

Chronic absence data can provide a wealth of information to reporters covering education. An analysis can show what parts of the city or school district have the most students missing too many school days. Chronic absence, starting in kindergarten, is associated with lower academic performance, especially for children living in poverty. It can also signal community distress, i.e. poverty, homelessness, unhealthy living conditions and neighborhood violence.

Start by asking your school district or state department of education if they have an analysis of chronic absence rates, ideally by district, school, grade and sub-population. If they haven't done an analysis, you can request the data (with student names scrubbed) and do a school-by-school or district-by-district comparison. If they don't have data, it's fair to write a story about why they don't look at this critical piece of information that can guide efforts to improve schools.

What you need to know to get started:

- **What are the different measures of attendance?**

Average Daily Attendance (ADA): Average number of enrolled students who attend school each day.

Chronic Absence: When a student misses so much school for any reason including excused and unexcused absences that they are at risk academically. Typically, suspensions are included although some states do not include them in the count of absences. Numerous research studies, and the practices of several states, define chronic absence as missing 10% of the school year (or about 18 days in a 180 school year). The federal Office of Civil Rights data is currently using 15 or more school days in a year.

Truancy: Typically refers only to unexcused absences. Each state has the authority to define truancy and when it triggers legal intervention.

- **Do state, district or school policies call for reporting on chronic absence?**

The new [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), signed into law by President Obama on Dec. 10, 2015, requires states to report chronic absenteeism rates as part of Title I. The former No Child Left Behind required states to define and track truancy, so most states require schools and districts to report on unexcused absences. Truancy however, masks when children are missing a significant number of days of school with an excuse. Especially, in the early grades, truancy doesn't capture what is going on since young children are likely to be home with an adult's permission. Likewise, average daily attendance numbers don't capture how many individual students are missing too much school.

A growing number of states, such as Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington report on the number and percent of students who are missing a significant number of days of school. But the definitions vary by state. Maryland defines this as missing 20 or more days. Hawaii sets it as 15 days and Oregon and New Jersey have adopted the 10% definition.

A small number of states, such as Colorado and Maine don't currently collect data on individual student attendance as part of their longitudinal student databases. [California](#) will begin collecting chronic student absence data from districts for the 2016-2017 school year.

- **Can you run your own analysis of chronic absence?**

Even if a district has never calculated the levels of chronic absence for their students, it typically has the data needed to do the analysis since most now track attendance electronically for individual students. In this case, you can run your own analysis.

The first step is to request individual student absence and enrollment data, with student identifier numbers rather than names. Then you can calculate chronic absence by dividing the total number of days absent by the total days enrolled in a district. If absences are more than 10 percent of total days enrolled, we consider the student chronically absent. Currently, there is no standard definition of chronic absence, though Attendance Works recommends using missing 10% of the school year for any reason.

In some communities, foundations, nonprofits or university researchers are looking at educational data and may be assessing whether chronic absence is a problem in their communities. They can also be sources for information and data.

- **If the data is available, where is it kept? Does anyone do anything to collate and analyze it?**

Several states include this data on their websites. The most common place is in school or district report cards. Chronic absence data are also available through a growing number of Kids Count grantees in their state report cards. A handful of districts have also published chronic absence rates for their schools.

If the state or district analyzes this data and releases a report, broken down by socioeconomic status and other demographic factors, you're in luck. Keep in mind that even if a state does not run an analysis of chronic absence, a local district might.

In June or July of 2016, the US Office of Civil Rights will for the first time release data on chronic absence as part of the biannual release of OCR data. Using a 15-day measure, OCR will provide a snapshot of chronic absence based on 2013-2014 attendance data from almost every public school and district in the nation. In this survey, chronically absent students include students who are absent for any reason, whether the absences were excused, unexcused or due to suspension.

The OCR data will be disaggregated by district, school, race/ethnicity, gender, limited English proficiency, and disability status. But it won't include chronic absence data by grade.

- **Why do schools and communities need to know if chronic absence is a problem?**

Improving achievement requires knowing if students are struggling academically because: a) they aren't in the classroom enough to benefit from the instruction, or b) they regularly attend but what happens in the classroom isn't helping them achieve.

If a school has a significant chronic absence problem, officials can work with the community to understand and address the factors that prevent students from attending school. We know that parents care about their child's academic achievement, but not all parents realize that school attendance matters even in the early grades. Schools and communities can work together to alert caregivers to the importance of attendance and to help them develop the skills and routines to get their children to school.

If poor attendance is connected to lack of health care, unreliable transportation or fear of community violence, then schools can use the data to forge partnerships with community agencies that address these problems. If chronic absence is concentrated among particular classrooms, then school administrators may need to figure out if those teachers need support partnering with parents and engaging their students in the classroom.

For more information:

Read *Present, Engaged and Accounted For* at http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_837.html.

Find success stories and strategies to reduce chronic absence on the Attendance Works website at www.attendanceworks.org

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