

# Accountable for Absenteeism: 4 Ways that States Can Use Chronic Absence in NCLB Waiver Applications



*A Policy Brief from Attendance Works*

Hedy Chang and Phyllis Jordan | January 2012

The U.S. Education Department's decision to grant waivers from the strictures of the No Child Left Behind Act gives states an unprecedented opportunity to decide how they will assess their own schools. States can now create a more flexible set of metrics to determine how a school is performing. These measures should go beyond test scores and graduation rates to include indicators that provide early warning of academic problems and that point to solutions, so that more students can graduate ready for college and career.

Chief among the early warning signals is chronic absence – when a student misses 10 percent or nearly a month of school over the course of an academic year. Research now documents the extraordinary scale of student absenteeism, the toll these absences take on achievement and the connection to high school dropout rates. In some communities, chronic absence affects as many as a third of all students. Chronic absence is a particularly powerful indicator of academic risk from kindergarten to second grade, when students are not yet taking standardized tests.

Attendance data is already collected by most school districts, but not often analyzed effectively. Most schools count how many students show up daily (average daily attendance) but do not monitor how many miss so many days that they are at academic risk. Thus schools and districts miss the opportunity to intervene early before students fall so far behind that they require expensive remediation or simply drop out.

Across the country, schools and their community partners have found that paying attention to chronic absence is a highly effective strategy for turning around low-performing schools because it is an easily understood, easily measured sign of progress that can provide a unifying goal for the whole community. When schools and community partners work together to reduce absences, they often see results within a semester or school year, first in attendance and later in academic performance. After all, improvements in classroom teaching and curriculum are not likely to yield results unless students are actually in class.

## Using Attendance in Waiver Applications

States should embed individual student measures—assessing how many students in each school are chronically absent (missing 10 percent or more of school) and how many are achieving satisfactory attendance (missing 5 percent or fewer days)—in the accountability systems they develop for waiver applications. States can:

**Recommendation 1:** Make improving individual student attendance an Annual Measurable Objective in the Accountability section of the waiver application.

**Recommendation 2:** Include chronic and satisfactory attendance in the performance indices being proposed for any new or revised statewide school accountability systems.

**Recommendation 3:** Make chronic absence a factor in determining which campuses are deemed Focus and Priority schools as defined in the waiver process and assessing how much progress they make.

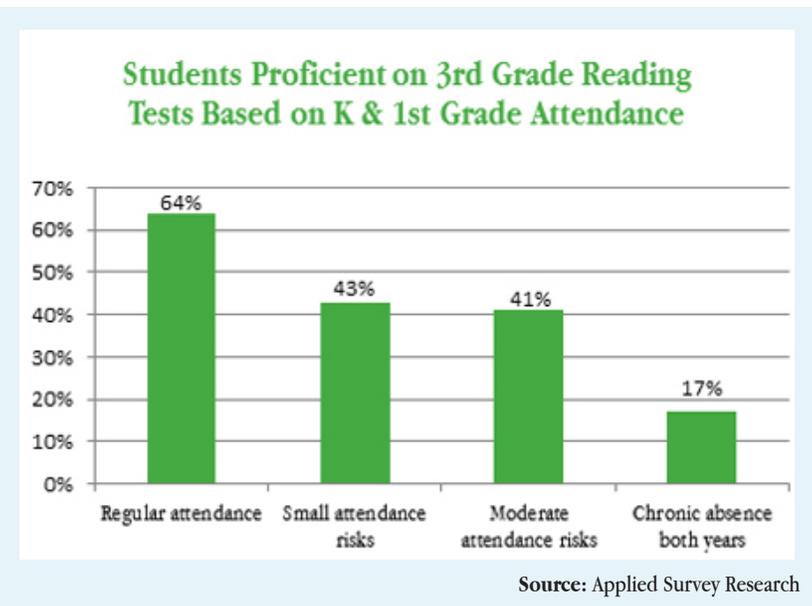
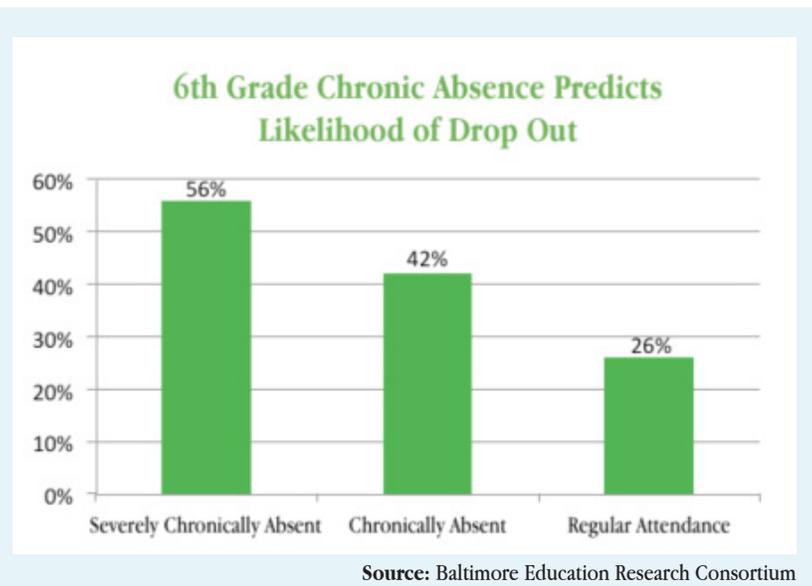
**Recommendation 4:** Make good or improved attendance a factor in determining bonuses for Reward schools.

## The Attendance Imperative

The connection between attendance and individual student achievement is intuitive: If you don't show up, you don't learn. In Baltimore City Public Schools, administrators found an average 25-percentage point gap in standardized test scores between students who attended regularly and those who missed 20 or more days in the previous year, which is Maryland's definition of chronic absence.<sup>i</sup> That achievement gap was bigger than the one separating students by socioeconomic status or English language skills. Baltimore's efforts to address chronic absence have been credited with helping the city turn around its flagging graduation rates. A recent study in Georgia estimated that 10,000 more students would have passed the state's reading test and 30,000 more students would have passed the math test if they had just attended five more days of school in the prior year.<sup>ii</sup>

Research also shows a strong connection between attendance and high school graduation. By sixth grade, chronic absence becomes one of three early warning signs that a student will drop out of high school.<sup>iii</sup> By ninth grade, attendance is a better indicator of dropout than eighth grade test scores.<sup>iv</sup> Overall, a student with 10 or fewer absences—roughly the equivalent of satisfactory attendance in most districts—is two and a half times more likely to graduate than is a chronically absent peer.<sup>v</sup>

What many policymakers do not realize, however, is that chronic absenteeism affects students long before middle or high school. Nationally, research suggests one in 10 kindergarten and 1st grade students misses nearly a month of school. Children living in poverty who are chronically absent in kindergarten have the lowest levels of academic performance by the time they reached fifth grade.<sup>vi</sup> A study in Northern California found only 17 percent of students chronically absent in both kindergarten and 1st grade were reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade, compared to 64 percent of those who showed up regularly.<sup>vii</sup> Students who do not learn to reading proficiently by the end



of third grade are likely to fall further behind once they reach fourth grade and are expected to “read to learn.”

What's more, chronic absenteeism can affect the entire classroom, when teachers have to slow down instruction to accommodate students who missed the lessons in the first place. A study of New York City fourth graders found that even students with good attendance had lower standardized test scores when they went to schools where absentee rates were too high.<sup>viii</sup>

## Tracking the Right Data

Tracking chronic absence and satisfactory attendance rarely requires any additional data collection, just a different way of looking what's collected. Schools typically keep absence records for individual students, and most districts store this information electronically, often turning it over to states for use in longitudinal student databases. Many states currently track some measures of attendance to determine Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind. With rare exceptions, though most rely on average daily attendance figures or on truancy rates, which reflect only unexcused absences. Both of these measures can hide a genuine problem with students accumulating enough absences for any reason – excused or unexcused – to put them at risk academically.

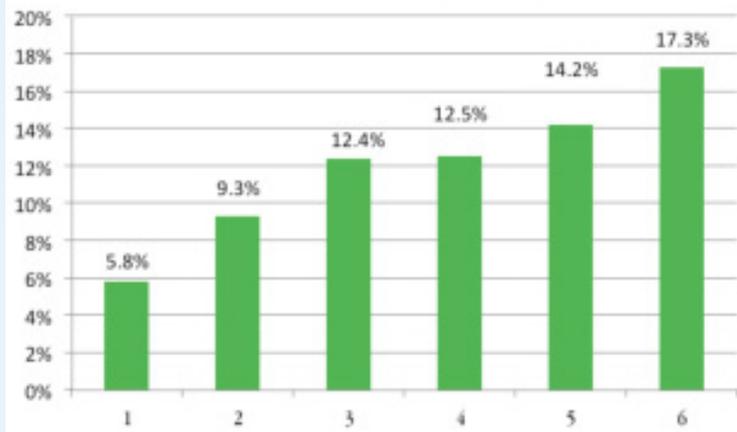
For instance, 95 percent average daily attendance for an entire school is typically considered good. But when researchers looked at elementary school attendance in three urban school districts, they found that a 95 percent average often masked a bigger problem with chronic absence. Think about it like this: If you had 100 students in your school and 95 percent showed up every day, you'd still have five absences a day. That's 900 absences over the course of the 180-day school year, and that could mean as many as 45 kids missing 20 days of school. It's rarely that extreme, but the three-district analysis found that at elementary schools with that 95 percent average, the proportion of chronically absent students ranged from 7 percent to a troublesome 23 percent.<sup>ix</sup>

It is also critical for states to focus on chronic absence because unexcused absences or truancy figures do not tell the entire story. As this chart of attendance data from Baltimore, Md., reveals, truancy often fails to detect all the students who are at risk academically due to poor attendance. Excessive absences reflect more than simply willfully skipping school. School attendance drops

when families lack the financial resources to meet their basic needs for shelter, food, clothing, and transportation. Health problems such as asthma and poor dental care can keep kids from attending regularly. Safety concerns, including neighborhood violence and schoolyard bullying, also keep students home. If classroom instruction is ineffective and not engaging, student may reflect their discontent by failing to show up.

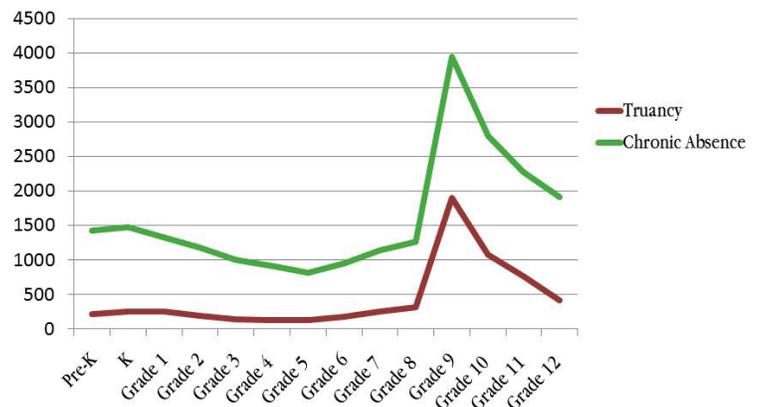
In the early grades, truancy rates are generally low and have

Percentage of Chronically Absent Students at Oakland Schools with 95% Average Daily Attendance



Source: Oakland Unified School District

Chronically Absent and Truant Students in Baltimore



Source: Baltimore Student Attendance Initiative

little relationships to chronic absence, because very young children seldom stay home without the knowledge of an adult who calls in an excuse. Among older students, truancy often underestimates the scale of the attendance problem because it does not capture days missed to suspensions, which are considered school-authorized rather than unexcused. Overly punitive approaches to school discipline can unnecessarily cause students to miss so much school that they fall behind.

### Improving student performance by reducing chronic absence

The good news is research and the experience of a growing number of local initiatives show that chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families, and community agencies work together to ensure children attend school regularly. The most effective efforts:

- Use data on chronic absence to identify patterns, set a target for reduction and monitor progress over time
- Take comprehensive approaches involving students, families, and community agencies
- Create engaged, personalized learning environments which entice students to attend school every day.
- Examine factors contributing to chronic absence, especially from parent perspectives
- Pay attention to attendance early, ideally starting in pre-K
- Combine strategies to improve attendance among all children, with special interventions targeting those who are chronically absent
- Offer positive supports to promote school attendance before resorting to punitive responses or legal action.

Ultimately, states need to assess rates of chronic absence to know why schools are not performing and what is needed to turn achievement around: Are students struggling academically because what's happening in the classroom is not meeting their needs, or because they're not in class often enough to benefit from what school has to offer?

### Definitions of Key Attendance Measures:

#### Average Daily Attendance:

The percentage of enrolled students who attend school each day.

#### Satisfactory Attendance:

Missing 5% or less of school in an academic year including all absences: excused, unexcused, suspensions.

#### Chronic Absence:

Missing 10% or more of school in an academic year including all absences. We recommend a percentage rather than a set number of days because it promotes earlier intervention throughout the year and better comparison across districts.

#### Truancy:

Typically refers only to unexcused absences and is defined by each state.

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If you get 90 percent on a test, you're doing pretty good. **If your attendance is 90 percent in 180-day year you are missing 18 days of school**, nearly a month. What are our best teachers supposed to do in that situation?

”

**Arne Duncan**

*U.S. Secretary of Education*

## How to Use Chronic Absence in a Waiver Application

The waiver process grew out of frustration over NCLB's rigid rules and a sense that the strictures were inhibiting true reform. The 10-year-old federal act judges a school as failing if one subpopulation is not making adequate progress. It prescribes a set of interventions that offer little flexibility, and it provides for student and school supports that haven't consistently proved effective. The waiver application or "ESEA Flexibility Request" allows states to develop their own "system of differentiated recognition, accountability and support." As such, it affords several opportunities for including chronic absence and satisfactory attendance in the index for judging schools. These opportunities include:

**Recommendation 1. Make improving individual student attendance—specifically chronic absence and satisfactory—attendance Annual Measurable Objectives in the Accountability section of the application.** The Education Department asks states to develop Annual Measure Objectives or performance targets for the new accountability systems. The department proposes three approaches to framing the goals: reduce by half the percentage of all students and students in each subgroup who are not proficient within six years; set a goal to achieve 100 percent proficiency by 2020; or to create another "similarly ambitious" method that is educationally sound and results in ambitious but achievable AMOs for all LEAs, schools, and subgroups.

The third option affords an opportunity for schools to move beyond simply tracking average daily attendance to monitoring chronic absence and satisfactory attendance levels for all schools. Even though ESEA typically only focuses on collecting data starting in grade 3, we recommend requiring reporting of these attendance measures starting in kindergarten. Data for this proven early warning sign is already available then, and high levels of chronic absence in the early grades is correlated with lower academic performance in 3rd grades. We suggest states require all schools to report on the levels of chronic absence and satisfactory attendance for the entire student body, as well as by grade and student sub-population. To ensure comparability, states should establish or maintain statewide

guidelines for defining when a student should be marked absent for the day.

Including these measures helps to promote college and career readiness. Simply put, students are not ready for career or college if they do not have the persistence to attend school regularly. Chronic absenteeism underscores a student's lack of persistence and time management skills, two academic behaviors that David Conley's "College Knowledge" identifies as key to college readiness.<sup>x</sup>

**Recommendation 2: Include chronic and satisfactory attendance in the performance indices being proposed for any new or revised statewide school accountability systems.** Analysis of the first 11 applications suggest that states are using the waiver process as an opportunity to replace Adequate Yearly Progress with a more multi-faceted measures to which all schools could be held accountable.<sup>xi</sup> Levels of chronic absence and satisfactory attendance should be available for each school and compared to the statistics for the other elementary, middle or high schools in their district. It should also be publicly reported and comparable across school districts.

**Recommendation 3. Make attendance a factor in determining which campuses are Focus and Priority schools.** The waiver process requires states to identify the lowest performing 5 percent of schools as Priority schools and another 10 percent with the largest achievement gaps as Focus schools. In addition to test scores and graduation rates, states can include high chronic absence rates in the formulas for determining which schools need extra attention. Likewise reduced chronic absenteeism and improved satisfactory attendance should be considered metrics for assessing improvement in these schools.

**Recommendation 4: Make good or improved attendance a factor in determining bonuses to Reward schools.** Title I schools where students are performing well academically or where they are making steady progress would be considered Reward schools and eligible for bonuses. Use improved attendance for individual students as an additional factor in considering when schools are eligible for bonuses. It could also be used as incentive for other Title I schools.

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