

EMPTY SEATS

Recent attendance numbers from Boston's Blackstone School, one of twelve so-called under-performing schools, are clearly very promising. Not surprisingly, a thoughtful faculty and staff recognize that when students fail to attend school on a regular basis they suffer academically as well as in the realms of psychological and cognitive development and social learning, all critical for normal growth. The lasting effects of student nonattendance, moreover, are found in families and communities.

The Blackstone, however, is hardly the only school struggling with the problem of absenteeism. On any given day in this country between 6% and 33% of students are absent from school. These students are likely to reside in unstable households headed by a single parent. Research indicates that they experience greater familial conflict, which accounts for lower levels of interaction with their parents or guardians. Moreover, as the Blackstone staff knows well, absent students may be ill, may be homeless, or have lost their transportation to school.

Generally speaking, students missing school are more likely to be males with low self-esteem and poor social skills. Typically, they associate with peers exhibiting anti-social behavior. They reveal higher rates of anxiety and depressive disorders, and disruptive behaviors that can be a result of anxiety and depression, disorders that researchers like Robert Friedberg argue can be found in as many as fifty percent of any student population. Frequently absent students are also more likely to have been victimized, if not outright traumatized. Not so incidentally, students enrolled in special education programs and those for whom English is their second language, show higher rates of school absenteeism than their peers. Furthermore, fifty percent of foster care alumni have failed to finish high school by the time they are twenty-two.

The profile of schools reporting high levels of absenteeism reveals larger class size, inaccurate attendance record keeping, and teachers who are perceived as controlling and rejecting. Schools describe the absent student as being more aggressive, but students describe themselves as

feeling unsafe. It should also be noted that schools with higher rates of absenteeism have more sanitary problems, such as inadequate air-flow, plumbing leaks, mold, and infestations of cockroaches and rodents. Finally, the parents of students who miss school are more likely to reveal mental health problems as well as relational problems in their families. They are, moreover, likely to be unemployed or underemployed.

Blackstone faculty and staff surely know well the one variable appearing to dominate most studies of absenteeism: children who miss school typically reside in poor communities. To begin, children in poverty are more likely to be held back in school. Specifically, 50% of boys and 40% of girls living in poverty where the head of the family dropped out of high school, lag behind in school by at least one year. Sadly, disadvantaged children, those most likely to benefit from the services provided in a good preschool remain the least likely to attend preschool. At the seventh grade level 14% of pre-schooled children, compared to 35% of children who did not attend preschool, had been retained or, interestingly, placed in special education.

In order to determine appropriate classroom placement, many schools employ one so-called school readiness test. Educational researchers argue that at best these tests ought to be used only as a guide, as in most cases other instruments need to be implemented to make a more accurate assessment of the child's readiness. Research suggests that current school readiness screenings result in one-third to one-half of all evaluated students being labeled as unready to progress, but in actuality, only about half of the children were identified correctly.

On a positive note, research confirms the notion that when school counselors intervene in the lives of students with high rates of absenteeism, the number of days of missed classes is significantly reduced. As a corollary of this finding, we note that consistent mentoring, almost irrespective of the form the mentoring may take, leads to the heightening of self-images in students, which supports school attendance. Conversely, unpredictability and inconsistency on the part of the mentor reduces a student's self-regard.

These important data are not easily summarized. It is, perhaps, too

simplistic to take them as confirmation of the old saw, it takes a village. . . . But what these research findings do tell us is that if it does take a village, the village better not be impoverished, otherwise, it may take an entire nation not only to educate children, but make certain that they come to school everyday, which is exactly what the Blackstone has worked so hard to achieve.

The authors of this paper are the members of a class entitled Children at Risk, and the People Who Serve Them, taught in the School of Education at Boston University.