

Summary Points

- Unexcused absence thresholds and their consequences vary.
- About half of Arkansas freshmen reached their district’s unexcused absence threshold, but only a quarter failed at least one course.
- Only about 40% of students who reached the unexcused absence threshold received a course failure, regardless of the language used in local policy.
- Arkansas freshmen are 8 percentage points more likely to fail a core course than a non-core course after reaching the unexcused absence threshold.

Analyzing Arkansas’s Course Credit and Unexcused Absence Policy

In this brief, we examine the implementation of A.C.A 6-18-222, a statewide policy in Arkansas that addresses the unexcused absences and course credit. We find wide variability in the policy’s local implementation. We suggest districts examine their thresholds and language in this policy, and implement Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring Systems to improve school culture.

Introduction

Course performance during the high school freshman year can be a predictor of students’ long-term educational outcomes (French et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2021). Chicago researchers find that freshman grade point average (GPA) and course failures are strong indicators of high school graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). In Arkansas, one in five freshmen fail at least one course, highlighting the urgency to understand the factors contributing to course failure (Morris & McKenzie, 2022).

One factor that could contribute to course failures is local school policies. School policies play a vital role for student success, yet implementation can vary. Without fidelity, school personnel can impede policy implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fowler, 2013).

Regular school attendance is critical for student success (Attendance Works, 2023). Students who miss more school

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are more likely to score 0.3 to 0.6 standard deviations lower on the math portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). Not only is missing school associated with lower achievement scores, but absences can be predictive of course failure, high school graduation, and overall high school grade-point averages (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Regarding course failures and unexcused absences, the Arkansas state legislature passed the A.C.A. 6-18-222 policy in 2011 which includes:

“The board of directors of each school district...shall include a certain number of excessive absences that may be used as a basis for denial of course credit, promotion, or graduation. However, excessive absences shall not be the basis for expulsion or dismissal of a student.”

Each Arkansas district is given local authority to set their number of absences as they see fit.

Study Design

Our analysis of the varying implementation of A.C.A. 6-18-222 answers the following questions:

- How does the policy vary across Arkansas districts by the number of unexcused absences and language of consequences after a student crosses the unexcused absence threshold?
- How many Arkansas freshman course failures could be the result of the number of absences?
- Which student demographic and programmatic groups more likely to fail after reaching their unexcused absence threshold?
- Are Arkansas freshmen more likely to fail a core course or a non-core course after reaching the absence threshold set by their district?

Our anonymized pooled sample is comprised of 65,651 first-time freshmen in Arkansas during 2020-21 and 2021-22. Data include student demographic characteristics, programmatic characteristics, achievement on state assessments in English language arts (ELA) and math, and course grades. A binary failure indicator is created for course grades of F, E, NC, I-0, or 59 and below. To examine the variations of the A.C.A. 6-18-222 policy, we reviewed the school websites of all 253 districts in our sample and analyzed the variations. We found policy language to be split into four categories once reaching the unexcused absence threshold: more permissive as a student “May Not” receive credit, more stringent as a student “Shall Not” receive credit, non-specific with “Missing” a absence threshold, and non-specific with “No Mention” as some districts did not specify or mention course credit consequences once reaching the unexcused absence threshold. We describe our freshman sample by

student demographic and programmatic groups in Table 1 below.

Seventy-one percent of districts model the permissive language that students “May Not” receive credit after meeting absence threshold. Twenty percent of the districts employ a more stringent language, indicating students “Shall Not” receive course credit after reaching the unexcused absence threshold, and their district’s weighted average enrollment is double the “May Not” districts. Additionally, the six percent of districts “Missing” a threshold have the highest percentage of White students and the lowest average district enrollment. Lastly, the three percent of districts that do not mention a consequence after reaching unexcused absences are also smaller with the second highest proportion of White students.

We also present Table 2 below to describe the differing absence rates by freshmen demographic and programmatic groups in our sample. Black students have the highest absence rates in the state at 8.1%, and White students have the lowest absence rates at 5.9%. Students in the FRL program have a 2 percent higher absence rate compared to non-FRL enrolled students. On average, Arkansas freshmen miss 6.4% of their school days.

Table 2: Freshman Characteristics by Demographic and Programmatic Absence Rates in Arkansas

Male	6.3	FRL	7.3
Female	6.5	Non-FRL	5.1
White	5.9	GT	4.5
Black	8.1	ELL	7.8
Hispanic	6.5	SPED	7.5
Other Races	6.3	Total	6.4

Table 1: District Demographic and Programmatic Percentages by Policy Language

	State	May Not	Shall Not	Missing	No Mention
% White	60	61	56	75	69
% Black	19	22	15	7	13
% Hispanic	15	12	21	14	13
% Other Races	6	6	8	4	5
% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	61	63	58	66	54
% Gifted and Talented	12	13	12	13	6
% English Language Learners	6	5	9	6	5
% Special Education Services	12	13	11	13	14
Average District Enrollment	6,328	4,952	10,568	1,495	2,725
Number of Districts	253	179	51	15	8
Percentage of Districts	100	71	20	6	3
Number of Freshmen	65,651	42,898	18,527	2,426	1,802
Percentage of Freshmen	100	65	28	4	3

We describe the results to our first two research questions by a descriptive analysis. Then, we conduct statistical analyses to explore the next two research questions. In these, we control for variations in student demographic and programmatic characteristics, student prior achievement, student absences, student discipline infractions, and district characteristics to analyze if any specific groups are more or less likely to fail once reaching their district's unexcused absence threshold.. Additionally, we measure whether Arkansas freshmen are more likely to fail core courses once reaching their threshold.

Analysis

We find two areas of variation in the implementation of *A.C.A. 6-18-222*. First, the number of unexcused absences a student can have before they are considered for course failure varies across the 253 Arkansas districts. We present the range of their variations in Table 3.

As Table 3 indicates, most districts use ten as their unexcused absence threshold. The second most frequent number is six. Three districts allow only two unexcused absences, and two districts allow fifteen unexcused absences. Six percent of Arkansas districts have left the phrase "insert number" in parenthesis in their policy, indicating an incomplete policy.

Table 3: Number of Unexcused Absences in *A.C.A. 6-18-222* Policy

Absence Number	Number of Districts	Percentage of Districts
no mention	8	3.2
"insert number"	15	5.8
2	3	1.2
3	2	0.8
4	10	4
5	14	5.5
6	42	16.6
7	18	7.1
8	22	8.7
9	12	4.7
10	66	26.1
11	27	10.7
12	6	2.4
13	6	2.4
15	2	0.8
Total	253	100

Not only does the number of unexcused absences vary among districts, but also the wording of course failure once reaching the unexcused absences. The four variations are highlighted in Table 1, with most districts (71%) opting for "may" fail or "may not receive credit", signaling room for the decision to change based on individual student circumstances. However, 20 percent of districts have strict language in their policy of "shall not receive credit," implying that

Table 4: Unexcused Absences and Course Failures Among Freshmen Who Failed At Least One Course by Policy Language

	Met Absence Indicator Threshold		Failed Course		Met Absence Indicator Threshold & Failed	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
May Not	19,799	46.2	12,515	29.2	7,938	40.1
Shall Not	7,566	40.8	4,806	26.0	2,908	38.4
Missing	N/A	N/A	736	30.3	N/A	N/A
No Mention	N/A	N/A	512	28.4	N/A	N/A
State	27,375	41.7	18,569	28.3	10,846	39.6

if a student reaches their district's unexcused absence threshold, they will not receive credit. Six percent of Arkansas districts are missing an absence threshold, and an additional three percent do not mention loss of course credit once thresholds are reached or exceeded by students. Overall, local implementation of *A.C.A. 6-18-222* varies across Arkansas districts. On the previous page in Table 4, we present the number of failures and number of students that reached their district's unexcused absence thresholds. We aim to determine how many Arkansas freshman course failures could be due to exceeding the maximum number of absences allowed by their district.

As Table 4 highlights, nearly half of our sample reached their district's unexcused absence threshold set by their districts, but only over a quarter of our sample failed at least one course. We anticipated the "Shall Not" category to have a high proportion of students failing as the language indicates stringent consequences, but only 38% of students who reached their district's unexcused absence threshold in "Shall Not" districts failed at least one course. Similarly, students in districts using the "May Not" wording failed at least one course 40% of the time after reaching the unexcused absence threshold. We are unable to calculate the number of students who reach the unexcused absence threshold for the 23 districts that are missing or do not mention course credit consequences for unexcused absences due to the lack of data necessary to measure this indicator. Overall, only about 40% of students who could be failing due to reaching the unexcused absence threshold are failing a course.

To explore our third research question regarding the likelihood of which student groups are more or less likely to fail after reaching the unexcused absence threshold, we conduct a statistical analysis. Independent from the absence indicator, our prior research finds that students enrolled in the FRL program are eight percentage points more likely to fail at least one course compared to students who are not enrolled in the FRL program (Morris & McKenzie, 2022), and we find similar results in this analysis.

Among the students who have reached their district's unexcused absence threshold and after controlling for student demographic and programmatic characteristics, student prior academic achievement, student absences, student disciplinary infractions, and district-level characteristics, those who are eligible for FRL are six percentage points more likely to fail a course than those who are not FRL-eligible.

Finally, our analysis for our last research question explores the likelihood of failure for type of course. We

consider core (math, English language arts, science, or social studies) versus non-core to analyze if there are associations with consequences for the type of course once reaching absence threshold. After controlling for student-level and district-level characteristics, we find once a student has reached their district's unexcused absence threshold, they are eight percentage points more likely to fail a core course than a non-core course.

Discussion

Through descriptive and statistical analyses, we find implementation of the *A.C.A. 6-18-222* policy varies across the state. First, the number of unexcused absences allowed before considering course failure varied widely among Arkansas districts, with ten being the most frequent threshold used, and 6% of districts leaving the phrase "insert number" in their policy document indicating an incomplete policy. The policy language regarding consequences for course failure also exhibited variation, with 71% of districts utilizing permissive language of "May Not" receive credit, and 20% employing stricter "Shall Not" language, and some districts having no mention of consequences.

Secondly, we find only about 40% of students who reached their district's unexcused absence threshold received a course failure regardless of the language used in local policy. Also, we find students enrolled in the FRL program are more likely to fail a course once reaching their district's unexcused absence threshold compared to students not enrolled in the FRL program.

Lastly, we find students who reach or exceed their district's absence threshold are eight percentage points more likely to fail a core course compared to a non-core course. This highlights the possibility of core courses applying the language of their district's policy more consistently than non-core courses.

This study has limitations as it relies on descriptive interpretations, preventing the establishment of a causal relationship between course failures and reaching a district's unexcused absence threshold. Additionally, the individual reasons behind the variation in denying course credit to some students while allowing it for others after reaching the threshold remain unclear, indicating the need for further understanding of the components of course credit.

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This brief contributes to understanding the implementation of *A.C.A. 6-18-222* in Arkansas districts and highlights the need for further research on granting course credit, policy language variations, absenteeism after COVID-19, and the root causes of chronic absenteeism.

Policy Implications

To address the discrepancies identified in our policy analysis regarding freshman course failure in Arkansas, we recommend that districts focus on reinforcing policy fidelity, increasing their absence threshold, or removing their stringent “Shall Not” language. Ambiguous policy language can impede adherence to guidelines. Districts should conduct internal assessments of policy fidelity to determine their own fidelity and implementation of the *A.C.A. 6-18-222* policy. Districts can also seek support or consultation from OEP for the internal assessment process.

Given the inconsistencies in policy implementation observed, we advise schools to reconsider the continued use of punitive measures based on unexcused absences. Instead, schools should shift their focus towards addressing the root causes of student absenteeism and course failure. Creating a supportive and conducive learning environment can be achieved through evidence-based interventions like Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring Systems (EWIMS) and efforts to improve school culture (Faria et al., 2017). Collaboration among administrators, educators, and stakeholders is essential to successfully implement universal prevention strategies, early intervention strategies for at-risk students, and targeted intensive support for students with the highest needs. By implementing these recommendations, districts can foster academic success among Arkansas freshmen and proactively address the underlying factors contributing to course failures and absenteeism.

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