

## Unexcused! School Attendance Policies and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

*Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure child welfare workers engage in best practices when working with children and families. The Minn-LInK Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful discussions about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.*

*In this issue, we were interested in understanding whether seemingly race-neutral attendance policies result in school staff disproportionately labeling the absences of minoritized students as unexcused, and whether racial and ethnic disproportionalities in unexcused absences lead to disproportionalities in petitions to juvenile court for truancy.*

### Discussion on Practice Implications

1. This study found that most of the districts in a representative sample of 97 public school districts excused absences for reasons White students typically miss school (e.g., illness, pre-arranged travel, and extracurricular activities) but not necessarily for reasons that are more common among racially minoritized students (e.g., not having transportation, family emergency, sibling care, and visiting an incarcerated parent). What are the policies defining excused and unexcused absences in your school district? Do they follow this pattern?
2. Compulsory education laws are based on the assumption that unexcused absences are willful. To what extent are each of the reasons listed for absenteeism in Figure 1 in the research brief willful or voluntary vs. unavoidable? If they are unavoidable for some students, what could schools and other community agencies do to decrease the number of unavoidable absences?
3. The study reported that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students were more likely than White students to be petitioned to court for truancy even when they missed the exact same number of days of school. The study makes the claim that this disparity is inequitable. Do you agree with that claim? Why or why not?
4. The study reported that Asian students, the majority of whom are Hmong American in this sample, were more likely than White students to have any given absence labeled unexcused. Thus, one might expect Asian students also be more likely to be petitioned to court. However, Asian students in this study were less likely than White students to be petitioned to juvenile court for truancy. What might explain that pattern of findings?

### Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

1. Currently, compulsory education laws require schools to distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. Look up the definition of excused and unexcused absences on the webpage of the school where you work or one of the schools you attended. The definitions of excused and unexcused absences are often found in the student handbook and/or the parent handbook. If you were put in charge of making the policies defining excused and unexcused absences more equitable, how might you change them for your school?
2. Several suggestions have been made to make the labeling of absences as excused or unexcused more equitable. Here are three suggestions.
  - Label absences as voluntary or involuntary (vs. excused and unexcused). Only discipline voluntary absences.
  - Allow each student five absences per year for any purpose. All subsequent absences are unexcused.
  - Grant the school principal or their representative full discretion in determining whether an absence is excused or unexcused.

How easy or difficult would it be to implement each these strategies? Would any these improve equity in truancy court petitions? Why or why not?