Attendance and Chronic Absence in Early Childhood

A Snapshot Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Educare Network

Significance & Context

Attendance matters: One important way that early care and education (ECE) programs and practitioners can support children's "school readiness" is to partner with families to build strong habits of attendance early on. Importantly, absenteeism in the early grades is a strong predictor of subsequent absenteeism, school readiness, and future academic success.[1] In fact, students who are chronically absent (missing 10% of school days or more) in preschool are five times more likely to be chronically absent in second grade.[2] More recent data from the U.S. Department of Education, show chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools has nearly doubled from 16% (2018-19) to 30% (2021-22) with two-thirds (66%) of K-12 students enrolled in a school with high levels of chronic absenteeism (i.e., 20% or more of all students are chronically absent).[3]

Disparities in absenteeism: Regular attendance is particularly critical for children living in disinvested communities[4], yet chronic absence is especially challenging for this group and suggests that children and families are less likely to reap the full benefits of their ECE program.[5] Children living in low-income communities are four times more likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten compared to their higher income peers and the negative impact of absenteeism on certain developmental outcomes has been found to be 75% greater for children living in low-income communities compared to their middle-class peers.[6] Prior research on attendance and absenteeism in preschool has also highlighted additional differences related to race/ethnicity, and disparities in levels of chronic absenteeism related to race/ethnicity have been further exasperated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[7,8]

Start earlier: Despite the importance of starting early, research, policy, and practice efforts have given limited attention to ECE attendance for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. For example, although there have been widespread increases in chronic absenteeism since the COVID-19 pandemic began[9], the media emphasis and public outcry has focused on kindergarten and above with less attention paid to our youngest learners. Data from the Educare Network highlight the importance of reducing and even preventing chronic absence in the earliest years and building strong routines and habits of attendance through the support of ECE programs and providers.

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Exploration & Evidence

Start Early researchers explored patterns of attendance and absenteeism for children enrolled in a sample of 24 Early/Head Start programs within the Educare Network before and during the pandemic. For the 3,603 children and families enrolled in Educare schools with attendance data during the 2018-19 school year and the 3,071 children enrolled with data during 2021-22, we examined and compared:

- Average attendance rates[◊]
- Percentage of children who were chronically absent[*]
- Attendance rates in relation to levels of chronic absence
- Differences in chronic absence by race/ethnicity

Not surprisingly, we found that **children enrolled in Educare schools during the pandemic had lower rates of attendance** than children enrolled prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, **there was a higher proportion of children who were chronically absent in Educare during the pandemic** compared to the proportion of children who were chronically absent before the pandemic.

86% 55% 78% 84%

Before Pandemic: 2018-19
n = 3603

During Pandemic: 2021-22
n = 3071

■ Average Attendance Rate   ■ % Chronically Absent
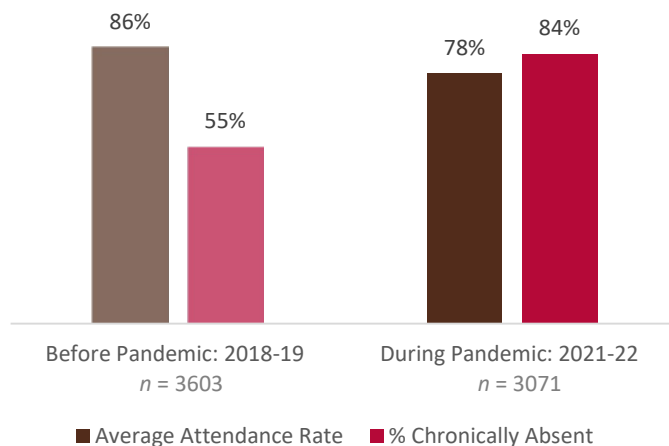
*CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM is defined as **missing 10% of total possible school days or more** during a school year for any reason.

◊ The number of days attended divided by the number of possible days a child could have attended (i.e., number of days enrolled).

DATA COLLECTION DETAILS

Each Educare school is part of a research-practice partnership (RPP) with a local evaluation partner (LEP). Through these collaborative partnerships, data are collected at the local program level and as part of core studies including the Educare National Evaluation to assess child and family outcomes, staff practices, and program quality in a variety of domains. Researchers and evaluators at each Educare school have been studying implementation and outcomes since 2007 to document:

- core features of the Educare model
- unique local features
- dosage, intensity, content, and quality of child and family services
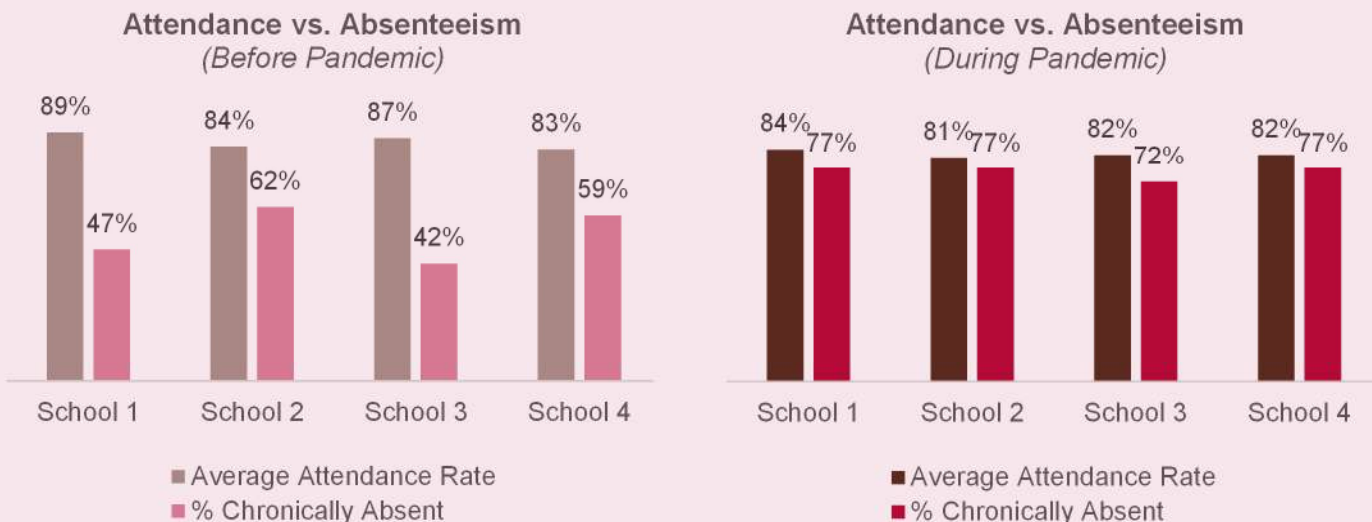- child and family outcomes
- progress over time

As part of the Educare National Evaluation, cross-site semi-annual/annual assessments of children's language, literacy, and social-emotional skills are completed, as well as caregivers' social-emotional well-being, activities, relationships, and experiences at Educare.

Each Educare school also engages in ongoing site-specific evaluations and data collection determined by the school and LEP to inform program practice, drive program improvement and professional development, evaluate locally driven initiatives, and determine compliance with a variety of ECE standards.
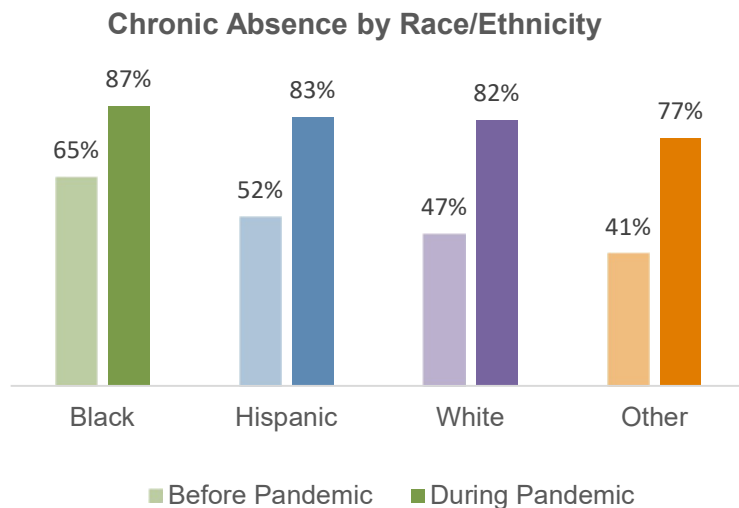
Specifically, during the 2021-22 school year, the average attendance rate was 8 percentage points lower than *before* the pandemic. In addition, the proportion of children who were chronically absent was 29 percentage points higher *during* the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, average attendance rates across Educare schools ranged from 31% to 100% and 55% of children were chronically absent. During the pandemic, average attendance rates ranged from 38% to 95% and 84% of Educare children were chronically absent. As an example, we present data from the same four Educare schools before and during the pandemic in the graphs below. Before the pandemic, average attendance rates for these schools were comparable, yet the percentage of children who were chronically absent varied. **During the pandemic, average attendance rates slightly decreased** (by 5 percentage points or less) but **these same Educare schools experienced large increases in the proportion of children who were chronically absent.** These data suggest that average attendance rates can often mask levels of chronic absence.

Attendance vs. Absenteeism
(Before Pandemic)

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
Average Attendance Rate	89%	84%	87%	83%
% Chronically Absent	47%	62%	42%	59%

- Average Attendance Rate
- % Chronically Absent

Attendance vs. Absenteeism
(During Pandemic)

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
Average Attendance Rate	84%	81%	82%	82%
% Chronically Absent	77%	77%	72%	77%

- Average Attendance Rate
- % Chronically Absent

Educare data also showed that rates of <u>chronic absence differed by race/ethnicity prior to the pandemic</u> with Black children having the highest rates of chronic absence. Although **rates of chronic absence were still highest among Black students during the pandemic, rates were consistently high across all racial-ethnic groups.**

Chronic Absence by Race/Ethnicity

	Black	Hispanic	White	Other
Before Pandemic	65%	52%	47%	41%
During Pandemic	87%	83%	82%	77%

- Before Pandemic
- During Pandemic

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Observations & Wonderings

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many adversities, including unprecedented barriers for early childhood practitioners and families of young children to navigate regarding their children's regular attendance in ECE programs. **Similar to other ECE programs and K-12 schools, the Educare Network observed decreases in child-level attendance rates and increases in the proportion of children who were considered chronically absent** due to missing more than 10% of possible school days. Unclear and rapidly shifting health guidance and practices (including when, why, and for how long to exclude children and staff from programs) may have been one factor contributing to more absences during the pandemic. **Missing out on in-person opportunities for instruction and interactions with peers and teachers can add up.**

Also, like other studies that have examined patterns of attendance and absenteeism in the early grades, we observed **racial-ethnic differences in the proportion of children who were chronically absent before and during the pandemic** in Educare schools. However, **racial-ethic disparities in chronic absence were less pronounced during the pandemic**. Rates ranged from 77-87%; yet the proportion of children who were chronically absent was still highest among Black students. It is also important to note that **factors contributing to racial/ethnic differences in attendance and absenteeism are often difficult to separate from conditions related to place, program, or other systemic or racial inequities.**

These data are limited in that they do not speak to the different factors (i.e., the why) that may have contributed to the decreases in child-level attendance and increases in the overall proportion of children who were chronically absent from before to during the pandemic. Accessing or gathering and analyzing **data that speak to reasons for absences and unpack multiple barriers to attendance** will be an important next step to **understanding and creating solutions that address the root causes and underlying conditions leading to absenteeism**.

Below are wonderings that Educare RPPs have already begun to unpack, and researchers, policymakers, and practice leaders outside of the Network might consider for their own future exploration and analyses:

- Are the children and families who were enrolled in Educare during the pandemic characteristically similar or different (or do they have similar or unique experiences) compared to those who were enrolled in Educare before the pandemic?
- Did families who were enrolled in Educare during the pandemic leverage strengths, resources, or supports in new or different ways than the families who were enrolled prior to the pandemic?
- What program strategies were being implemented and which resources were being accessed that may have played a role in attendance and absenteeism? Were these strategies culturally responsive?

- How might staffing patterns have played a role in children's attendance and absenteeism?
- What local contextual factors or policies – such as health-related restrictions and procedures, access to reliable transportation, and others – need to be taken into consideration when examining and addressing attendance and absenteeism?
- Are attendance and absenteeism associated with indicators of child and family progress?
- Are improvements in attendance or reduced levels of chronic absenteeism observed further out from the start of the pandemic or in relation to the implementation of specific attendance improvement strategies?

QUESTIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS TO "BITE" INTO

LEVERAGING DATA:

- What does chronic absenteeism look like in my program?
- How does chronic absenteeism data compare to average child-level attendance rates or average daily attendance rates at the school level?
- How have our patterns of attendance and absenteeism changed across school years?
- What other data might be helpful to paint a fuller picture?

FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS:

- What factors do programs or individuals with strong attendance *(positive outliers)* have in common?
- How can ECE practitioners leverage the strengths and assets of families and communities to encourage regular attendance?

IMPROVING PROGRAMS:

- What barriers might exist within families, programs, communities, or policies to reducing chronic absenteeism and improving attendance?
- What role does mindset play in improving attendance?
- How does our program engage and support families in navigating these barriers?

IMPROVING POLICIES:

- What systems and policy changes are needed to reduce chronic absenteeism and better support families around regular ECE attendance in the early years?
- What systemic inequities exist that may be contributing to income-related or racial-ethnic disparities in attendance and absenteeism?

NETWORK SPOTLIGHT

Highlighting one example of outstanding practice or innovation in the Educare Network

TULSA EDUCARE

Tulsa Educare (TUL) has four sites – Kendall-Whittier, Hawthorne, MacArthur, and Celia Clinton – all located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. TUL enrolls over **560 children** - from birth through age five -and their families to advance their mission of transforming the lives of young children and their families through high-quality ECE, enhancing parenting practices, and strong partnerships with other organizations. Over **50% of TUL children and families identify as Hispanic or Latino and more than 30% identify as Black**, characterizing TUL as racially and ethnically diverse schools.

TUL has used many **strengths-based strategies to meaningfully support families with their children's attendance**. These strategies are built on TUL's shared commitment to families' engagement in children's learning and have contributed to improvements in the rates of chronic absenteeism at TUL from the 2021-22 school year to the 2022-2023 school year. **Across the four Tulsa Educare schools, the percentage of children who were chronically absent decreased by 27 percentage points.**

Program leaders and staff at TUL have utilized structured spaces, such as Policy Council, and optimized informal ones, like drop off/pick-up times, to **strengthen relationships and partnerships with families through conversations about attendance.** Early after a child's enrollment, TUL weaves attendance success conversations into their family engagement activities. For example, **attendance procedures and policies are reviewed with each newly enrolled family** and "Attendance Thermometers" can be seen displayed in hallways that **showcase school attendance rates** to prompt goal-setting conversations with staff. Moreover, **staff take opportunities to explain why regular attendance is important and engage in deeper conversations** using Motivational Interviewing inspired conversation tools and talking points as needed. These conversations aim to facilitate families' reflections on their initial enrollment motivation and why they want to keep their children enrolled in Educare. If a child's attendance does not improve, **staff use attendance success plans and co-create attendance goals with families.** The success plan follows a 7-step strengths-based framework for goal setting and staff provide multiple opportunities for families to assess and reassess these plans in order to support them in accomplishing their goals.

In addition, program leaders and staff at TUL have **implemented a tiered approach to ensure all staff are using attendance data in their work**. For example, school leadership teams review their school's attendance, and classroom staff look at classroom data to consider how irregular attendance affects lesson plans and classroom routines. Family support staff also reflect with families on how child absences impact their work, school routines, and parent group participation as well as how positive messages of child attendance can improve family engagement. Finally, attendance data is analyzed during quarterly scheduled data discussions to explore associations with child outcomes.

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Please direct questions about Educare research and evaluation to the Network's National Coordinating Office at Start Early: Amanda Stein, Managing Director, Research and Evaluation

For more information on:
- Network research and evaluation findings (The Educare Insights series)
- The Educare Network's Research Agenda to Advance Racial Equity
- The Educare 5 Policy Priorities to Ensure All Families Thrive
- On bringing Educare practices to your own program

EDUCARE INSIGHTS DATA BITE

WHAT: Educare Insights Data Bites are short reads aimed at building awareness, sparking dialogue, and spurring further inquiry by situating descriptive data points, examples, and voices from the Network in the context of current challenges or opportunities within the ECE field. They are designed to drive hypotheses and more rigorous future analysis.

WHO: Data Bites invite problem solvers, innovators, practitioners, investors, and anyone who loves the ECE field to "bite" into questions and discussion about data on timely topics.

WHY: The Educare Network seeks to model and scale elements of our approach to data utilization. We hope the Date Bites inspire more intentional use of data for program improvements, policy and systems change, and knowledge generation to ensure every family in every community has equitable access to quality early care and learning.

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