How Much Does 9th Grade Attendance Matter?

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As students develop and progress through their education, every year matters. However, research shows that success in 9th grade is especially important. Students that fall behind during this critical year are more likely to drop out than those that fall behind earlier or later.

To make matters worse, 9th grade is particularly challenging for several reasons. For most students the shift from 8th grade to 9th grade comes with transitions to a new school, to a new scheduling format, to new social dynamics, and to new academic expectations. In addition, this moment often coincides with an increase in autonomy, which brings increased opportunities to make poor decisions.

Together, these challenges raise barriers to a successful year. The problem gets worse, however, when students respond to these challenges by disengaging, and staying away from school. 9th graders with strong attendance are much more likely to succeed, but in the School District of Philadelphia, absences almost double from 8th grade to 9th grade.

Every Absence Matters

Missing just a few days can have a big impact, and this is true for students at every attendance level. In all cases, attending just a few more days is associated with a higher probability of graduating on time – and missing just a few days in 9th grade is related to lower graduation rates.

It is Never Too Late!

To maximize their potential, students must attend almost every day, all year long. However, changing attendance habits for the better makes a big difference. We looked at students that had poor fall semester attendance, missing at least one out of every five days. If those students continued to miss that much school, their graduation rate was only 21%. However, if those same students committed to excellent attendance, and missed only one or two days total during the second half of the year, then their graduation rate was 77%.
This bar chart shows just how much 9th grade attendance matters for graduation. The call out boxes give examples of how someone might be thinking about missing school – and how quickly it can add up to make a real difference for graduating on time.

"I was sick for a couple of days in the fall, but those are the only days I missed."

"Once or twice a month I take a day off, and I was sick a couple of times."

"Most weeks I take Friday off."

*All analyses and statistics conducted using administrative data for students that were first-time 9th graders in 2012-2013, were enrolled in SDP schools for at least 10 days during that year, and did not depart SDP for another district within 4 years (n=7,820).

**This pattern is also present in other school districts. See for example: https://toandthrough.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/UChiToThrough_IssueBrief_ATTENDANCE.pdf which inspired this focus brief.