices among preschools in his district. Answering these questions should take no more than 10 minutes of your time. Would you have 10 minutes now to answer our questions?

1. Do you have an attendance policy at your preschool?

What is the attendance policy?

How is the policy communicated to parents?

How do you address infractions of the attendance policy?

2. How do you monitor attendance at your preschool?

How frequently is attendance monitored?

Is there someone at your school that looks at students' patterns of attendance?

How does your school identify students who have attendance issues?

3. Do staff reach out to chronically absent students? How so?

Does the site partner with local agencies that can provide supports or resources to assist chronically absent students and their families?

Which local agencies? What services do they provide?

4. Do you provide incentives to encourage good attendance? If so, what incentives do you provide?