Transcend

The Relationship Between Student Experiences and Outcomes

RESEARCH BRIEF

September 2025

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About Transcend

Transcend is a national nonprofit organization focused on innovation in school design. We support communities in creating and spreading extraordinary learning environments for all. Inspired by what we are learning from communities across the country, we share insights to fuel progress and innovation for more and more schools. To learn more about partnering with Transcend, reach out to us or visit **our website**.

Summary

In 2021, **Transcend** launched the **Leaps Student Voice Survey**, a valid and reliable tool to gather evidence about the quality of students' learning experiences. We recently conducted analyses to better understand the relationship between students' experiences in school, as measured by the Leaps Student Voice Survey, and a range of important outcomes.

In the spirit of continual improvement and collective learning, we are sharing the findings from those analyses:

1. Students, on average, who report higher quality learning experiences as measured by the Leaps Student Voice Survey also have:
    a. **GPAs** that were almost 15% higher. This is equivalent to the difference between a C+ and a B (2.6 compared to 3.0 on a four-point scale) [see Finding 1]
    b. **Test scores** that were 27% higher on state standardized high school end-of-course algebra and geometry exams [see Finding 2]
    c. 17% fewer **disciplinary incidents** [see Finding 3]
    d. 34% fewer **in-school suspensions** [see Finding 3]
    e. A 33% lower **chronic absence rate** [see Finding 4]
2. Leaps Student Voice Survey results are also associated with school-level accountability ratings; schools with better student experiences earn, on average, higher state accountability scores. [see Finding 5]
3. The relationship between Leaps scores and student outcomes is consistent with the wide body of peer-reviewed, published research on the relationship between learning experiences and outcomes. [see Building an Evidence Base]

These relationships were statistically significant and durable after controlling for important covariates, including, race, ethnicity, grade, gender, and disability status.[1]

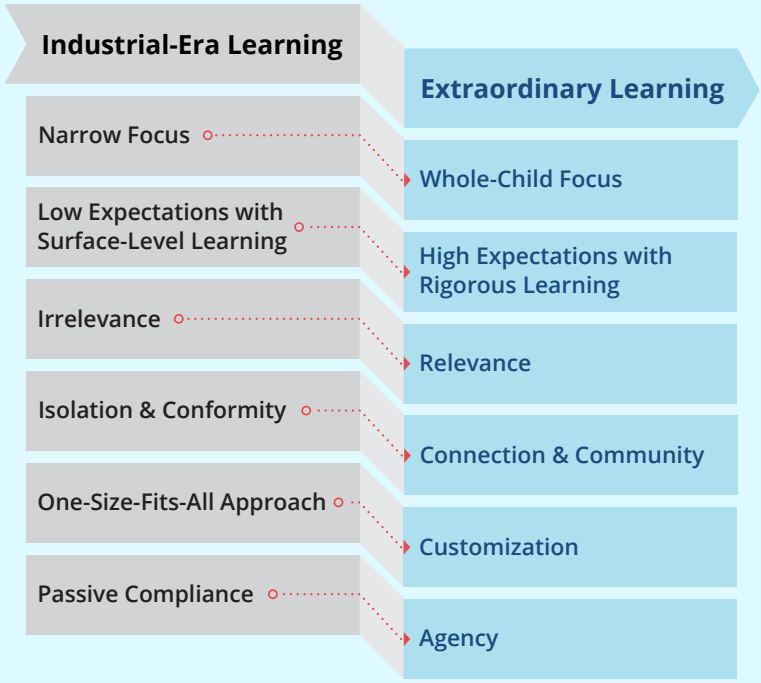
[1] We also considered socio-economic status as measured by qualifying for the federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program, but because there was little variation in this variable within our sample we did not include it.

Background

Today's educational systems focus heavily on traditional student outcomes such as GPA and math and reading test scores, which are intended to directly or indirectly reflect student learning. Absenteeism and disciplinary incidents are also routinely measured and reported to understand the extent of student engagement with school. This focus on a standardized set of engagement and learning measures reflects our collective desire for transparent and comparable data for all students. However, focusing exclusively on this narrow set of measures presents several limitations. First, learning outcomes are lagging indicators; it can take months or years for interventions by a school or district to influence standardized assessment scores. In addition, these learning outcomes represent only a slice of the **broad range** of **goals** that the public, employers, parents, educators, and students prioritize for their schools. Similarly, while engagement measures can suggest whether a student may be disengaging from school, they do not indicate the causes of that disengagement. Research suggests that combining traditional student learning and engagement data with additional information on the quality of students' learning experiences can help address these limitations in two ways. First, it provides meaningful, actionable, near-term data to fuel rapid improvement in ways that lagging outcomes data can't. Second, it offers a richer and more robust picture of impact than can be captured by traditional outcomes measures alone.[2] Put simply, the quality of learning experiences matters both as predictors of student outcomes and because those experiences are valuable in their own right.[3]

This research brief contributes to **the growing body of evidence** substantiating that link between the quality of learning experiences and student outcomes. It contains analyses of the relationship between student responses on the Leaps Student Voice Survey and various learning and engagement outcomes from two separate samples. The first analysis produced Findings 1-4, and the second analysis produced Finding 5.

Transcend's Leaps toward Extraordinary Learning for All describe the key ways we believe the student experience must change so that every young person can maximize their potential and contribute positively to society now and in the future. These Leaps can help schools move from experiences that often leave young people disconnected and struggling to engaging experiences that prepare young people for life in the 21st century. **You can read more about them here**.



[2] Baek, C. (2023). How (do) school experiences contribute to students' sense of belonging? Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2023.2206552

[3] Durlak, J. A., Mahoney, J. L., & Boyle, A. E. (2022). What we know, and what we need to find out about universal, school-based social and emotional learning programs for children and adolescents: A review of meta-analyses and directions for future research. Psychological Bulletin, 148(11-12), 765–782. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000383

FIRST SAMPLE & ANALYTIC APPROACH (Findings 1-4)

Sample

The total sample for findings one through four includes 5,100 students in 6th through 12th grades attending 17 schools in an urban midwest district during the 2022-2023 academic year. This sample includes students for whom we had at least one wave of Leaps Student Voice Survey data during the 2022-2023 academic year and at least one of the outcome variables of interest. We used the most current data at the time of reporting. Specific sample sizes vary based on the outcome of interest from 1,388 to 4,921. Exhibit 1 depicts the characteristics of this sample.

Exhibit 1. Sample Demographics (N = 7,890)

Grade Level	
6th	15.4%
7th	15.4%
8th	16.9%
9th	14.9%
10th	14.2%
11th	12.4%
12th	10.8%

Gender	
Male	49.4%
Female	50.6%
Other	2.2%

Race/Ethnicity	
Asian	9.2%
Black	45.9%
Hispanic or Latino	6.1%
Multi-Race	9.1%
White	29.6%

Other	
Disability	19.4%
FRPL	97.8%
504 Status	4.1%
English Language Learner	7.5%
Homeless	4.8%

Method

The Leaps Student Voice Survey uses a five-point Likert scale where students report their perception of experiences aligned with each of the Leaps toward Extraordinary Learning for All. For the purposes of this study, "Low quality" experiences are those for which students reported a one through two on the scale. "High quality" experiences are those for which students reported a four through five on the scale.

At the time of this analysis, a validation study defined each Leap as a distinct construct. However, given that our analyses found statistically significant relationships between student outcomes and all of the Leaps, and because the focus of this report is on the importance of student experiences as a whole, the analysis below aggregates data averaged across all of the Leaps. Future research will focus on further distinguishing among individual Leaps and the outcomes with which they each might be uniquely closely associated.

The outcome variables include end-of-year academic tests, GPA, attendance, and discipline. All of these variables are on different scales. Separate regressions with covariates were run for each outcome. These models showed statistically significant relationships between the quality of student experiences, as measured by the Leaps Student Voice Survey, and differences between students with high quality experiences and students with low quality experiences across multiple outcomes of interest, while holding student demographic characteristics constant. For details about each regression model, see the appendix.

Finding 1: High quality experiences are associated with higher GPAs.

Students with **high quality** experiences (i.e., higher Leaps scores) also have GPAs that are almost 15% higher than students reporting **low quality** experiences. This is equivalent to the difference between a C+ and a B (2.6 compared to 3.0 on a four-point scale). See Ex. 2.

Finding 2: Students reporting high quality experiences demonstrate higher performance on high school math assessments.

Students who reported **high quality** experiences on the Leaps Student Voice Survey scored 27% higher on state standardized high school end-of-course algebra and geometry exams than students who reported **low quality** experiences.[4]

We did not find a statistically significant association between student experiences and ELA assessment scores. This pattern fits with the research (see **here**, **here**, and **here**) showing math scores are generally more closely linked to school experiences than reading scores, perhaps due to some combination of the more structured nature of math instruction, the fact that math learning happens almost exclusively within school, or math performance being more strongly influenced by stereotype threats.[5] **Future analyses** will focus on exploring the relationship between experiences and ELA/reading performance, as well as middle and elementary school math performance.

Exhibit 2. Students with **High Quality** Experiences Demonstrate Higher GPAs

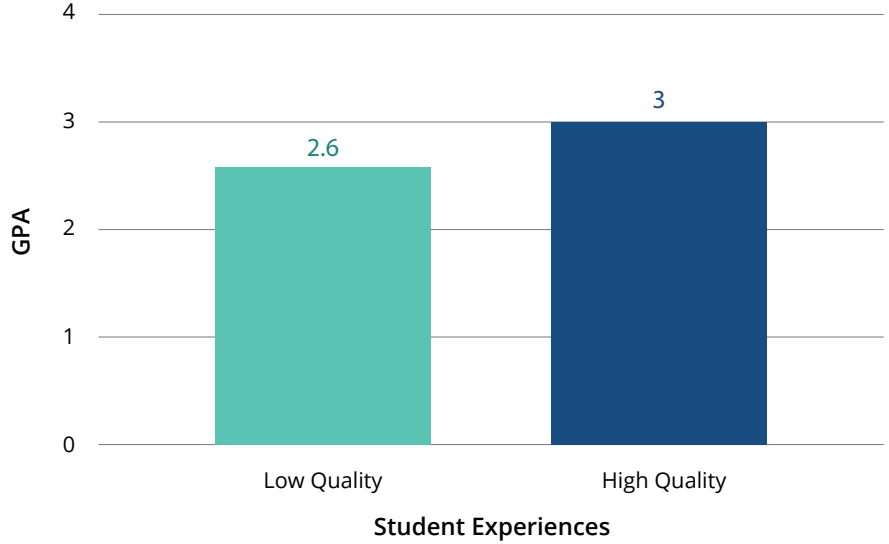
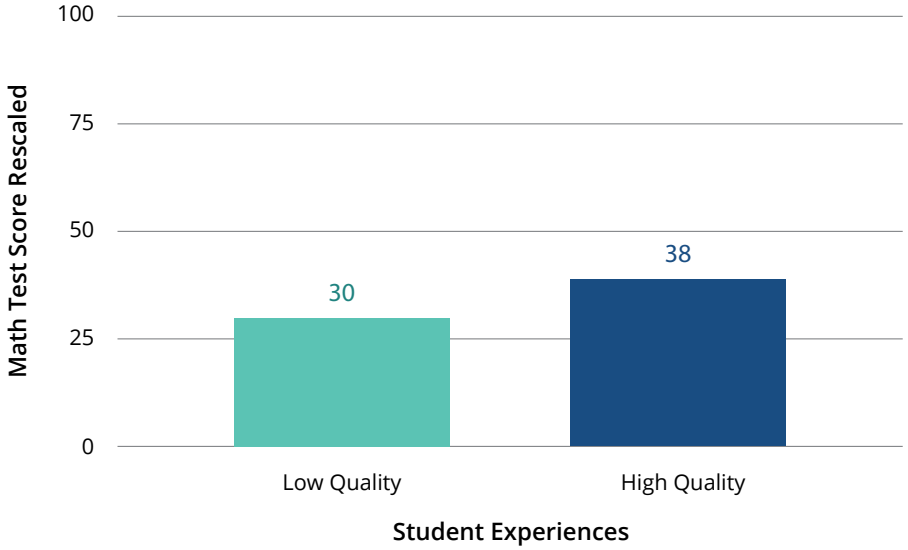


Exhibit 3. Students with **High Quality** Experiences Performed Better on Math Tests



[4] According to this guide, scores on the Algebra II and Geometry tests can range between possible scores of 604 and 814. For ease of interpretation, exam scores were rescaled on a scale of 0-100, with 604 set to 0. Because the values were rescaled, we report the percent difference.

[5] Spencer, S.J., Steele, C.M., & Quinn, D.M. (1999). Stereotype Threat and Women's Math Performance. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 35, 4-28.

Finding 3: High quality experiences are associated with fewer disciplinary events and suspensions.

Students with **low quality** experiences are involved in an average of **17% more discipline incidents** in school than students with **high quality** school experiences. Additionally, the per-student **rate of in-school suspensions is 34% higher** for students with **low quality** school experiences compared to students with **high quality** school experiences.

Finding 4: High quality student experiences are associated with higher attendance.

There's a strong link between student experience and attendance; when students love school, they show up. Our data indicates that when students report **high quality** experiences in school, they are 33% less likely to be chronically absent than students reporting **low quality** experiences.

The four findings described above hold true across time points and across student groups, including, race, ethnicity, grade, gender, and disability status, demonstrating these associations are consistent and durable.

While we saw consistent and significant correlations between the Leaps in general and GPA, test scores, attendance, and discipline, we saw particularly strong correlations between all four outcomes and three specific Leaps: **Connection & Community**, **Customization**, and elements of **High Expectations with Rigorous Learning**. One of our priorities for future research is to further disaggregate among the Leaps to better understand the relationships between specific Leaps and outcome variables with which they might be differentially associated, and how this might vary among different geographic, demographic, or program-related contexts.

Exhibit 3. Students with **High Quality** Experiences Associated with Fewer Disciplinary Incidents and In-School

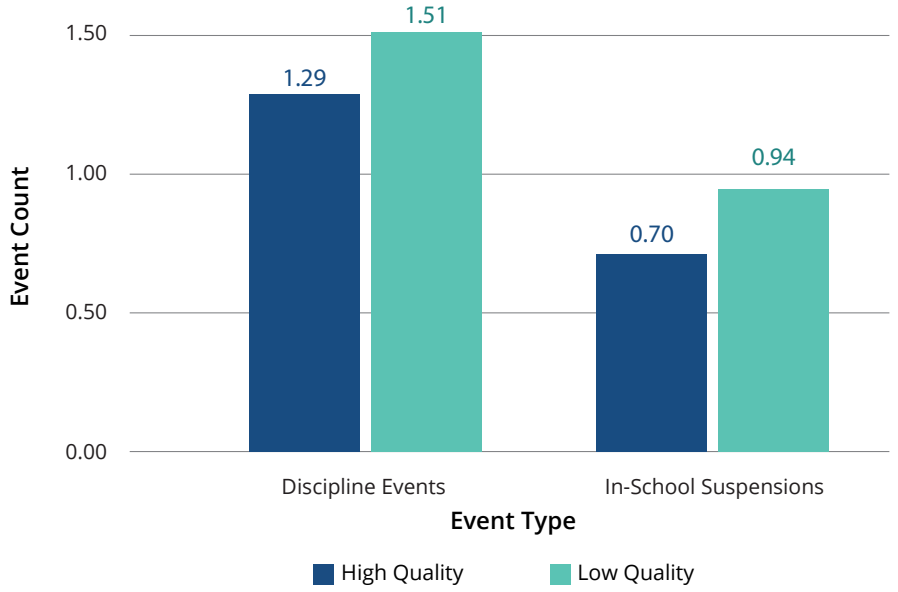
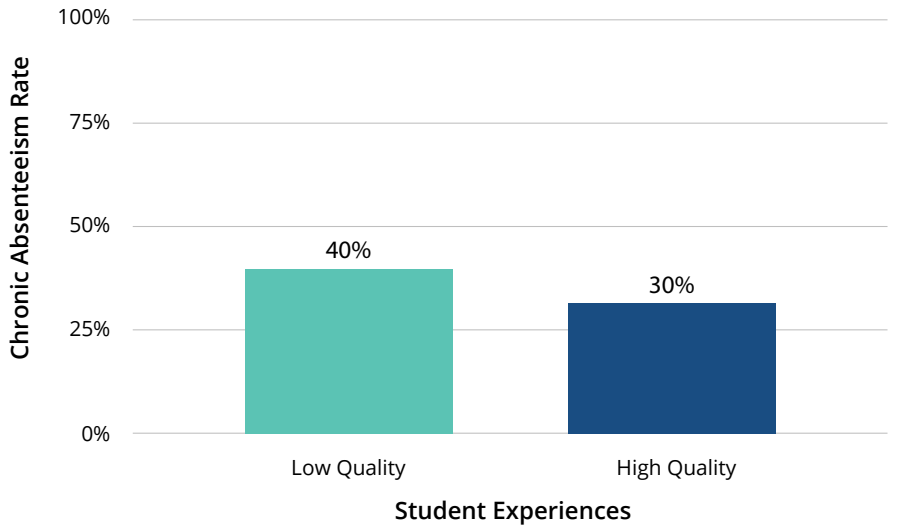


Exhibit 4. Chronic Absenteeism is 33% Lower for Students Reporting **High Quality** Experiences



SECOND SAMPLE & ANALYTIC APPROACH (Finding 5)

Our second sample includes data from 10,065 students across 29 Texas campuses. For this analysis, we examined the relationship between student experiences and school accountability ratings, controlling for school level. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) accountability scores is based on three measures:

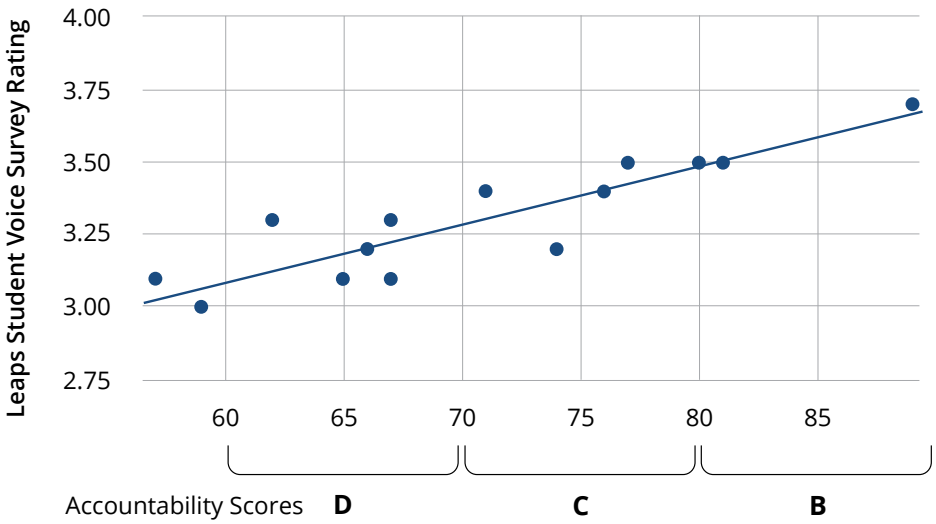
- **Student achievement** - How much all students know and can do, as measured by the annual Texas STAAR exam in ELA and math, and other indicators such as AP scores, dual enrollment credits, and graduation rates,
- **Student progress** - How many students saw one year's worth of growth and how students are doing relative to their peers in demographically similar schools on the STAAR exam, and
- **Closing the gaps** - How well different groups of students are performing on the STAAR exam, disaggregating for various student demographic indicators

The TEA assigns schools annual ratings on an A-F scale. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used in this analysis to measure the relationship between campus accountability ratings and Leaps Student Voice Survey.

Finding 5: Schools where students report higher quality experiences earn, on average, higher state accountability scores.

We saw a significant relationship between students' experiences and the overall campus accountability score. Schools with students reporting **high quality** experiences received higher accountability ratings compared to schools where students report **low quality** experiences. This relationship was especially strong for middle schools.

Exhibit 5. Middle School Student Experiences Correlated with Accountability Scores



In summary, Findings 1-5 describe statistically significant differences across important outcomes between students who reported high quality experiences in school and those reporting low quality experiences in school. This provides evidence that supports the association between better experiences and better learning and engagement outcomes across a range of dimensions.

BUILDING AN EVIDENCE BASE

Our findings are consistent with and contribute to the wide body of peer-reviewed, published research on the relationship between student outcomes and the experiences described by the Leaps. **Transcend has cataloged** over 100 peer-reviewed, published studies that demonstrate this close relationship; we are eager to continue contributing our own research to this growing body of evidence.

We are also committed to working in partnership with the many other organizations and individuals contributing to this evidence base. For example, NewSchools is undertaking a significant **research agenda**, which includes the **finding** that students in their partner schools are more likely to meet growth goals in math and reading when they have strong positive perceptions of school culture. PERTS has published **similar research** showing a strong relationship between students' perceptions of their learning experiences and their mathematics performance, and **researchers from Stanford, the University of Chicago**, **WestEd**, and other institutions are building and sharing significant amounts of aligned research.

Implications + Recommendations

The quality of students' learning experiences are strong predictors of important educational outcomes and success later in life.[7] They are also essential in their own right; all humans deserve to be in environments where they are appreciated for who they are, connected through positive relationships, and engaged in activities that are meaningful to them.

We believe this research calls upon us to collectively undertake several next steps as a field:

1. Invest in gathering evidence about the quality of learning experiences. The Leaps Student Voice Survey offers one validated and easy-to-use tool for gathering this data, but focus groups, interviews, and observation protocols can all produce meaningful and complementary data. Other organizations such as PERTS, Panorama, 5Essentials, and Gallup also offer widely used surveys that include indicators of student experience.

2. Broaden our individual and collective priorities beyond a singular focus on traditional outcomes to also include evidence on the quality of learning experiences that serve as near-term predictors of those outcomes, and that can serve as early "on-track" indicators. Funders should use student experience data to inform their strategies and investments, policymakers should consider them in accountability systems, and educators should prioritize them in goal-setting and performance management.

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[7] Dudovitz RN, Nelson BB, Coker TR, Biely C, Li N, Wu LC, Chung PJ. Long-term health implications of school quality. Soc Sci Med. 2016 Jun;158:1-7. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.04.009. Epub 2016 Apr 11. PMID: 27100212; PMCID: PMC4875819.

3. Prioritize R&D into new learning models that are designed to improve student experiences. This includes both the design and deployment of new models and the gathering and sharing of evidence regarding their impact on student experiences and outcomes, especially over time. For example, Transcend's Innovative Models Exchange documents dozens of adoptable models that were specifically engineered to create high quality experiences, many of which have also documented robust evidence of impact on student learning and engagement outcomes. Educators, funders, policymakers, and the public should work together to deploy, learn from, and validate innovative new models like these.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

We have several priorities for building upon and expanding this research to test the external and internal validity of these findings. First, we will focus on gathering and analyzing data from a broader set of contexts, including data at the elementary level and from a diverse range of geographic and demographic contexts. Second, we will conduct longitudinal analyses to explore whether Leaps Student Voice Survey data is associated with changes in outcomes in addition to point-in-time outcomes (i.e., we will attempt to demonstrate that experiences are not only associated with outcomes, but also that changes in experiences are predictive of changes in outcomes). Third, we will further disaggregate among the Leaps to better understand the relationships between specific Leaps and outcome variables with which they might be differentially associated. Fourth, we will further explore the relationship between Leaps Student Voice Survey data and student outcomes in literacy. Finally, we will document and validate strategies for improving the quality of student experiences.

Appendix

Model Specifications

For the end-of-year academic tests, GPA, and attendance, linear regression models were conducted and standardized parameter coefficients were analyzed to determine significant factors contributing to variance in these outcomes. Given the significant skew for in-school suspensions, Poisson regression models were conducted and odds ratios were analyzed to determine which factors contributed to variance in suspension rates.

For each model, demographic covariates were entered in Step 1, with gender coded as binary (male/female); race/ethnicity entered as binary (yes/no) for Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, and Multiracial; and disability status also entered as binary (yes/no). Leaps score was entered in Step 2. The sample size for each regression model ranged between 1,388 students (for HS math) through 4,921 (for absenteeism). These models showed statistically significant relationships between the quality of student experiences, as measured by the Leaps Student Voice Survey, and multiple outcomes, while holding student demographic characteristics constant through their inclusion in Step 1 in each model.

For ease of interpretation, outcome variables were transposed for mean comparison analyses using ANOVA and independent samples t-tests to look at whether the outcome means between students with **high quality** experiences and students with **low quality** experiences were significantly different. The purpose of this additional analysis was to generate statements about mean differences that would be more interpretable and meaningful to a broad audience.

Table 2. Model Fit Statistics and Parameter Estimates for Regression Analyses

	Absenteeism[c]	Disciplinary Incidents[a,c]	In-School Suspensions[a,c]	GPA[c]	Math Test Score[b,c]
N	4,921	4,898	2,472	3,304	1,388
Overall Model R^2	.053	.074	.049	.071	.140
Overall Model F	39.06***	56.73***	35.76***	35.73***	32.13***
Parameter Estimates	*β*	OR [95% C.I. range]	OR [95% C.I. range]	*β*	*β*
Covariates					
Gender	-0.3*	0.73 [0.62-0.86]***	0.80 [0.71-0.91]***	-.12***	-.01
Race (Asian = referent)					
Black	.30***	0.17 [0.13-0.22]***	0.34 [0.28-0.43]***	-.22***	-.14***
Hispanic/Latino	.12***	0.76 [0.52-1.11]	0.90 [0.67-1.22]	-.07***	-.11***
Multiracial	.16***	0.34 [0.24-0.49]***	0.56 [0.42-0.75]***	-.06**	.02
White	.15***	0.84 [0.63-1.11]	0.92 [0.74-1.15]	-.01	.14***
Disability Status	.06***	0.77 [0.63-0.95]*	0.80 [0.69-0.94]**	-0.7***	-.24***
2023 Leaps Pulsecheck Score	-.10***	0.81 [0.72-0.91]***	0.83 [0.76-0.92]***	.14***	.13***

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

[a] Poisson regression used given the count nature of the outcome variables.

[b] Leaps Pulsecheck Scores only significantly associated with high school math test scores.

[c] Connctions & Community and Customization subscales of Leaps Pulsecheck are uniquely associated with outcome when isolated from the rest of the Pulsecheck.