The Facts About Chronic Absence

Prevalence

• Nationwide an estimated 5 million to 7.5 million students are chronically absent each year, meaning they miss 10 percent or more of the school year in excused and unexcused absences. That’s about 18-19 days in a typical year.¹
• High levels of chronic absence are found in urban, suburban and rural communities. In some school districts, as many as one in four students are chronically absent.²
• This is not just a high school problem. One in 10 kindergarten and 1st grade students is chronically absent.³
• Low-income students are four times more likely to be chronically absent than their middle class peers.⁴
• Chronic absence occurs even when the absences occur sporadically throughout the year.⁵

Impact

• Students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are less likely to read proficiently by the time they finish third grade. Preliminary data in California found that 17 percent of those students were reading on grade level at the end of third grade, compared to 62 percent who attended regularly.⁶
• Lower levels of third grade reading are also found among children chronically absent in preschool and kindergarten or who did not ever attend preschool.⁷
• By sixth grade, chronic absence becomes an early warning sign that a student may drop out of high school, a Baltimore study found.⁸
• By ninth grade, it is a better indicator than eighth-grade test scores that a student will drop out.⁹ A study in Utah found that a student chronically absent any year between eighth and 12th grade was 7.4 times more likely to drop out.¹⁰
• Children with certain risk factors—including poverty, homelessness and chronic illness—are both more likely to be chronic absent and especially hard hit because they often lack the resources to make up for the lost opportunities to learn in the classroom.¹¹
• Chronic absence is often higher among children with disabilities. This requires examining the nature of the disability and how well the educational needs of these children are being met.
• In school districts where state funding is determined by average daily attendance, chronic absence is costing districts millions of dollars each year.

Monitoring

• Many schools, and districts and preschools have no idea how big the problem is because they don’t track how many students are chronically absent.
• Schools typically look at average daily attendance (the percentage of students who show up every day) or at truancy (unexcused absences) but not at how many kids miss so many days in excused and unexcused absences that they are headed off track academically.
• A school can have 95 percent of its students show up for school every day and still have 20 percent who are chronically absent, since school-wide averages don’t show whether all students are missing a few days or a subset of students is missing school frequently.¹²
• There is no federal requirement to track chronic absence, and few states require school districts report the data. Most states and districts have the capacity to calculate chronic absence based upon the attendance data in their student databases.
• Chronic absence can be reduced when schools, communities and families work together to track the data, build a culture of attendance and address barriers to good attendance.


3 Chang and Romero


10 Chronic Absence in Utah, Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah, 2012.


12 Bruner, Charles, Anne Discher and Hedy Chang, Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight, Child and Family Policy Center and Attendance Works, November 2011