



Is Success Really Just a Matter of Showing Up?

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By: Geneva Lee

A student who fails every test in a course is unlikely to get a passing grade just because he makes it to class every day. Yet the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) currently grants accreditation to every single public school in the state*—and some schools keep that accreditation despite poor academic performance because of the way attendance is factored into the state’s formula for evaluating them.

The state’s method of accrediting schools is based on its [Annual Performance Report](#) (APR), which uses five factors—academic achievement, subgroup achievement, high school/college/career readiness, graduation rates, and attendance rates—to assess the quality of public schools. Missouri’s APR is among the [least stringent in the country](#), which might be why [not a single district is unaccredited](#). The scoring of attendance is especially problematic, as perfect scores are handed out even when kids are missing for weeks.

This attendance inflation is especially concerning due to the large weight allocated to attendance in the Annual Performance Reports. The possible number of points from all categories varies by school, anywhere from 50 to 140 points, but in all cases a school [must get 50 percent](#) of the total available performance points if it is to be accredited. And here’s how attendance fits in: Regardless of how many points are possible for a given school, ten points are allotted for attendance, giving the measure different weights for different schools. This means that a 10/10 attendance score could account for anywhere from 14 to 40 percent of the necessary points for

accreditation. Accordingly, a school that would otherwise lose accreditation based on the academic achievement of its students might nonetheless squeak past the 50 percent line thanks to strong attendance numbers. Considering that every Missouri school is currently accredited—even those with poor academic records—and considering the generous [attendance formula](#) (as detailed in a [previous post](#)), this scenario is hardly implausible.

Kansas City's Central Middle School is a case in point. It is accredited with 75 percent of its possible APR points and 7.5 of its 10 possible attendance points, even though 54 percent of its student body was chronically absent (defined by the federal government as missing 15 or more days of school) in 2015–16. Its academics are among the poorest in the state, with only [five percent](#) of students proficient in math. Normandy's 7th & 8th Grade Learning Center managed to become accredited with 37.5/70 points (54 percent), 7.5 of which were from attendance alone. The attendance boosted the Learning Center's score by 11 percentage points, and without it, this school, in which only [one in twelve kids](#) is proficient in math, would not have been accredited.

Accreditation implies that Central and the Learning Center are preparing students to succeed, even though almost all students struggle with elementary concepts. Knowing that their schools are accredited will be cold comfort to students who find themselves unequipped for further studies or the workforce. Missouri needs to re-evaluate its educational standards and provide accurate performance reports that call attention to shortcomings in the public schooling system. The APR was never meant to provide cover to underperforming schools at the expense of students.

*DESE has informed us that they accredit exclusively at the district level, and thus do not accredit individual schools.

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[3] https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/reducing_chronic_absenteeism_under_the_every_student_succeeds_act2.pdf

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