

# School Absences Translate to Lower Test Scores

By Sarah D. Sparks

Missing even a few days of school seems to make a difference in whether 8th graders perform at the top of their game, according to a new analysis of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The report, the first of a planned **series of analyses** of NAEP's background-survey data, looks at how 4th and 8th graders use existing school time, including their attendance, instructional time, and homework. It was previewed here at a Nov. 29 meeting of the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for NAEP. The study found that instructional time in reading, math, music, and the visual arts is on the rise nationwide, and that teachers are expecting more homework from their middle school students. As schools ramp up their academic focus, however, the analysis shows the cost of missing school may be greater.

Fifty-six percent of 8th graders who performed at the advanced level in NAEP reading in 2011 had perfect attendance in the month before the test, compared with only 39 percent of students who performed below the basic level.

In comparison, nearly one in five 8th graders at the basic level and more than one in four below basic in reading had missed three or more days in the past month, according to Alan L. Ginsburg, a research consultant for the governing board and a co-author of the report with Naomi Chudowsky of Caldera Research in Bend, Ore.

"Three days, if you multiply that out by nine months, is five weeks a year," Mr. Ginsburg said. "You've got more than a quarter of the below-basic kids who are going to miss five weeks of school a year or more," he said, noting that only 8 percent of students at the advanced level had missed that much school. "That, to me, would be something that if you are a chief state school officer or a superintendent, you might worry about."

The analysis contributes to mounting evidence that absenteeism puts students at greater risk of poor academic achievement and eventually dropping out of high school.

"For those of us in schools, this reflects what we've been saying all along: In order to advance, in order to learn, you have to be there," said Doris Hicks, a governing board

member and the principal and chief executive officer of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School for Science and Technology, in New Orleans.

## **Low Performers**

Academic expectations seem to be increasing for middle school students both in school and at home, the researchers found. But the bulk of the additional instructional time happened before the 2001 passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, with its new demands for academic progress, and the students who most needed extra time weren't always the ones to get it.

Teachers reported that from 1996 to 2000, 18 percent of 8th graders moved from having less than four hours of mathematics instruction each week to four or more hours a week, and from 2005 to 2011, another 6 percent of students started receiving five or more hours of math each week.

While 8th graders performing at or below basic in math on the 2011 NAEP were more likely than advanced students to receive seven hours of math instruction a week or more, the researchers found that more than half of 8th graders performing below basic in math received less than an hour of math each day on average.

"To me, this is [about] opportunity to learn," Mr. Ginsburg said. "Are the kids getting the amount of instruction they need to succeed?"

"At grade 8, prealgebra, where we have most kids getting less than an hour a day on average," he said, "does that make sense? ... You have a group of kids who are below basic, who are in need of help, and they are getting less than an hour a day of instruction."

Some educators have voiced concern that extending math and reading instructional time could crowd out other subjects, but the researchers actually found a slight increase in arts instruction in middle school. Fifty-seven percent of 8th graders had music instruction three or more times a week in 2008, up from 49 percent in 1994. During the same time, 47 percent of 8th graders had visual arts at least three times a week, 5 percentage points higher than in 1994.

Moreover, the analysis found that teachers are expecting students to do more work outside of class to bolster their class time. From 1996 to 2011, the percentage of 8th graders assigned an hour or more of math homework each night rose more than fourfold, from 4 percent to 17 percent.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan last week called for more expanded school days and years. But the NAEP background questionnaire does not include questions on school length, so researchers were not able to include such data in the report.

The assessment governing board has also released an analysis of charter school attendance and achievement, and it is planning as many as a dozen reports intended to "develop a portrait of American education."

"You're raising questions with this data for the field that I think will be very useful," Mr. Ginsburg said.