



## Chronic Absenteeism in New Jersey Public Schools: A Statewide Survey of Superintendent Views

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### ABSTRACT

This study conducted the first statewide quantitative survey of New Jersey superintendents' perspectives on chronic absenteeism. The survey offered a comprehensive cross-sectional analysis of school leaders' attitudes toward chronic absenteeism, addressing several key constructs: (1) the role of equity in decision-making related to chronic absenteeism, (2) expressions of accountability in confronting the issue, (3) strategies for prioritizing student needs and allocating resources to improve attendance, and (4) perceptions of chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school quality or student success. Unlike previous research, which has examined topics such as leadership, best practices, school climate, and reform, this study specifically quantified superintendent perceptions of both chronic absenteeism and the related metric of chronic absence at the statewide level. The paper also discusses the survey's broader applications and implications for future research.

**Keywords** chronic absenteeism, chronic absence, superintendent survey, equity, accountability

### Introduction

Chronic absenteeism represents a significant educational crisis that has garnered widespread attention over the past several decades, from practitioners and researchers across the United States and in communities worldwide. Broadly defined as the accumulation of missed instructional time, chronic absenteeism has played a significant role in both federal and state policies, seeking to capitalize on the benefits of data-driven solutions. Researchers and policymakers have developed the associated metric of chronic absence to better track the attendance profiles of individual students and schools by enlisting disaggregated student data and eschewing a one-size-fits-all approach, while tailoring interventions and supports to specific school, student, family, and community needs.

This study first considers findings on the detrimental short- and long-term impacts of student absence. Next, definitions of chronic absenteeism and its related metric, chronic absence, are provided in light of recent federal and state laws and policies, as well as ongoing practices and discussions. Gaps in the literature regarding school leader perspectives on chronic absenteeism are then identified, along with the constructs and other variables explored and described in this quantitative study. This brief review of the literature provides a rationale for the survey design, which is described in detail, followed by a presentation of the data collection, analysis, and results. Finally, significant findings on the measured constructs indicate fruitful areas of study for school leaders seeking to provide equitable solutions for increased student attendance, while holding all impacted stakeholders accountable.

### Chronic Absenteeism and the Chronic Absence Metric

Chronic absenteeism, in terms of student attendance, is the accumulation of enough absences to harm instructional time. Missed instructional time broadly includes excused and unexcused absences, whether full or partial days, such as half-days, early dismissals, lateness, class cuts, and suspensions (Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates Center, 2016).

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) was a significant piece of legislation for chronic absenteeism that brought about important policy discussions in replacing No Child Left Behind through the reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ESSA has required all U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico to adopt a fifth non-academic indicator of School Quality or Student Success (SQSS); the accompanying policy discussions led the majority of U.S. states, including New Jersey, to adopt chronic absenteeism as their fifth SQSS indicator (Kostyo et al., 2018; Schanzenbach et al., 2016; New Jersey Department of Education [NJDOE], 2019b). Moreover, ESSA required for the first time that states report chronic absenteeism rates, while providing federal funding for related professional development to school staff on improving attendance. While most U.S. states have not established a legal threshold for chronic absenteeism rates, in policy and practice, the majority deem a student *chronically absent* when they miss 10% or more days of school annually, excused or unexcused, or both. For most



states, this percentage amounts to 18 days out of the school year, whereas some states may set the threshold a bit higher or lower, depending upon their unique requirements (Conry & Richards, 2018).

Researchers and policymakers use the metric of chronic absence to monitor student and school attendance (Bauer, Liu, et al., 2018; Chang et al., 2018; Gottfried, 2014; Schanzenbach et al., 2016). This metric shows patterns of absence, lateness, and early departures over time in individuals and groups. By mapping these patterns, chronic absence reveals attendance challenges in real time and context. The metric helps diagnose and address attendance problems by uncovering root causes. Schools can then create personalized solutions for students, families, and communities (Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates Center, 2016; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Wells, 1990).

### **An “Old Problem in Search of New Answers”**

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, and especially over the last several decades, U.S. research on student absenteeism has shown the implications of poor attendance to be utterly devastating (DePaoli et al., 2018; Jacob & Lovett, 2017). This growing body of work points to associations of absenteeism with stunted academic growth and delinquency in young children, as well as dismal career prospects and deteriorated mental and physical health for many high school and college dropouts. Other bleak outcomes include sustained poverty, drug addiction, and gang involvement, often leading to a life of crime along the infamous school-to-prison pipeline (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Kostyo et al., 2018; Mallett, 2016). Needless to say, unemployment, incarceration, and dependency on government programs resulting from incomplete schooling all take a considerable toll on the taxpaying community.

The negative relationship between absenteeism and whole-child education is well-documented. A 2018 analysis of data from nearly 1,200 participants in the Chicago Longitudinal Study found that chronic absenteeism, specifically in the early middle grades, reduced the probability of 4-year graduation by 18 percentage points, graduation at the age of 21 by 17 points, and high school completion at age 21 by 11 points (Smerillo et al., 2018). Poor attendance in kindergarten has been associated with lower reading and math achievement in successive grades, while there has also been a demonstrated link between absenteeism and adverse effects on socioemotional development (Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2010, 2014; Romero & Lee, 2007; Stempel et al., 2017). Such studies, which represent just a few of the many examples, have led U.S. researchers specializing in attendance to call special attention to chronic absenteeism in particular, and to school absenteeism in general, by coining the fitting description: “an old problem in search of new answers” (Jacob & Lovett, 2017; Lara et al., 2018, pp. 1, 6).

### **A Gap in the Literature: The Need for School Leader Perspectives**

There is a paucity of research that examines superintendents’ knowledge of chronic absenteeism: two doctoral dissertations identifying superintendent knowledge of best practices in which suggest developing and applying a best practices framework (Aaron et al., 2012; Hertzog et al., 2014), and a survey of Indiana superintendents about the prevalence and reach of court truancy programs serving their districts (Lochmiller, 2013). Beyond superintendents’ knowledge of best practices and court truancy programs, the present study makes an original contribution to pre-existing literature in two significant ways: (1) it provides a quantitative snapshot of a representative statewide sample at a momentous time in education history—the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, when standard attendance practices resumed during COVID-19; and (2) a survey of school leaders’ actual perspectives on chronic absenteeism and chronic absence, as measured by relevant constructs in research and practice. While the present study similarly used both a statewide sample and an original survey design, with district-level leaders throughout New Jersey as participants, it additionally utilized statistical methods to measure the salient constructs in order to yield an instrument for future theoretical and practical work. Other studies related to this topic have compared student, staff, and truancy administrator perspectives with smaller samples (Desulme, 2019; Foy, 2018; Grant, 2016; Perkins, 2013; Sullivan, 2018; Valencia, 2018).

The goal of this study, therefore, aimed to survey the perceptions of superintendents, who are among the most visible figures in education, regarding chronic absenteeism within their districts. Through their delegation of roles and responsibilities to building leaders and their staff, the superintendents of public school districts in the United States are held accountable for chronic absenteeism, and—even when not directly involved in specific problems and solutions—can reasonably be expected to maintain views on the issue that relate in some way to the policies and practices of their schools, regardless of the extent, cohesion, and clarity of these policies and practices.

### **Why New Jersey for a Statewide Survey**

New Jersey is among the first states, with the passage of the 2018 Ruiz-Corrado bill in the state legislature, to require a corrective action plan that identifies barriers to attendance, reviews policies, and solicits input from parents. This action plan applies to districts where 10% or more of the student body is chronically absent, as defined by the Commissioner of Education, which presently amounts to 18 or more days of the school year; moreover, all districts, whether they have an action plan in place or not, must annually report school wide rates of absenteeism as well as disciplinary suspension (S. 1876, 2018). School leaders in New Jersey could reasonably be expected to maintain informed views on student attendance, as well as on the multitude of factors underlying participation in school and affecting diverse stakeholders, including parents/families.



On a national level, Chang and colleagues (2018) analyzed and compared the 2013–2014 and 2015–2016 Civil Rights Data Collection from the Department of Education, specifically mapping rates of student absences in school districts across the country. The first major takeaway was that, in every state, schools reported significant levels of chronic absenteeism (10% or more), and at least 1 in 10 students was chronically absent in 59% of schools nationwide. At the same time, more than half of all chronically absent students in the United States were concentrated in less than a quarter of the nation's schools (Chang et al., 2018).

With regard to New Jersey, extreme levels of absenteeism are concentrated in certain districts, while chronic absenteeism continues to be disproportionately represented among racial and ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged, and special needs students (Chen & Rice, 2017b; NJDOE, 2017, 2018, 2019a). In comparing these findings to those of the Department of Education gleaned from the aforementioned Civil Rights Data Collection, it becomes immediately clear that both of these New Jersey trends reflect national patterns. In light of these trends, school leaders in the Garden State who are committed to meeting all standards of public education have the incentive, now more than ever, to ensure that every day counts for each one of their students.

## **Materials and Methods**

The purpose of this study was to describe chronic absenteeism as understood from the point of view of public school superintendents and their attendance teams. The study further sought to recognize the needs that school officials identified and the resources and strategies they prioritized to address the problem. In order to meet this goal, this original survey design provided a useful snapshot of school leader perspectives on the nationwide attendance crisis and on the utility of the chronic absence metric.

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional exploratory survey to explore and describe the views of school leaders (i.e., superintendents and charter school directors) on chronic absenteeism in New Jersey public schools. Individuals were eligible for participation if they were a superintendent or charter school director in the state of New Jersey, so that a wide range of views could be captured. The development of the survey used in this study was informed by an extensive review of pre-existing literature related to attitudes towards chronic absenteeism. The survey was an online self-administered questionnaire that implemented the Qualtrics platform.

## **Framework of this Research**

The original survey developed for this study aimed to answer four central research questions:

- (1) How do superintendents and school leaders perceive the importance of equity in their decisions related to chronic absenteeism?
- (2) To what extent do superintendents and school leaders express accountability in addressing chronic absenteeism?
- (3) How do superintendents and school leaders assess and prioritize needs and resources for increasing student attendance?
- (4) How do superintendents and school leaders perceive rates of chronic absenteeism as an indicator of SQSS?

These questions have taken into account the utility of a common framework that has stood the test of time. This fourfold framework of (1) school, (2) student, (3) family, and (4) community is vital as each of these stakeholders presents both needs and opportunities for improved school attendance (NCSE, n.d.; see also Wells, 1990). This framework has emerged from the growing body of research on the root causes and contributing factors driving poor attendance. Likewise, the framework has remained integral to the purpose and methodology of this present study. The four stakeholders—that is, school, student, family, and community—all play pivotal roles in the fundamental, day-to-day educational activities of children, adolescents, and young adults, including their school attendance. Framing the stakeholders in such an intuitive, practical way helps to organize the complexity of student absentee behavior around the focus areas and the desired outcomes belonging to each of the key players in a school system; however, in the United States, the conceptual framework itself, while pervasive in the chronic absenteeism literature over the past three decades, has never been applied on a statewide or regional scale to understanding commonalities in perceptions and in approaches to combating chronic absenteeism, as these views and practices continue to unfold in the education community.

## **Survey Constructs**

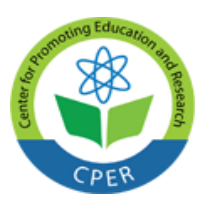
The survey was purposefully designed with an exploratory and descriptive capacity in mind in considering a range of constructs. The four specific constructs measured by the survey are the following: (1) equity, (2) accountability, (3) perceived needs and resources of stakeholders, and (4) attitudes toward chronic absenteeism as an SQSS indicator. Robust reliability and validity measures met high standards for small-sample exploratory factor analysis, retaining the best survey items for testing differences among these absenteeism-related constructs, well supported by the literature.

The survey measures included:

1. Equity (6 items)
2. Accountability (5 items)
3. Needs and Resources (7 items)
4. Attitudes/SQSS (4 items)

## **Demographics**

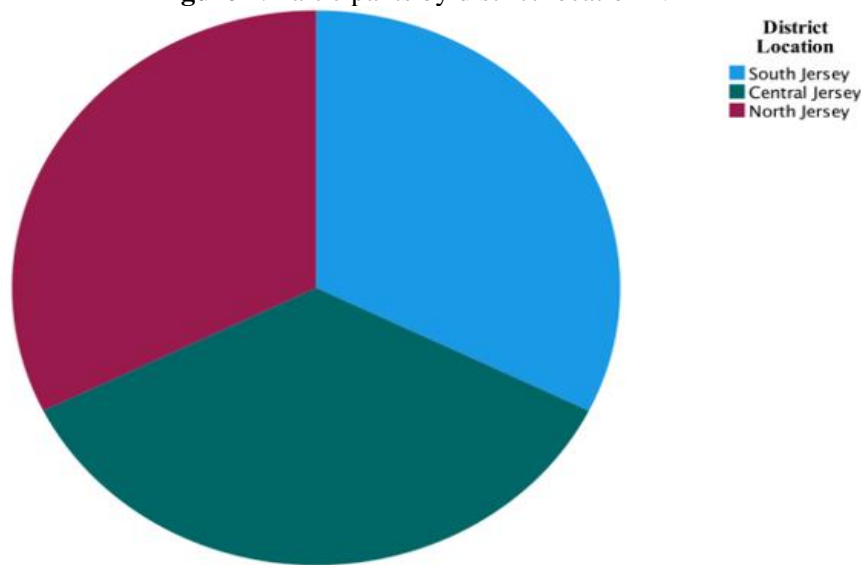
Purposeful, nonprobability sampling was used in this study as a means to collect a homogenous sample of school superintendents and district leaders. A total of 42 complete responses were retained for analysis of these constructs. Significant



findings linked different groups with varying levels of support for equity-related solutions in addressing chronic absenteeism to all other constructs. As a secondary input construct, attitudes toward chronic absenteeism also demonstrated significant differences among groups on scores for specific items under the construct of perceived needs and resources.

While the regions of South, Central, and North Jersey do not have municipally defined boundaries—which may also be subject to cultural debate—when Central Jersey is given a conservative definition, then the demographic distribution of participant districts is fairly even (see Figure 1). The districts of 12 participants were located in South Jersey (Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Gloucester, and Ocean counties), 16 participants in Central Jersey (Hunterdon, Mercer, Middlesex, and Monmouth counties), and 14 participants in North Jersey (Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Morris, Passaic, Sussex, and Union counties).

**Figure 1.** Participants by district location N = 42



## Instrument

The main instrument used in this study was an online self-administered questionnaire (SAQ) in the form of a quantitative survey consisting of closed-scale and ranking questions—intentionally designed as vehicles for broad description and some statistical inferences. These questions were created by the author for the purpose of providing an accessible summary of the views, needs, resources, and even attitudes of superintendents and their attendance teams involving chronic absenteeism in districts and schools across New Jersey. The instrument design also allowed for the testing of real statistical differences between samples by applying the four constructs, operationalizing the variables, and carefully ranking them throughout the survey.

While other past surveys and interviews of superintendents have focused on such areas as leadership, best practices, school climate, and reform, the goal of this study was to get at the heart of perceptions on both chronic absenteeism and its related attendance metric, chronic absence, on a statewide scale. As previously mentioned, chronic absence has become an increasingly well-defined and yet fluid measure, still open to fruitful discussion; and since 2015, it has remained the leading non-academic indicator of SQSS across the United States (Attendance Institute & University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014; Chang et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Inasmuch as chronic absenteeism rates must be reported by every public school in the nation, there has never been a non-academic metric as far-reaching as chronic absence, not even the alarming national dropout rates, which focused more on middle school and high school grade levels.

## Data Analysis

With the aim of drawing clear conclusions, the analysis used the best approaches to the particular data gathered from this survey instrument and sampling design, following a well-defined scale data analysis process. In order to prepare for visualization and analysis, all raw data were edited for the detection of duplicate submissions and coded for incomplete responses to one or more questions, which were excluded using case analysis (listwise deletion). After preliminary editing, correlation tables were subsequently condensed from correlation matrices to map inter-item reliability, EFA was conducted in FACTOR to assess construct validity, and consistency checks were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics (SPSS, Version 28) to calculate Cronbach's Alpha for instrument reliability.

Next, the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests, both common nonparametric tests used respectively for two and multiple groups, were enlisted in this study to run the data analysis in SPSS to see if any statistically significant differences between groups were identified. One important advantage of these tests is that they avoid two parametric assumptions: normal distribution and a large sample size. Indeed, nonparametric tests were ideal for this study, given that the ordinal scale data provided by the survey were likely to be heavily skewed, while the nonprobability sampling method adopted here involved a small, purposive





sample, describing the views of a relatively homogeneous group: New Jersey superintendents, school leaders, and their attendance staff (Bertram, 2007; Sandelowski, 2000).

While nonprobability is generally considered more suitable for qualitative studies—where theory emerges from in-depth sampling—than for quantitative studies—where generalizations are described and inferred from statistical analysis of often large, randomized (probability) sampling, smaller and non-randomized purposive sampling can also be acceptable for quantitative analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Purposive sampling more readily lends itself to quantitative study when the sampling design proves to be strongly supported by both research and practice, as in this study, where it was reasonable to show that some cautious generalizations could—and should—be extrapolated from school leader views on chronic absenteeism, based upon expert knowledge of the sampling frame and of the measured constructs. In this way, a quantitative analysis surveying New Jersey superintendents, charter school directors, and their attendance staff has shown considerable potential in laying the groundwork for future studies regarding the views on chronic absenteeism held by leaders of schools with both similar demographics and chronic absenteeism rates in New Jersey, as well as in other states and regions. This has been no small matter, as conservative users of the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests may more likely contend that these both necessarily assume a statistically randomized sample; however, it was acknowledged here that these specific applications would also work for the appropriate purposive sample and that randomization was not a necessary assumption.

## Results

The findings of this study provide evidence that there are significant differences when examining the post-hoc pairwise comparisons amongst the groups of responses.

Regarding research question one, groups of participants with varying responses to equity-based questions indicated statistically significant differences on ordinal items measuring expressions of accountability. Both Kruskal-Wallis *H* tests and post hoc Dunn-Bonferroni multiple comparisons revealed significant differences between groups in the equity construct who held the view that state-required district CEPs *should* ( $N = 21$ ) and *should definitely* ( $N = 12$ ) include a multi-tiered approach to address chronic absenteeism. Significant differences were also found among groups who outlined multi-tiered approaches—in either the district attendance policy or practice manual to a *small* extent ( $N = 10$ ) and to a *considerable* extent ( $N = 8$ ). These differences were for scores on the accountability item (Question 4): “How clear are the attendance protocols in your district for personalized, early, and ongoing outreach to families when students are absent?” The smaller groups, more supportive of equity-driven measures to reduce chronic absenteeism, expressed a greater degree of accountability on this item.

Research questions one and three focused on determining whether these same groups that supported equity-driven measures to varying extents would also show differences in perceived needs and resource items. There were significant group differences on the perceived needs item School Environment (climate, culture, safety, services, and facilities), but not between any specific groups, as revealed by pairwise comparisons. Notably, the group that most supported CEPs, including multi-tiered strategies to confront chronic absenteeism, scored lower on ranking the importance of School Environment relative to other school-specific factors underlying lack of student participation in school. When it came to interpreting the ranking items under the perceived needs and resources construct, there was no definitive way to ascertain whether participants were ranking an item as particularly less important or simply other items as more important.

Notably, in the present study, the group most committed to including multi-tiered strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism in the district CEPs significantly ranked mobility and homelessness relatively more important as a perceived need with respect to other equity groups.

Another perceived needs area where a strong-support equity group scored significantly higher was Low-Skill Local Jobs. This item was ranked in degree of importance relative to other community-specific factors underlying the lack of student participation in school: unsafe areas, air quality index, lack of community-wide efforts, and local law and policy on attendance. Interestingly, the gap in scores on this item was between groups outlining multi-tiered strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism in the attendance policy or practice manual to a *considerable* extent (mean rank = 15.19) and to a *great* extent (mean rank = 33.50). At the minimum, from this surprising find, it can be surmised that the great extent group ( $N = 4$ ), having scored much higher on this item, perceived the local community as having a significant impact on education in connection with career prospects, with perhaps an even sharper eye toward student views of other, more immediate possibilities for financial gain as opportunities that compete with high school completion. Again, the strong equity groups scored higher on perceived needs items affecting traditionally underrepresented student groups.

Additionally, under the research question four results, several groups within the equity construct showed significant differences in scores on the following perceived resources item: Communication of Goals and Expectations to Students, Families, and Community. Post hoc pairwise comparisons on Equity 2 did not reveal significant differences between any two groups in particular; however, groups that increasingly supported incentives and rewards as equitable solutions to poor attendance scored increasingly lower on this item. This seemingly counterintuitive result may be explained by the fact that the strength of this specific item was taken for granted by the stronger equity groups amid a range of other possible district resources and strengths available for



ranking in this survey question: incentives, celebrations, and awards for good attendance; data usage and reporting; early outreach: home visits, action plans, and attendance counselors, mentors, and peers; connecting students and caregivers to resources, service, and expertise; and making truancy referrals to local court systems as needed.

A similar inference may be made for Equity 3 groups, where post hoc comparisons revealed that groups outlining multi-tiered strategies to a *small* extent scored significantly higher on Communication than groups outlining such strategies to a *considerable* extent; this latter group may have simply decided to highlight other district resources and strengths instead. In fact, as noted above under research question four results, participants who ranked ADA as of middle importance (with many of these same participants ranking chronic absence as most important) had higher scores on another perceived resource item: Connecting Students and Caregivers to Resources, Services, and Expertise.

Research question four also tested perceived needs and resources items, using the input construct groups differing in their attitudes toward chronic absenteeism as an SQSS indicator. One notable highlight, consistent with the other findings in this study, was that the group that ranked chronic absence as *most important* relative to other attendance metrics (i.e., ADA and truancy) also scored significantly higher on the following perceived needs item: Mobility and Homelessness. Rather than just representing an isolated problem in a pocket of New Jersey communities where participants happened to be working as superintendents and charter school directors at the time of survey completion, mobility and homelessness was most likely ranked higher by these respondents for a valid reason: participants that value the ability of chronic absence to measure barriers to attendance that other metrics have failed to identify are more likely themselves to identify relatively more hidden barriers to attendance, such as students lacking a stable home placement. This problem is probably underreported by many public schools in a number of states across the United States, including New Jersey (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Lastly, research question two's results revealed some notable pairwise comparisons. There were significant differences between the following groups on scores ranking the relative importance of chronic absence: between groups outlining multi-tiered strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism in the attendance policy or practice manual to a *moderate* extent (mean rank = 22.56) and to a *considerable* extent (mean rank = 9.38) and between groups outlining such strategies to a *considerable* extent (mean rank = 9.38) and to a *great* extent (mean rank = 31.00).

Furthermore, a wide gap in attitudes toward chronic absence between the *considerable* extent equity group and the *great* extent equity group was noted. This notable disparity was best explained by the *considerable* extent group having the tendency to give chronic absence the least importance and ADA the greatest importance when ranking attendance metrics. From this observation, another inference could be reasonably made that there was some level of tension between chronic absence and ADA as contenders for the top tier, with truancy lying in the middle-to-lower ranks. It was reassuring to find that chronic absence won the number one spot overall among the 42 complete cases retained for analysis in this study.

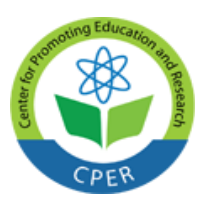
The main construct of equity demonstrated statistically significant differences among groups on all other construct scores, including scores for accountability, perceived needs and resources, and attitudes toward chronic absenteeism as an SQSS indicator. Some of the most striking findings have been the item scores by groups in stronger support of equity measures, especially on more hidden family-specific and community-specific factors underlying lack of student participation in school, including student mobility and homelessness, as well as low-skill local job opportunities that compete with secondary and higher education completion. School leaders overall continued to hold parents most accountable for student attendance, and Parents as an accountability item strongly correlated with other items under the accountability and equity constructs.

## Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the chronic absenteeism literature by measuring four specific and salient constructs related to the views superintendents can be expected to have on the issue: (1) equity, (2) accountability, (3) needs and resources deemed most important among stakeholders, and (4) attitudes toward chronic absenteeism as the state-adopted non-academic school quality or student success (SQSS) indicator.

It is quite possible, as the literature would suggest, that school leaders with an above-average commitment to promoting equity with chronic absenteeism measures have already focused on making the school district environment inclusive and safe, and so would likewise emphasize other items available for ranking in this question, such as school access, teacher-student rapport, and boredom with subjects. Similar inferences can be made from this same equity group regarding the perceived needs item Family Income, on which this group scored significantly lower on the post hoc tests compared with the less equally supportive group. In fact, while the group should definitely include scored significantly lower on Family Income as a perceived needs item, this same equity group scored significantly higher on another family-specific factor underlying lack of student participation in school, that is, Mobility and Homelessness. This finding is consistent with the chronic absenteeism literature, especially with equity-driven studies focused on identifying and removing barriers to attendance.

A review of the literature connecting school absenteeism and student mobility found mixed empirical evidence that suggested a significant correlation and also a small mediating role played by absenteeism between student mobility and student outcomes (Welsh, 2018; Mississippi Kids Count, 2017; Rumberger, 2003). Ross (2016) used hierarchical regression modeling to



analyze the first available mobility data for students attending 316 comprehensive New Jersey public high schools during the 2010 – 2011 academic year; the quantitative analysis revealed a significant impact of the student mobility rate on the graduation rate. The surge of available data resulting largely from the technological revolution in education has made this old problem of chronic absenteeism more identifiable and therefore more amenable to innovative solutions. The data matters, and how they are modeled matters: this has become an overarching theme unifying the various contributions from cross-disciplinary specialists and practitioners raising valid questions about what school attendance is designed to measure, how finely grained it should reasonably be in everyday practice, and the policies and protocols by which attendance data are maintained, reviewed, interpreted, reported, and presented. Above all, it is most evident that early warning systems need to be more tailored to student groups and grade-level needs, identifying different bands of absence. This tailoring, as a rigorous proactive measure, will require additional investment of technology, human capital, or both, to address chronic absenteeism as early as possible; however, in recognizing that school absenteeism is a systemic problem, community stakeholders must manage expectations about what may be feasible in a given timeframe.

Stronger support for equity was statistically tied not only to accountability, specific needs, and resources, but also to the perceived greater importance of chronic absence relative to other attendance metrics, like truancy and ADA, which have not gone far enough to improve attendance. Moreover, school leaders most receptive to this metric had statistically higher scores on key underlying items pertaining to needs and resources, and often hidden in plain view, such as mobility, homelessness, and connecting students and caregivers to resources, services, and expertise. In light of these conclusions, it is absolutely vital for best practice and future research that the input of school leaders on school attendance is integrated with the input of other key stakeholders among schools, students, families, and communities, and that the relevant data are shared and reported in a manner that is transparent, inclusive, reasonable, useful, and reliable. These are just small steps in the right direction toward actually using chronic absenteeism and chronic absence data to improve outcomes for all students, making each and every school day count.

## Limitations

The data were derived from a relatively small sample of professionals and from a well-designed survey that nonetheless has not been previously piloted. These two limitations required that only cautious generalizations be made about the participants in regard to perspectives held by New Jersey school leaders. Tests were only able to indicate the level of internal reliability and construct validity, as well as differential validity regarding the similarities and differences in the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to chronic absenteeism with respect to school leaders in this particular public education system.

The state of New Jersey encompassed the geographic delimitation of this study. Its population is overly represented in suburban school districts in comparison to other states, as New Jersey has ranked as the state with the highest suburban student population percentage (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). A related limitation concerns the fact that this study only described and tested constructs. Indeed, the constructs themselves derived logical validity, reliability, and bias-free reporting from the operationalization of variables via a broad, meticulous synthesis of the current chronic absenteeism research, taking into account significant past work and charting the pertinent trends in the field (Attendance Works, 2021; Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates Center, 2016, 2021; Brundage, 2018; Chang et al., 2018; Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018; Huck, 2011; Hutt, 2018; Kneale et al., 2015; Maynard et al., 2013). However, the otherwise thoughtful design did not protect against common sources of survey error, including nonresponse bias; nor was the instrument used in combination with other sources of data, whereby triangulation would have further strengthened the study. For example, no preexisting data were used to test for correlations as to the relationship between school leader views on chronic absenteeism and district and school demographics. Due to such limitations and delimitations, only the broad outlines of cautious generalizations about chronic absenteeism constructs were drawn.

## Implications and Future Work

The original survey design used in this study has offered promising results for researchers and practitioners who may be interested in school leader perspectives on chronic absenteeism and in designing instruments to measure constructs relevant to the most pressing issues under discussion in education. Not all constructs were of equal size in this study; however, all constructs proved integral to understanding the input of superintendents and charter school directors on a statewide, national, and global school attendance problem.

One interesting implication for future study is the high level of caution that is necessary in crafting equity-related questions on any given issue in education. Along with chronic absenteeism and accountability, equity has become a buzzword, as well as a politically charged notion, in the United States. While this study was successful in exploring some genuine equity questions gleaned from the data, other questions were excluded. With minor revisions, there were core items under each construct that could lead to other quantitative and qualitative survey-type instruments that could focus individually or collectively on equity, accountability, perceived needs and resources, and attitudes toward chronic absenteeism as a key indicator. While the most difficult to analyze, the perceived needs and resources questions and items proved to be the most robust and revealing when explored and described in relation to the other constructs. Given the results, several quality questions added to the remaining constructs would streamline this survey into a rather formidable instrument that may be further adapted to other regional and local contexts. There are already





excellent tools being developed to collect reasons-for-absence data from both students and families, as well as logic models, assessment, and evaluation tools to better determine the effectiveness of services, programs, and interventions, so this survey was designed to encourage the development of a reliable and high-quality instrument for school leaders' input on chronic absenteeism. Lastly, this survey in its present form, or adapted, can be used to collect data in New Jersey and demographically similar regions to gain the perspectives of school leaders in other roles, such as principals, vice principals, attendance officers, school nurses, school counselors, mentors, attendance committee members, local law enforcement, specialists of the community courts, etc. Other possibilities hinge on whether to collect any level of personally identifiable information, such as school type and location, participant title or role, and further demographic information, to increase the level of research on the constructs in this study in connection with distinct key variables.

## Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism has been strongly linked to poor educational outcomes impacting students in the earliest grade levels and well into adulthood; it is a severe nationwide and global problem that disproportionately affects socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, students of color, and ELL in s, but it is an issue that remains pervasive and can be found in all types of schools and communities. The associated metric of chronic absence has proved to be an indicator of future academic achievement and socioemotional development, as powerful as the high school graduation rate and applicable to all grade levels as early as preschool, and correlated with sentinel measures, most notably the third-grade reading level, as well as with the well-known struggles experienced in the transitional grades.

Given that chronic absence is now a commonly used metric in the United States for policy making and for action-based research in strategic planning on improving SQSS, more research and focus are needed on this subject related to school leadership. In particular, specific attention is necessary to provide better educational services for underrepresented and disadvantaged student groups. Similarly, equity and accountability remain an important descriptive area of this present study, as both of these objectives provide a significant rationale for ESSA when it was enacted and for continued research in education.

The perceptions, attitudes, and behavior of school leaders in addressing chronic absenteeism may often impact, and be impacted by, other variables beyond equity and accountability. The backdrop of trends and discussions around the definition of chronic absence as a metric, issues of attendance coding and data modeling, types of multi-tiered interventions, school infrastructure, resource mobilization, and interdisciplinary approaches to whole-child learning were all brought to bear on the formulation of survey questions for each construct.

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