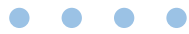


# Growth on the DESSA is a Protective Factor Against Chronic Absenteeism.



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## Introduction

Chronic absenteeism, typically defined as missing 10% or more of the school year, has become a significant concern for schools nationwide. Students who are frequently absent are more likely to have low achievement, to dropout, and to be held back a grade (Liu et al., 2019). Chronic absenteeism also disrupts classroom dynamics and slows instructional progress for students who do attend regularly, compounding the overall impact on learning (Gottfried, 2019).

The financial consequences of chronic absenteeism are equally serious. Because school funding formulas in many states are tied to enrollment and attendance, chronic absenteeism translates into direct budgetary losses. Estimates vary due to the size of the district and the funding formulas used, but one state projected a \$162 million loss in funding in the 2024-25 school year due to chronic absenteeism (Suppe, 2024).

The problem has grown sharply since the pandemic. National and state-level data show that chronic absenteeism nearly doubled during the 2021–22 school year compared to pre-pandemic levels, and it remains elevated in many districts today (Barshay, 2025). Addressing this crisis has become central to academic recovery efforts, as absenteeism undermines both student learning outcomes and district financial stability.



## Social-Emotional Competence and Its Role in Reducing Absenteeism

Emerging evidence suggests that increases in chronic absenteeism are closely tied to student mental health and overall engagement in school. Polikoff et al. (2023), for example, found a strong connection between absenteeism and mental health struggles such as anxiety, depression, and trauma. Their research revealed that many students are absent because they feel disengaged, unsupported, or overwhelmed. Parents frequently voiced their concerns about their children's well-being, noting that schools were not adequately meeting these needs.

In response to these challenges, many districts are turning to social-emotional learning (SEL) as a strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism (Eklund et al., 2022). SEL initiatives are designed to help students develop skills such as self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills, which can mitigate the challenges linked to absenteeism. Several studies have demonstrated the relationship between measures of social-emotional skills and student attendance; students with less developed skills are at higher risk of being chronically absent (Meyer, 2025; Yin et al., 2023). What remains less clear is whether growth in social emotional competence (SEC) can help mitigate that risk.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between students' growth in SEC and chronic absenteeism. This study addressed the following research question: Are students who demonstrate meaningful growth in SEC over the course of a school year less likely to be chronically absent?



## Methods

**Sample.** The study was conducted using a dataset comprised of 8,271 students in grades 6-8 enrolled in a large public school district located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. during the 2023-2024 school year.

To conduct this study, students who demonstrated meaningful growth, defined as an increase of 5 or more T-score points on the DESSA, were identified (n = 1,863). Propensity scores were then estimated using logistic regression, with baseline DESSA-mini scores and key demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, ELL status, and SPED status) as predictors. Each student with high SEC growth was matched to a student with low growth using nearest-neighbor matching without replacement and a caliper of .05, ensuring comparable baseline profiles. This procedure resulted in 1,863 matched pairs (see Table 1).

### Measures.

**Social-Emotional Competence (SEC).** Students' SEC was measured using the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment–mini (DESSA-mini; Naglieri et al., 2011), a standardized, strength-based behavior rating scale designed to assess social and emotional competence in youth. The DESSA-mini consists of 8 items rated by teachers on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Never” to “Very Frequently.” Scores are reported as T-scores (M = 50, SD = 10), with higher scores reflecting stronger social-emotional skills. The DESSA-mini was administered twice during the 2023–24 school year, once in the fall and once in the spring. These scores were used to calculate both baseline SEC levels and growth over the school year.

**Chronic Absenteeism.** Absenteeism was measured based on district records of student attendance. A binary indicator was created to reflect whether a student was chronically absent, defined as missing 10% or more of school days during the year.

**Demographics.** Student-level demographic information included gender, race/ethnicity, ELL status, and special education status. These covariates were used to control for potential confounding factors in modeling the relationship between SEC and absenteeism.

**Data Analysis.** Propensity score matching (PSM) was conducted to estimate the association between growth in social-emotional competence (SEC) and chronic absenteeism. Students were classified into two groups: High Growth ( $\Delta\text{DESSA} \geq 5$  T-score points) and No Growth ( $\Delta\text{DESSA} \leq 0$ ). Propensity scores were estimated using logistic regression with baseline DESSA scores and demographic covariates (gender, race/ethnicity, ELL status, and SPED status) as predictors. Students were matched using nearest-neighbor matching without replacement and a caliper of 0.05. Covariate balance between the two groups was satisfactory, with all standardized mean differences below 0.10 (Guo et al. 2020). After matching and confirmation of balance, chronic absenteeism was modeled as the outcome using logistic regression with growth group as the predictor. Effect sizes were reported as odds ratios (OR), relative risks (RR), and the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT).



## Results

In the matched sample, 14.8% of the High Growth group were chronically absent compared to 25.0% of students in the No Growth group. Logistic regression confirmed a significant association between SEC growth and absenteeism, yielding an odds ratio of 0.523 (95% CI [0.443, 0.617],  $p < .001$ ). This indicates that students with high growth had 47.7% lower odds of being chronically absent than their matched peers (see Table 2).

Complementary effect size estimates supported this finding. The average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) showed a 10.2 percentage point difference in absenteeism between groups, and the relative risk (RR) indicated that High Growth students had 59.2% of the risk of chronic absenteeism compared to No Growth students, reflecting a 40.8% lower risk.

An exploratory analysis examined outcomes among students with very low baseline DESSA scores ( $T < 40$ ). Within the matched sample 66 students in the High Growth group and 64 students in the No Growth group fell into this category. Absenteeism was 28.8% among the High Growth group compared to 48.4% among the No Growth group, a difference of nearly 20 percentage points.



## Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that students who demonstrated substantial growth in social-emotional competence (SEC), as measured by the DESSA-Mini, were 41% less likely to be chronically absent than comparable peers with no growth. This result adds to a growing body of research showing that SEC plays a central role in supporting student engagement and attendance. Prior studies have identified competencies such as self-efficacy, self-management, and connection as key predictors of consistent school attendance, particularly among students at greater risk of disengagement (Meyer, 2025; Yin et al., 2023). The current results align with this evidence, suggesting that SEC growth contributes directly to students' capacity to cope with stressors, sustain school connection, and maintain regular attendance.

Importantly, even among students with very low SEC at baseline, growth was strongly associated with lower absenteeism. While nearly half of the students in the No Growth group with low baseline scores were chronically absent, fewer than one in three students in the High Growth group were. This suggests that SEC development may be particularly impactful for students who begin the year with the greatest vulnerabilities. Our findings suggest that growth in SEC is an important way to improve attendance.



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Table 1  
Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample

	<b>High Growth (n = 1,863)</b>	<b>No Growth (n = 1,863)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	895 (48.0%)	855 (45.9%)
Male	968 (52.0%)	1008 (54.1%)
<b>Race (code)</b>		
White	1191 (63.9%)	1162 (62.4%)
Black	451 (24.2%)	536 (28.8%)
Asian	93 (5.0%)	44 (2.4%)
Two or more races	87 (4.6%)	92 (4.9%)
Other (<1%)	41 (2.2%)	29 (1.5%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Hispanic/Latino	406 (21.8%)	416 (22.3%)
Not Hispanic	1457 (78.2%)	1447 (77.7%)
<b>ELL</b>	149 (8.0%)	152 (8.1%)
<b>SPED</b>	217 (11.6%)	235 (12.6%)
<b>Chronic Absenteeism</b>		
Yes	276 (14.8%)	465 (25.0%)
No	1587 (85.2%)	1398 (75.0%)

Note. Values are counts with percentages in parentheses. High Growth defined as  $\geq +5$  T-score points on the DESSA; No Growth defined as  $\leq 0$  points.

Table 2

## Association Between SEC Growth and Chronic Absenteeism (Matched Sample)

<b>Effect Size</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>95% CI</b>	<b>p-value</b>
Odds Ratio	0.523	[0.443, 0.617]	< .001
Relative Risk	0.592	—	—
ATT (Risk Difference)	-10.2 pp	—	—
<b>Absenteeism Rates</b>	High Growth 14.8%	No Growth 25.0%	

Note. Odds ratios are from logistic regression of chronic absenteeism on growth group (High Growth =  $\Delta\text{DESSA} \geq +5$ ; No Growth =  $\Delta\text{DESSA} \leq 0$ ). Relative risk (RR) was computed directly from group proportions. ATT = Average Treatment Effect on the Treated; reported as percentage point difference in absenteeism rates.