Engaging Teachers: Measuring the Impact of Teachers on Student Attendance in Secondary School

Jing Liu, PhD
Postdoctoral Research Associate
Annenberg Institute, Brown University

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Abstract: Teachers’ impact on student long-run success is only partially explained by their contributions to students’ short-run academic performance. For this study, we explore a second dimension of teacher effectiveness by creating measures of teachers’ contributions to student class-attendance. We find systematic variation in teacher effectiveness at reducing unexcused class absences at the middle and high school level. These differences across teachers are as stable as those for student achievement, but teacher effectiveness on attendance only weakly correlates with their effects on achievement. We link these measures of teacher effectiveness to students’ long-run outcomes. A high value-added to attendance teacher has a stronger impact on students’ likelihood of finishing high school than does a high value-added to achievement teacher. Moreover, high value-added to attendance teachers can motivate students to pursue higher academic goals as measured by Advanced Placement course taking. These positive effects are particularly salient for low-achieving and low-attendance students.

Bio: Jing Liu is an education researcher whose work spans from K–12 schools to higher education. He earned his Ph.D. in the economics of education from Stanford University in 2018. One line of Liu’s research focuses on understanding the causes and consequences of student engagement and behavior (e.g., attendance and exclusionary discipline) in K-12 schools, and how such daily schooling experiences contribute to student success in the long run and educational inequality in general. For example, Liu has studied how teachers contribute to student engagement in secondary school, and how engaging teachers affects student graduation and AP course taking. A second line of inquiry is to systematically quantify micro processes in classrooms and schools, such as how teachers and peers interact with students and how schools use reform strategies to turn around low-performing schools. This work intends to identify malleable and high-leverage practices to help teachers grow and school leaders to make better decisions. Liu achieves this goal by using computational social science methods, especially text-as-data methods. For example, he has published work on how peer interaction in online discussion forums affects student learning and persistence in college online courses. Lastly, Liu also studies academic mismatch and major choice in China’s higher education system.