



A is for Absent

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By: Geneva Lee

Being financially responsible—keeping a close eye on your bank balance and even your credit score, for example— isn't always pleasant. Being truly accountable for educating kids also requires keeping track of numbers, both good and bad. As President George W. Bush said, you can't fix what you don't measure.

From reading Missouri's State Board of Education's reports, one would think that the state's kids are succeeding in their studies and attending their classes; however, this is not the case. While Missouri schools and districts report their average daily attendance, and it's incorporated into their Annual Performance Report (APR), these numbers hide individual students who aren't showing up.

We can't prove a causal relationship between truancy and poor academic outcomes, but the two are [clearly correlated](#), and common sense tells us that students need to be present to learn. Unfortunately, recently released [federal data](#) show that nearly 110,000 Missouri students missed 15 or more days of school in the 2015–16 school year, meaning that they are categorized as “chronically absent.” In seven Missouri school districts, serving a total of over 50,000 students, more than one-quarter of the students were chronically absent.

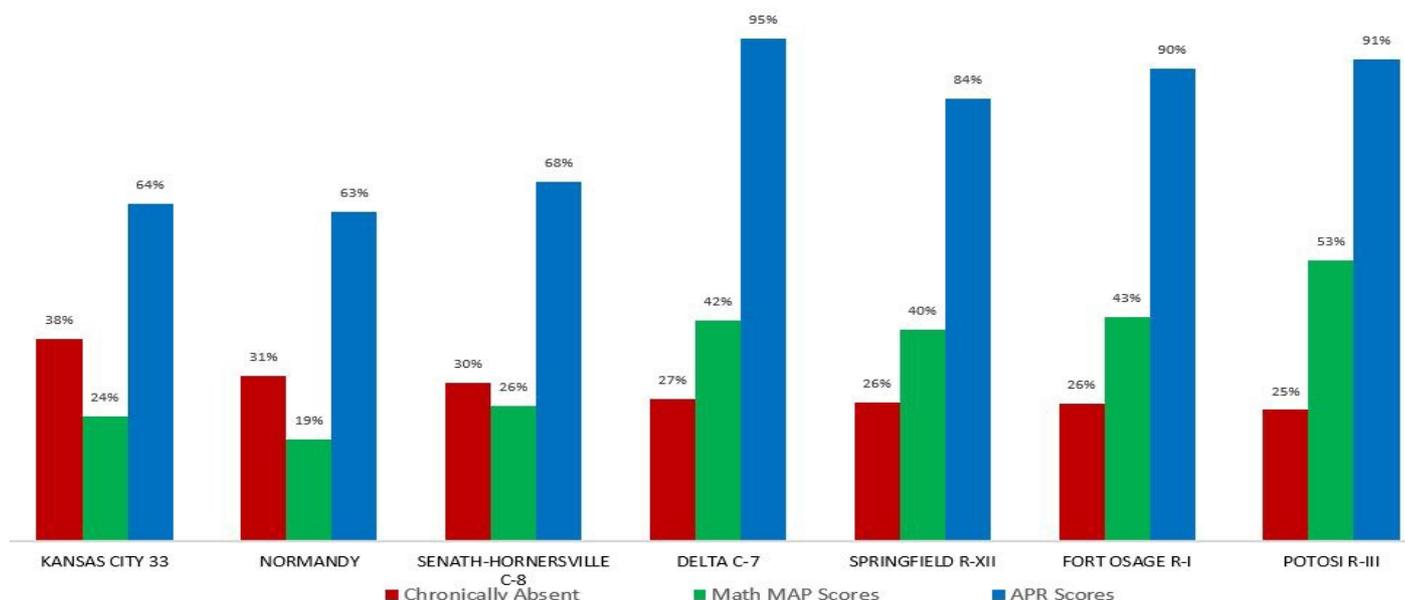
At the school level, 42 Missouri schools had chronic absenteeism rates of more than 33 percent.

And yet these high-absence schools earned an average of 70 percent of the possible points in the [APR evaluation](#) in 2017—well above the 50 percent needed for full accreditation. It’s not surprising that with more than one-third of their students chronically absent, an average of only 15 percent of the students at these schools were proficient in math, and just 32 percent were proficient in reading. In one egregious case, at Kansas City’s Central Middle School, where 54 percent of the students were chronically absent, only 5 percent of students were proficient in math. Yet this school received 75 percent of their APR points, making it fully accredited.

The same trend is apparent at the district level. Kansas City leads with 38 percent of its students qualifying as chronically absent, even though DESE reports a proportional attendance rate of 83 percent for the same year (more on that disconnect in another blog) and a math proficiency rate of less than 25 percent. Yet, the district garnered an APR Score of 64 percent—making it provisionally accredited. Springfield was able to get 84 percent of its APR points, even though one-quarter of its students were chronically absent, and only 40 percent of them are proficient in math.

Though reducing chronic absences will not solve Missouri’s educational woes, making sure kids show up to class is an essential first step for progress. A rating system that gives the impression that children can get a good education when they are not physically present in schools robs them of the chance to succeed. Even more troubling are misleading APR scores that hide the fact that children are not being given the educational opportunities they deserve but being set up to fail.

Percentages of Chronic Absenteeism, Math Proficiency and APR Points Earned Selected School Districts



NOTE: Chronically absent percentages are for 2015-16. Math Scores are a Composite of 2017 MAP Math Scores for Grades 3-8 at the District Level for 2016-17.

About the Author



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Geneva Lee is from the St. Louis area and is currently a junior at Cornell University pursuing a B.S. in policy analysis & management.

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<https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/accountability/absent>

Links

[1] <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/accountability/absent>

[2] <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chronic-absenteeism-an-old-problem-in-search-of-new-answers/>

[3] <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/>

[4] <https://mcds.dese.mo.gov/guidedinquiry/School%20Report%20Card/School%20Report%20Card.aspx>

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