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**Jacksonville: How Do Students with Excused Absences
Compare to Students with Unexcused Absences**

National Center for School Engagement

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Jacksonville: How Do Students with Excused Absences Compare to Students with Unexcused Absences?

Students are labeled “truant” based on their number of unexcused absences. Truants typically have poor academics and often have discipline problems in school. Generally, students with excessive absences that are considered “excused” are not targeted for truancy interventions to aid with these challenges. This is the case in Jacksonville, Florida where interventions are focused only on students with five or more unexcused absences in one month or ten or more in a 90-day period. However, it was unknown if students who miss an excessive amount of school but are excused have similar academic and discipline outcomes as those who have an excessive amount of unexcused absences. The current study examines differences in academic and disciplinary outcomes among students according to the type of absences.

Method

CFFC received a database containing records of 780 students who had excessive absences during the 2003-2004 school year. The database included some demographic information, attendance, grades, discipline data, special education status, and free and reduced lunch status. The primary goal was to explore the academic and discipline differences between students who had excessive excused absences (“excused students”) to those with excessive unexcused absences (“unexcused students”). For the purpose of this study, students were considered to have excessive excused absences if they met three conditions.

- 1) their excused absences were greater than the number of unexcused absences,
- 2) their unexcused absences were fewer than ten (and hence, they would not likely be identified as truants), and
- 3) the number of excused absences exceeded ten.

These conditions ensured that students who would be included in the “excused” absence classification met the same absence level as those who would be considered truant if the absences were unexcused. Students were considered to have excessive unexcused absences if they had more than ten unexcused absences.

A secondary goal was to examine the basic relationship between the two types of absences and their relationship to grades and discipline. To do this we applied correlational methods¹.

Results

Demographics

The students in this study were elementary school students because the Jacksonville truancy intervention is largely focused at this level. The following table shows the breakdown of the 780 students by grade level.

¹ A correlation examines the relationship between two variables. If one variable is perfectly predicted by another variable the correlation is 1.00; if there is no relationship between two variables the correlation is .00.

Grade Level	Number of Students (%)
Pre-Kindergarten	63 (8.1%)
Kindergarten	209 (26.8%)
1 st Grade	150 (19.2%)
2 nd Grade	96 (12.3%)
3 rd Grade	102 (13.1%)
4 th Grade	82 (10.5%)
5 th Grade	78 (8.1%)
TOTAL	780 (100%)

Forty-nine percent of the students were female and 51% were male. The majority of the students were White/Caucasian: 52%. Thirty-nine percent were Black/African-American, almost 5% were Hispanic/Latino, 3% were mixed, and 1% were Asian. The majority (74%) received or were eligible for free or reduced price lunches.

Thirty-six percent of students had special education status. Of these students, 40% had a physical disability, 24% had a learning disability, 34% had a mental disability, and not quite 2% were gifted. Of all the students from whom we had data, 82% were promoted to the next grade.

Achievement

Students who had excessive unexcused absences had statistically significantly poorer grades than students who had excessive excused absences. Reading grades averaged a C for excused students, whereas it was closer to a C- for unexcused students, $t(315)=9.56, p<.005$. Math scores were similar, except that excused students had averages of C+s. These differences in grades are due to the fact that students with unexcused absences have disproportionate D and F grades compared with students with excused absences (see Math and Reading Table).

Grade Distribution: Excused vs. Unexcused*

	A	B	C	D	F
MATH					
Unexcused	7%	4%	51%	20%	18%
Excused	16%	14%	49%	13%	8%
READING					
Unexcused	2%	16%	32%	32%	18%
Excused	6%	26%	38%	22%	8%

* Note: Grades designated E, S, and U, were coded as A, C, and F, respectively

Finally, excused students were promoted significantly more than unexcused students, $t(633) = 19.88, p<.001$: 85% of excused students were promoted, whereas only 62% of unexcused students were².

² The total number of students promoted is closer to that of excused students vs. unexcused because there were more students who were in the excused category.

In addition to comparing the excused students to the unexcused students, we also examined the basic relationship between the two types of excessive absences to grades using correlational methods. Math and reading grades were essentially uncorrelated with excused absences. That is, the correlation between the number of excused absences and math grades was $-.08$ ($p < .05$) and reading grades was $-.02$ (*ns*). However, the relationship between grades and *unexcused* absences was statistically significant. Specifically, greater unexcused absences were related to lower math and reading grades ($r = -.19$, and $-.23$, $p < .001$, respectively). Whether students were promoted or retained was also more highly correlated with unexcused absences than excused absences ($r = .19$ and $.11$, $p < .01$, respectively).

Discipline

Most students had no suspensions. However, students with excessive unexcused absences had significantly more out of school suspensions compared to those with excessive excused absences, $t = 9.80$, $p < .005$: 7% of excused students had out-of-school suspensions compared to 19% of unexcused students. In Jacksonville, elementary school truants are not given out-of-school suspensions for truancy. Thus, truancy is not the cause of the suspensions. Although unexcused students did not differ statistically from excused students on in-school suspensions, the average number of in-school suspension is higher for unexcused students (i.e., 1% of excused students and 4% of unexcused students). In addition, the numbers of discipline referrals for unexcused and excused students are also of statistical significant, $t = 10.91$, $p < .005$. That is, 23% of unexcused students had discipline referrals compared to 8% of excused students.

Similar patterns are found in the relationship between overall unexcused and excused absences. Out-of-school suspensions and discipline referrals are significantly correlated with unexcused absences ($r = .14$ and $.14$, $p < .001$, respectively) but are essentially uncorrelated with excused absences ($r = .04$, and $.00$, *ns*).

Other Factors

Achievement, attendance, and disciplinary outcomes are generally also related to student factors such as free and reduced lunch status, special education status, and ethnicity. In this study, it was important to explore whether these factors, and grade level, influenced whether students were categorized as having excessive excused absences or excessive unexcused absences. None of these factors were significantly different in terms of whether children had excessive excused vs. unexcused absences.

The fact that the aforementioned student factors did not differ in terms of who was placed in which excessive absence category should not be confused with the idea that student factors are not related to school outcomes. Although it was not the focus of the current research question, we also examined whether free and reduced lunch, special education status, and ethnicity were related to achievement, disciplinary actions, retention or promotion to the next grade level, and having any excused or unexcused absences (which is different from having excessive absences). We found that students who qualified for free and reduced lunch had significantly lower reading and math scores, more out-of-school suspensions, more disciplinary referrals, more unexcused absences, and were held back in school more often than those who paid full price lunches. In addition, special education students had significantly more out-of-school suspensions, more disciplinary referrals, and higher excused absences than students who did not have special

education status. Finally, when we compared white students to non-white students, we found that non-white students had significantly lower reading scores, more out-of-school suspensions, and more discipline referrals than white students.

Conclusion

Clearly, at least at the elementary level, whether absences are excused or unexcused is important to school achievement and disciplinary referrals. Unexcused absence is the clear proxy of bad outcomes³. Consequently, the results of this study indicate that Jacksonville is targeting the appropriate population for its truancy intervention. Students with excused absences do not manifest similar negative outcomes in academia or discipline compared to students with unexcused absences. It is not only most effective to remain focused on students with unexcused absences, but it is also cost-effective because resources are spent on the most at-risk students.

³ The results of this study do not lend to conclusions of causality. It is impossible to know if the relationship whether unexcused absences cause poor grades and discipline problems or vice versa.

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.



National Center for School Engagement

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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