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Measuring Missed School: The Historical Precedents for the Measurement and use of Attendance Records to Evaluate Schools

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At the very end of his *First Annual Report of the Massachusetts Board of Education* in 1838, Horace Mann (1838) complained of the inability of the state to collect even basic “information respecting the number of scholars attending the public schools, and the regularity of that attendance” (p.69). It was not just the lack of school attendance information that concerned Mann, but also the state’s relative lack of interest in the issue. “While the State, in the administration of its military functions,” Mann observed, “establishes a separate department, fills the statute-books with pages of minute regulations and formidable penalties...so that the fact of every missing gun-flint and priming wire may be detected, transmitted, and recorded among its archives, it prescribes no means of ascertaining how many of its children are deserters from what should be the nurseries of intelligence and morality” (Mann, 1838, p. 69). With these sentiments, Mann expressed some of the earliest official interest in more systematic administrative effort and record keeping practices—practices that would, later in the Progressive Era, be referred to as the “school census” and “child accounting”.

In Mann’s era schooling was largely decentralized, informal, and intermittent. But as school systems developed and enrollments and expenditures increased, possessing reasonably accurate accounts of how many children—and later, which children—were attending public (and private) schools became *the* foundational school system statistic. School attendance records became integral to, among other things, the disbursement of state school funds, the enforcement of compulsory school laws, and the evaluation of school system effectiveness and efficiency.

Now, nearly two centuries later, the latitude provided to states by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to develop alternative measures of school quality has led to renewed interest in student attendance measures. The basic appeal of tracking attendance—or rather non-attendance, “chronic absenteeism” in current parlance—is as clear now as it was in the era of the common school and for precisely the same reasons. Since the early twentieth century Americans have used schools—and compulsory school laws—as the primary mechanism for delivering a wide range of social services and for monitoring and securing the basic welfare of the child (e.g. Grubb & Lazerson 1982; Hutt, 2012; Katz, 1986; Katznelson & Weir, 1988; Cohen, 2005; Steffes, 2012). Then as now, non-attendance meant not only that the student missed out on the opportunity to learn (e.g. Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017) but also missed the opportunity to receive access to the considerable and multi-faceted non-academic resources that flow through and stem from school such as access to food and medical care.

In a field inundated with policy solutions and metrics that are sometimes too clever by half, the return to something as seemingly straight-forward and “commonsense” as attendance is laudable. But straight-forward is not the same as uncomplicated. Though history cannot provide “lessons” in a strict sense—history never repeats itself exactly and our modern school systems have changed since the early 20th century in fundamental ways as have our views of children and childhood development—there is value in considering some of the hard earned knowledge of the past. Even if it cannot tell policymakers how to act in the present, history can raise important questions and point to potential challenges that likely lie ahead.

In particular I would like to highlight a recurrent issue related to the historical measurement and use of attendance data: The challenge of producing uniform and reliable records on school attendance. While almost all 19th century school administrators agreed that attendance information was important, efforts to secure accurate information was repeatedly undermined by the cross-cutting incentives embedded in the system. For instance, in the mid-19th century when all records were aggregate accounts, many had an interest in reporting high total numbers: school census takers—those charged with identifying all the children of school age within a particular area—were often paid per name of school aged child they recorded; school administrators whose funding was often tied to student enrollments; and states legislatures (and citizens) whose claims to modernity and progress were tied up in pointing to growing student enrollments (e.g. Hartwell, 1915; Neystrom, 1910).

When the era of voluntary schooling gave way to compulsory schooling in the latter half of the 19th and early 20th century, the calculus and incentives shifted somewhat. Now school officials were not only concerned with total enrolled pupils or number of total days of student attendance (there were still incentives to keep these high) but also the average daily attendance of pupils enrolled. Given the high fixed costs of schooling (concern about class size was generally low), the emphasis on compulsory school law enforcement, and the relative ease of calculation (i.e. it did not require tracking individual students), average daily attendance was seen as a reasonable measure of school system efficiency and quality (e.g. Ayres, 1913; Thorndike, 1907). In fact, according to a 1924 survey of school district record keeping, “it is difficult to find many cities where anything but *average* attendance is kept” (Moehlman, 1924, p. 34) as the ability to collect and retain individual student level records had not yet become widespread (Hutt, 2016). Publishing league tables based on average daily attendance as a means of doling out praise and censure became a common feature of local, state, and even national school reports and publications (e.g. Deffenbaugh, 1914; Heck, 1925; Moehlman, 1924).

The emphasis on this measure created incentives for districts to calculate the constituent parts of that measure—total number of students enrolled, total days of attendance—in the most flattering way possible. One major source of contention was how to count students who were absent for extended periods of time. Given that the teacher had no way of knowing if the child had transferred to a different school, left town, taken up employment, or simply been kept at home to assist his or her family, it seemed unfair to continue to count those absences against the school enrollment numbers. Thus, when to drop student names from the rolls and whether; how many absences should count prior to the name being dropped from the attendance rolls; and whether to recount absences if the child ever returned, produced considerable debate around data collection and measurement and, therefore, very limited uniformity across states or even districts. For instance, some districts did not count student absences if the school was informed of the absence in advance—allowing them to claim near perfect daily attendance. In another, admittedly extreme case, a district managed to boast record high attendance rates in the midst of a Spanish Flu epidemic by dutifully dropping the names of students absent more than three days—only to return their names to the rolls when the outbreak left and the students returned (Moehlman, 1924, p. 76).

Teachers, the key actor in all attendance keeping systems, recognized the significance of attendance metrics and sometimes took matters into their own hands. Evidence from historical legal records indicates that teachers sometimes pleaded guilty to falsifying attendance records to secure more money for the school or, in one case, falsified attendance records to keep average daily attendance above the threshold necessary to qualify for a teacher’s assistant (e.g. *Mississippi v Mortimer*, 1903; *Thompson v. State*, 1904). These practices led not only to repeated calls for the creation of standardized record forms and greater uniformity in record keeping, and more state oversight (e.g. Philbrick, 1885; National Education Association, 1912) but also to efforts by researchers to calculate adjusted attendance rates to allow for greater comparisons among cities (Ayres, 1913; Neystrom, 1910; Thorndike, 1907).

Of course parents and students had their own incentives to complicate school record keeping effort and to utilize these rules for their own benefit. Far from being ignorant of school laws, families engaged in behavior that reflected a keen understanding of district rules and enforcement capacity. Students often enrolled in multiple schools or transferred repeatedly between schools as a way of evading attendance officers. Students often took advantage of work permit exceptions in compulsory school laws to

leave school lawfully. With the student's name then removed from the school register, it became largely a question for the children's families whether to return to school. If there was ever a gap in employment, children uninterested in returning to school simply told inquiring truancy officers that they were not truant but rather in the process of looking for work (Sumner & Hanks, 1917; Clapp & Strong, 1928). Faced with overcrowding and a lack of resources to help the often newly arrived immigrant children with limited English skills, districts often regarded these practices with selective indifference if not active promotion (Sumner & Hanks 1917, p. 48–52). Parents were also aware of the administrative pressure placed on schools to maintain certain levels of average daily attendance and could use it to leverage political pressure. In one curious but nonetheless illuminating instance, families in a West Virginia town created a private school for the alleged purpose of depriving the local public school of sufficient average daily attendance in an effort to get the school board to close the school—a campaign apparently undertaken because a local family's daughter was passed over for a teaching position (West Virginia, 1917, p. 413).

These crosscutting incentives and multiple uses of attendance records meant that they were messy records often difficult to interpret or compare. Increasingly, though, they became the starting point for empirical inquiries into efforts to improve and reform schools. In one of the most famous of these inquiries, Leonard Ayres (1913) identified that there were many “over-aged” children in early school grades. While noting the very high number of such children (a quarter to a half, in his estimation), Ayres recognized that the likely cause was multifaceted and, contrary to many contemporary reports, had less to do with poor language skills, “innate dullness,” or delayed entry into schools than irregular attendance, which he considered to be “a large, if not the largest, factor” in preventing school advancement (p. 132). Districts that studied the causes of that irregular attendance, likewise, found that the reasons were complex and multifaceted, often having less to do with “truancy and incorrigibility” than health, family finances, or plain dislike of school (e.g. Abbott & Breckinridge, 1917, p. 148–164). Detroit, for instance, found health to be the leading cause of non-attendance and, setting aside average daily attendance as a metric of school efficiency, encouraged teachers to send sick students home rather than keeping them in class (Moehlman, 1924, p. 33–34). A 1918 teachers' manual, likewise, acknowledged the multi-causal problem of non-attendance, estimating that the responsibility was probably shared evenly between in-school and out-of-school factors but noting that, the school was “doubtless accountable for too large a portion” of truancy (Davis, 1918, p. 281).

An important upshot of this view of non-attendance was a level of circumspection among those charged with enforcing compulsory school laws about how best to secure attendance (Tyack & Berkowitz, 1977). This is not to say that district officials were at all in doubt about the superiority of children attending school over any other possible activity—labor, hanging around with friends—or the general importance of schooling as an intervention into family life. But they did recognize that increasing attendance should not be considered an end in itself. Indeed, one professor of school administration observed wryly that, when it came to securing increased attendance, “the employment of the policeman or the average truant officer tends to produce the same result as attempting to repair a delicately adjusted watch with a claw hammer” (Moehlman, 1924, p. 43). Likewise, the superintendent of Kalamazoo, cautioned that while truant officers have been bestowed with certain “police powers,” when it came to enforcement, “the fact to be kept constantly in mind [is] that better school attendance must, in the end, be secured by positive rather than negative means” (Hartwell, 1915, p. 52).

Though we have come a long way since of professional truancy officers and state and local attendance bureaus, as attendance metrics return to the forefront of school evaluation, we would do well to remember the contours of the issues briefly outlined here. While our capacity for record keeping and analysis has greatly expanded, the multiple and crosscutting incentives around those statistics have not. Nor has the basic organizational and logistical fact that attendance is recorded by the teacher at a very far distance from the potential district, state, and federal audiences for this information. Those states and districts that employ these metrics should assume that, as with all records that become—whether as a matter of law or public interest—evaluative metrics, they are prone to corruption either through outright fraud or, more likely, compliance in fact if not in spirit. Finally, we should be cautious about assuming that we fully understand the reasons for student non-attendance or that these reasons

are within the purview and power of individual teachers, schools, or even districts to solve. Failure to recognize this fact and how it might differentially affect individual schools and districts, threatens not only to ignore the long history of attendance enforcement but also perpetuate unrealistic expectations about what schools can accomplish in the present. While the basic logic of concerning ourselves with school attendance and non-attendance remains inescapable and the incorporation of these measures in state ESSA plans represents a positive development, it is worth remembering a bit of wisdom from a truancy officers' handbook, "THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR COMMON SENSE, TACT, AND PATIENCE in the application of any rules—the successful attendance officer will learn to exercise this slogan wisely" (Blackburn, 1946, p. 7).

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