

“Ferris Bueller, Bueller?”:

Effectively Addressing Chronic Absenteeism and
School Refusal

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AUSTIN, TEXAS

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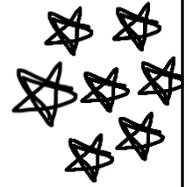
Absenteeism v. Truancy

- Absenteeism – absent for any reason
- Truancy – unexcused absence



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Chronic Absenteeism



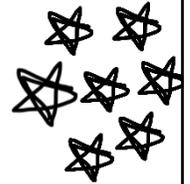
- Chronically Absent Student
 - One who misses more than 10% of class, for any reason
- Absenteeism Spiked after COVID 19
 - 2022-2023 saw an increase to 1 in 5 students classified as chronically absent in Texas
 - Rates were double that of 2018-2019 school year



Source: Texas Tribune, <https://www.texastribune.org/2025/02/04/texas-schools-chronic-absenteeism/>

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Why does absenteeism matter?

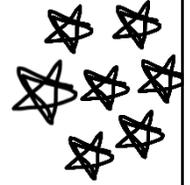


- Student performance and progress
- Future outcomes
- Decline in mental health

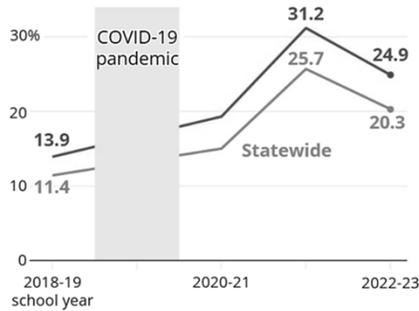


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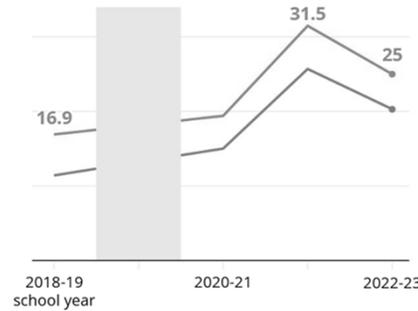
Eco Dis and SPED



Economically disadvantaged students



Students in special education programs



Note: Rates are calculated by dividing the number of students absent for at least 10% of school days, by the total number of students enrolled in a school year. No comparable rate is available for 2019-2020.

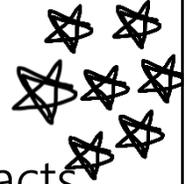
Source: Texas Education Agency

Credit: Yuriko Schumacher



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Absenteeism Impacts Funding

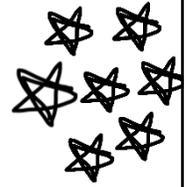


- Texas: Average Daily Attendance (ADA) impacts funding for school districts
- Students who have high eco dis. or SPED populations may be affected more significantly
- Does this perpetuate the cycle? Fewer resources, less programming, fewer incentives



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Districts are Getting Creative

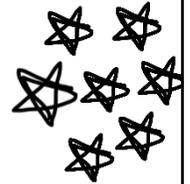


- Community Partners
- Student incentives (no finals, class trips/celebrations)
- Truancy Prevention Officers
- Automated Communication

 • Targeted Outreach

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Absenteeism and Disabilities

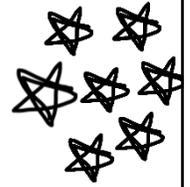


- Why is the student absent?
 - Child Find
 - Do we need to evaluate?
 - Do we need a plan?
 - 504 / IEP
- Are truancy proceedings appropriate?



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When Absences Affect FAPE

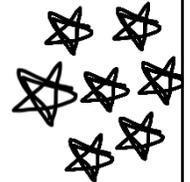


- When should we have an ARD to address absences?
 - No threshold numbers in the law
 - However, consider the following:
 - Absences are disability related
 - When we cannot determine the reason for absences
 - Student is failing classes and/or not making expected progress on IEP goals
 - Student falls below 90% attendance



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Disability Related Absences

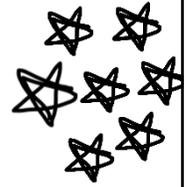


- Medical appointments
- Chronic Health Conditions
- Therapy sessions
- School refusal
- OSS due to Behavior



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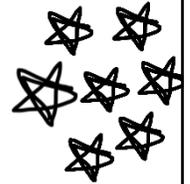
Disability Related Absences



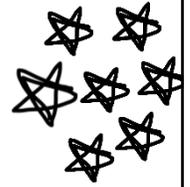
- Do we need additional evaluation data?
- Should we coordinate with private/outside providers?
- Is there a need to consider homebound?
- Shortened school day?
- Behavior Intervention Plan?



Cases Regarding Absences



A.P. v. Pearland ISD, 5th Cir. (2025)

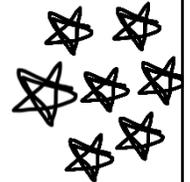


- ISSUE: When do absences trigger Child Find duties?
- Facts:
 - Student incurs numerous absences during middle school
 - In 9th grade, absences increase



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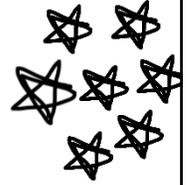


- More Facts:
 - Failed to attend tutorials
 - Took advanced courses against district's advice
 - 9th grade – failed 5 of 7 classes
 - Failed state assessments



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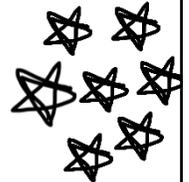


- More Facts:
 - Parents cited the following reasons for absences: family travel, menstrual cramps, indigestion
 - Student spent summer after 9th grade recovering credits for failing
 - She passed Alg, Eng, and Biology



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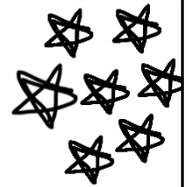


- 10th grade; continued with advanced courses
- Accrued 25 absences
- District recommended credit recovery program
- Parents refused and began homeschool in Feb.
- In Sept., parents filed a request for DPH



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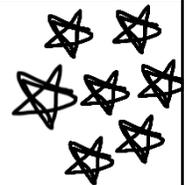


- District offers evaluation at resolution session and parents refuse to consent
- Parents obtain private evaluation
- Private evaluation determines learning disability reading comprehension, math calculation, math reasoning



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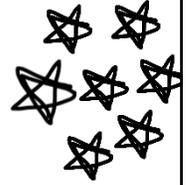


- Initial ARD held; ISD said private evaluation didn't contain information from school
- Not enough information to qualify as SPED
- At DPH, Hearing Officer determines absences were cause of poor grades, not disabilities.



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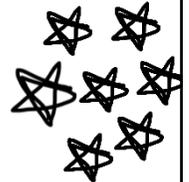


- 5th Circuit
 - Hearing Officer got it right
 - Private evaluation lacked important information
 - Teachers said when she was present, she understood work and did well



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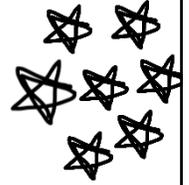


- 5th Circuit
 - Absences alone do not necessarily trigger suspicion of a disability
 - BUT...



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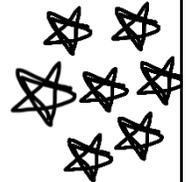


- 5th Circuit
 - Was district ever on notice that student had a disability?
 - Teacher testimony very important
 - No indication of mental health or psychological condition
 - Private evaluator's credibility undermined
 - In this case, absences and poor grades did not lead to suspicion of a disability.



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Cases Where Absences May Trigger Child Find Duty...



- ABSENCES +
 - Parents indicate it is due to severe anxiety, stress, and/or depression
 - Behavioral problems
 - Medical concerns



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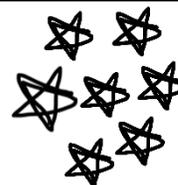
Sophia M. v. Round Rock ISD
121 LRP 17743, (W. Dist. Tex., 2021)



- In elementary school, severe boating accident results in TBI and OHI for student; she begins receiving SPED services
- At beginning of high school, student cannot attend due to severe headaches
- Parents communicate routinely with campus



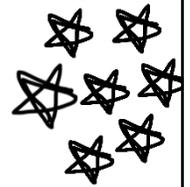
Sophia M. v. Round Rock ISD
121 LRP 17743, (W. Dist. Tex., 2021)



- Neurologist recommended decreased workload, reduced homework
- Student is admitted to hospital
- Misses 65 days in the fall and the entire spring semester
- Parents asked about "home tutoring"
- ARD meeting held in March after homebound needs assessment completed



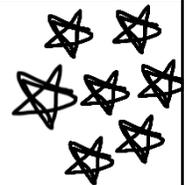
Sophia M. v. Round Rock ISD 121 LRP 17743, (W. Dist. Tex., 2021)



- School declined reduced school day and added opportunity for tutorial services before school
- ARD meeting doesn't go well and AP files truancy charges against parent
- Student began attending Fusion, a private school with a flexible schedule and setting
- District ordered to pay for private placement



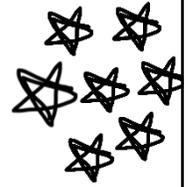
Key Takeaways



- Don't ignore absences.
- For students not yet identified as 504 of IDEA, Child Find may be triggered:
 - Especially in cases where it is known or claimed that the student is experiencing psychological programs or mental health issues or
 - Student is demonstrating behavioral difficulties



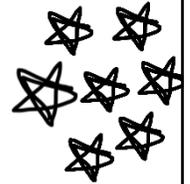
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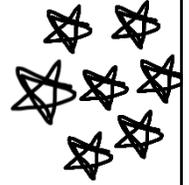
- For students with disabilities, call a meeting to discuss:
 - Chronic absenteeism, failing grades and/or lack of progress on IEP
 - Consider additional evaluation (FBA, In-home needs assessment)
 - Specific plan to address absences, which may include:
 - Goals, accommodations, specialized instruction, and/or positive behavioral supports
 - Change of Placement
 - Related Services (social work, counseling, transportation)



School Avoidance



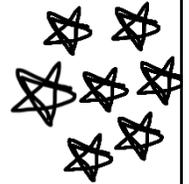
School Avoidance / School Phobia



- Student refuses to attend school or stay for all of the day
- Physical symptoms may accompany avoidance
 - Stomachaches, headaches, nausea / vomiting, diarrhea
- It is not a clinical diagnosis in or of itself, but usually a symptom of an underlying condition.
- Source: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/23982-scolionophobia-fear-of-school>



School Avoidance / School Phobia

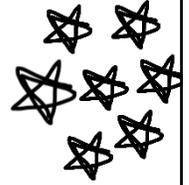


Causes may range from:

- Bullying / harassment
- Learning difficulties
- Fears (violence, school shootings)
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Social skills deficits
- Lack of positive connection to school



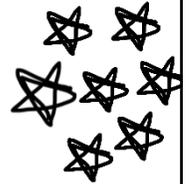
School Avoidance / School Phobia



- Consider Evaluation
 - FBA – What is the function / reason for the avoidance
 - In-home needs assessment
- Consider Interventions
 - Consult with private providers, if applicable
 - Consider the need for related services
 - Counseling, transportation, IEP goals
 - Behavior Intervention Plan



School Avoidance / School Phobia

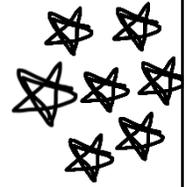


- Is the avoidance disability related?
- Is the avoidance a result of social maladjustment or family circumstances?
- HIGHLY fact-dependent analysis

- Involve School Psychologist



Common Missteps

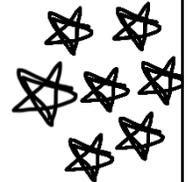


- Failing to communicate with parents regarding absences / truancy
- Not coordinating efforts between truancy prevention efforts and special education
- No evaluation regarding absences
- No ARD to address absences
- Failing to follow through on items addressed at ARD



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Proactive Measures

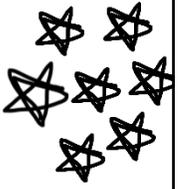


- Ensure absences are tracked
- Case manager / special education teacher and ARD committee need to be informed of chronic absences
- Communicate with parents
- Evaluate
- Implement interventions (positive in nature)
- Document efforts to increase attendance in IEP documents



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Engagement / Picture Slide



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