



Navigating into, through, and beyond the middle grades: The role of middle grades attendance in staying on track for high school graduation[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In this longitudinal study, we investigated the use of attendance during middle school as a behavioral indicator of engagement to predict whether students are on track toward high school graduation. We used administrative data from four cohorts of students in New York City schools ($N = 303,845$) to (a) explore patterns of change in attendance between Grades 4 and 8 and (b) determine the extent to which changes in attendance between Grades 4 and 8 predict which students are on track in Grade 9 for going on to graduate from high school. Results of latent growth modeling indicated that students demonstrate the most substantial declines in attendance during Grade 8 and that attendance changes are most variable in this year, with some students demonstrating much more dramatic declines than others. In addition, these changes in attendance were robust predictors of whether students were on track for high school graduation. To identify students who are at risk for not graduating for the purposes of providing appropriate interventions, educators should pay attention to their commonly collected data on attendance rates as a behavioral indicator of engagement.

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1. Introduction

Studies of the predictors of high school graduation have generally focused on the high school years, with less research dedicated to investigating earlier indicators in middle school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Similarly, interventions have typically centered on high school. In the most recent What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) practice guide on dropout prevention (Dynarski et al., 2008), only 1 of the 11 programs was aimed at middle school students. Since then, some additional programs aimed at middle school students have been reviewed by WWC, but none demonstrated significant effects on dropout and met WWC evidence standards. Despite this focus on the high school years, researchers conceptualize dropping out

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from high school as part of a long-term process of disengagement from school, with negative developmental pathways that begin before Grade 9 (e.g., Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Although only a few empirical studies have tested this notion, their findings demonstrate the predictive power of earlier indicators and their utility for intervening early (Balfanz & Boccanfuso, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2007).

Middle school is an important transitional period for students, marked by increasing curricular demands (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) as well as important changes in the organization and social structure of schools, including larger class sizes and multiple teachers (Eccles et al., 1993). These changes have been associated with declines in motivation and engagement (Finn, 1989; Simmons & Blyth, 1987) that can interact with growing academic demands to create a cycle of increasing under-performance (Wilhelm, 1995). These environmental changes make middle school a time of heightened risk for student disengagement and thus a particularly important period for studying early indicators that predict the likelihood of later dropout. Yet, middle school reforms that intended to keep students on track have largely focused on curricular and pedagogical changes to increase students' academic performance, and far less attention has been dedicated to indicators of school engagement and their potential contribution to preventing dropout (Goldsmith & Kantrov, 2001; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004).

To address the antecedents of high school dropout during the middle school years and go beyond solely academic indicators, the present study investigates the role of an indicator of behavioral engagement—attendance—during the middle school years in predicting whether students stay on track toward high school graduation. Specifically, we use longitudinal, administrative data from New York City to explore students' growth trajectories in attendance between Grade 4 and Grade 8 and to determine the extent to which changes in attendance across these grades predict whether students are on track for on-time high school graduation. In so doing, we aim to shed light on the value of monitoring attendance as an early indicator for determining which students are falling off track for graduation. Our ultimate purpose is to inform systems to identify specific students for intervention at a point early enough in their schooling to be effective.

1.1. Engagement and behavioral indicators

School engagement has received increasing attention among researchers studying high school dropout (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Engagement is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct (Fredericks et al., 2004). However, there is great variability in how the different dimensions of engagement are operationalized in the literature and the terminology used to describe them (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). This disagreement lies predominantly in the number and types of engagement dimensions or components that are included in this broader construct (Appleton et al., 2008). Some research posits a model of engagement that includes two components—a behavioral component and an affective component (Finn, 1989; Marks, 2000; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). Examples of behavioral indicators include attendance, on-task behavior, and number of suspensions, where as examples of affective indicators (also termed emotional indicators) include positive or negative attitudes as well as interest in certain activities. More recent research argues for an engagement model that includes cognitive indicators, a three-component model where cognitive indicators include self-monitoring strategies and the willingness to persist in problem solving in the face of difficult academic activities (e.g., Fredericks et al., 2004). Others have proposed a model that includes four components, adding an academic dimension, and using the term psychological engagement to describe aspects of engagement most closely aligned with the affective component offered in previous conceptualizations (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Despite disagreements about the components to be included in the conceptualization of engagement, behavioral engagement is the component most consistently included (Appleton et al., 2008).

The present investigation focuses on behavioral engagement and more specifically, student attendance, as an important indicator in middle school. Our focus on behavioral engagement reflects the agreement across studies of the centrality of behavioral engagement to the larger construct of engagement as well as prior research that shows that behaviors such as attendance, grade point averages, and misbehaviors are good predictors of dropping out (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Morris, Ehren, & Lenz, 1991; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). Our particular focus on one specific indicator—namely attendance—also reflects the call by educators and school counselors for practical methods that can serve to flag students for early intervention and that can be managed easily within schools existing data systems (Balfanz et al., 2007; Suh et al., 2007). Attendance can be a practically useful indicator, because it is observable and less inferential compared to cognitive and affective indicators, and it is also efficient to collect and analyze with existing school-based resources and personnel (Furlong & Christenson, 2008).

Finn's (1989) participation-identification model provides a way to understand the relation between attendance and dropout. Finn's seminal theory posits that students tend to enter school with a relatively positive approach to school, willing participants as a function of parent and teacher encouragement. With students' sustained participation in school activities and accompanying academic successes, students begin to identify with school. This identification with school establishes a sense of scholastic belonging that boosts and propels future active engagement, such that small frustrations have little impact on this cycle of continued active participation in school. However, this self-reinforcing process can also have the opposite effect whereby early disengagement contributes to negative long-term consequences, such as dropout.

Specifically, levels of disengagement that predict dropout occur when there is an interaction among various cognitive, behavioral, and affective factors. Students disengage from school through behaviors (such as avoiding class or staying home from school), through cognitive activities (such as not applying themselves to or focusing on academic tasks), and through affective orientations and attitudes (such as ceasing to value or identify with school). Any one of these in isolation may not necessarily lead to dropout, but instead, it is the interplay among these factors that likely contributes to the success or failure of students' in school (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Janosz, 2012; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Voelkl, 2012). For instance, behaviors that keep students out of class

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