



Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: → Charting a Course for Student Success

As we work to close achievement gaps and reduce dropout rates, educators and policymakers often overlook another pernicious problem that is undermining success for our most vulnerable young students: the attendance gap. Across the country, an estimated 5 million to 7.5 million students are missing nearly a month of school and suffering academically for it.

The problem starts early: At least 10 percent of kindergartners and first graders miss that much school, absences that can stall their progress in reading and deny them an equal opportunity to learn. Chronic absence flares again in middle and high school, when it becomes an early warning sign that students will drop out. Children from low-income families and communities of color, and those with disabilities are disproportionately affected.

This isn't simply a matter of truancy or skipping school. In fact, many of these absences, especially among our youngest students, are excused and tied directly to health factors: asthma and dental problems, learning disabilities and mental health issues related to trauma and community violence. In many cases, these attendance trends go unnoticed because schools are counting how many students show up every day rather than looking at how many miss so much school, for any reason, that they are falling behind.

Essentially, these early attendance gaps turn into achievement gaps that create graduation gaps. Poor attendance is among our first and best warning signs that a student has missed the on-ramp to success and is headed off track for graduation. We must address attendance and its connection to public health early in a child's life.

To do that effectively, we need to map our attendance gaps, starting with our youngest students. States are uniquely positioned to analyze the data they collect and determine who

Who's Missing Too Much School?

An analysis of attendance data provided by 4th and 8th graders taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2011 and 2013 reveals that students who reported missing three or more days in the month before the test scored significantly lower than students who missed no days. The proportion of students missing that much school was higher among the same populations of students who are most at risk for not graduating.

Low-income students: 23 percent of low-income 4th graders missed three or more days in the month prior to the test, compared to 17 percent of their peers. In 8th grade, the gap was 8 points with significantly higher rates in some states. Weak attendance often reflects the challenges that accompany poverty, such as unreliable transportation, unstable housing and little access to health care.

Children of color: The highest absenteeism rates nationwide were among American Indian/Alaskan native students. Black and Hispanic students typically have higher levels with wide gaps in some places. A deeper analysis can help schools and communities determine how much poverty, health considerations or ineffective school discipline practice affect attendance rates.

Students with disabilities: 25 percent of 4th graders and 27 percent of 8th graders identified as needing support for disabilities miss too much school, compared to 19 percent of others in both grades. Some of these absences result from the health concerns of physically disabled students, but others reflect bullying, school aversion or the lack of appropriate educational placements.

is missing too much school, when and where students are most likely to be absent and why absences are adding up. State leaders can shift the focus – and the accountability metrics – from truancy to chronic absenteeism, a measure of how many students miss 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason.

This brief maps the national attendance gap – the who, what, when, where and why of absenteeism – using research drawn from national sources as well as attendance data gathered from students taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Health emerges again and again, both as a challenge and as a solution to improving attendance. Our appendices list NAEP attendance data for every state – broken down by income, race and ethnicity, and special education status – revealing wide gaps in some places.

The brief documents how states can use their data to help schools and communities unpack when and why chronic absence becomes a problem in the early grades so that they can put in place effective solutions. The work breaks down into five key steps:

- 1. Make the case that chronic early absence matters:** Inspiring action starts with being able to make the case to key stakeholders that chronic early absence is a matter of concern. That requires obtaining the data to show impact and scale, and engaging key champions to spread the word.
- 2. Map chronic early absence:** States can break down their data to show chronic absence rates by grade, district school, student population, even classroom. Equipped with this information, states can promote more effective and efficient allocation of resources to places experiencing the highest rates of absenteeism.
- 3. Engage partners in unpacking why early absences occur:** Interventions are most effective when they respond directly to the issues that are preventing students from getting to class. A variety of partners can help unearth the reasons for absenteeism. This brief pays particular attention to health-related causes of absence and leveraging the power of health partners to understand why students miss school.
- 4. Learn from positive outliers:** There are always schools and districts that are beating the odds, improving or maintaining high levels of attendance despite challenging conditions. States can use data to identify these places and figure out what strategies are working for them.
- 5. Embed action into existing initiatives:** Too often, something that requires new organization or infrastructure simply does not get done. Increasingly, states are finding ways to integrate it into tiered systems of support, school climate indices, third grade reading initiatives, school improvement planning and community partnerships.

This brief concludes with a discussion about a variety of stakeholders, across sectors, can help build state-level capacity to map and address the attendance gap by promoting actionable data, positive messaging, capacity building and shared accountability.

Read the full report: [Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting a Course for Student Success](#)