

Executive Summary

Research confirms what we know from common sense: Showing up for class matters. Missing 10 percent of the school year for any reason — excused or unexcused — can leave students unable to master reading by the end of third grade and can signal that a student is more likely to drop out of high school. Nationwide, an estimated 5 million to 7.5 million students (more than one out of 10) miss that much school every year, a crisis in absenteeism that is exacerbating achievement gaps and dropout rates.

The good news is that chronic absence can be turned around when schools, districts, community agencies and families work together to monitor the data, identify and remove barriers for getting students to class, and nurture a habit of regular attendance. State policy and action are essential to advancing such practice.

Policymakers and advocates at the state level can take several key steps to support this work, including:

- 1 Public awareness:** Build public awareness of chronic absence and why it matters for doing well in school, graduating from high school and eventually succeeding in the workplace.
- 2 Standard Definition:** Adopt a standard definition of chronic absence (ideally, define it as missing 10 percent of school for any reason) to be used statewide and by each school district. The definition should clarify that chronic absence includes excused as well as unexcused absences (truancy), and should ensure that absences due to suspensions or children switching schools are also counted.
- 3 Attendance Tracking:** Track individual student attendance and absences in state longitudinal student databases and ensure that data are entered accurately and consistently as early as preschool.
- 4 Chronic Absence Reports:** Regularly calculate and publicly share chronic absence data statewide, providing information by district, school, grade and subgroup.
- 5 Reports to Families:** Urge districts to provide families with actionable, real-time data on their child's attendance, as well as an alert if their child is accruing too many absences.



- 6 School Improvement:** Require district and school improvement plans to include chronic absence data and strategies for nurturing a culture of attendance, identifying causes of absence and fashioning effective interventions for chronically absent student.
- 7 Capacity Building:** Ensure district leadership, educators, parents, staff of community-based organizations and public agencies have the opportunity to learn about evidence-based and promising practices for reducing chronic absence. Promote comprehensive and collaborative approaches that start with universal supports to nurture a habit of going to school every day and offer personalized early outreach for those with at-risk attendance patterns. More costly and intensive interventions involving legal action and the justice system should be used only as a last resort.
- 8 Interagency Resource Allocation and Coordination:** Use chronic absence rates to facilitate coordination among districts, public agencies, parent organizations, civic organizations, businesses, nonprofits and policymakers. Encourage joint review of chronic absence data to inform the allocation of resources (such as health services, transportation, early care and education, afterschool programming and mentoring) that can improve school attendance as well as relevant local and state policies.

Most states are well-positioned to start this important work because they already track attendance and absences in their longitudinal student data systems. A growing number are beginning to draw upon the power of attendance data to turn around absenteeism and inform strategies for promoting student success. For example, state leaders and advocates in Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Oregon, Rhode Island and Utah have used longitudinal student data systems to produce statewide chronic absence reports showing the scale, scope and concentration of the problem. Several reports confirmed the connection between attendance and student achievement. Each year, more states -- including New Jersey, Indiana, Hawaii, California and Oregon -- are incorporating measures of chronic absence into school accountability systems. Some states, such as Massachusetts and Virginia, have developed early warning systems, which track chronic absence and other metrics to help keep students on track for graduation.

States are starting to recognize that it is no longer enough simply to count how many students show up on average for school every day or to concentrate on truancy (unexcused absences). State policy and action can ensure that districts and schools use chronic absence data to trigger a timely response and collaborate with families and community partners to prevent children from missing so much school that they fall behind and lose hope of ever succeeding in school. When it comes to lost instructional time, an absence is an absence.

