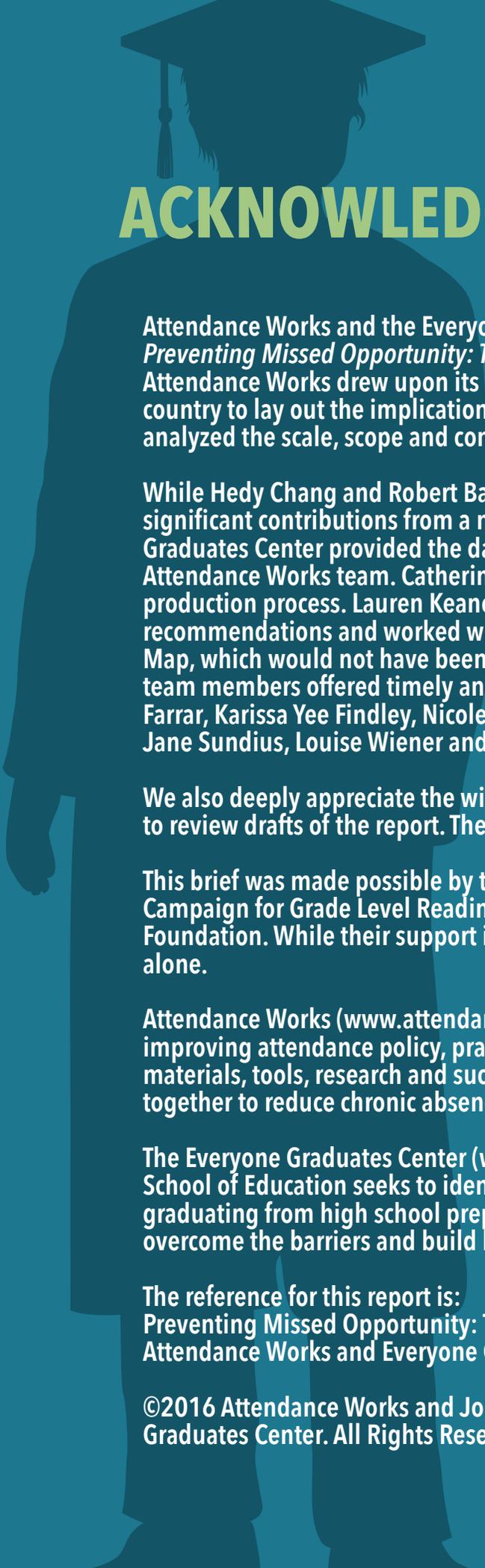# PREVENTING MISSED OPPORTUNITY:

Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence

SEPTEMBER 2016

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org) is a national initiative dedicated to improving attendance policy, practice and research. Its website offers a rich array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.

The Everyone Graduates Center (www.every1graduates.org) at Johns Hopkins University, School of Education seeks to identify the barriers that stand in the way of all students graduating from high school prepared for adult success, develop strategic solutions to overcome the barriers and build local capacity to implement and sustain them.

The reference for this report is:
Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence, Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center, September 2016.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the United States, the promise of an equal opportunity to learn and succeed, regardless of circumstance or social class, is a shared value and widely accepted civil right that binds us together as a nation. The recent release of the first-ever national, chronic absence data set by the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Office for Civil Rights (OCR) reveals that this promise is broken for far too many children. More than 6.5 million students, or about 13 percent, missed three or more weeks of school during a single school year, which is enough time to erode their achievement and threaten their chance of graduating. Over half were in elementary or middle school. Students from communities of color (African American, Native American, Pacific Islander and Latino) as well as those with learning disabilities were disproportionately affected.

The OCR's chronic absence data are part of its Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), a biennial survey encompassing nearly all public school districts in the United States. For the 2013-14 school year, OCR asked districts to report, for the first time, on the number of students who missed 15 days of school for any reason. This definition of chronic absence is similar to the most commonly used definition of missing 10 percent of school.

Studies show that missing just 10 percent or more of school – whether absences are excused, unexcused or due to suspension – predicts lower levels of numeracy and literacy for students by third grade, class failure in middle school and higher levels of suspension. It also can lead to a higher likelihood that students will drop out of high school and will have lower levels of persistence in college.[1] Chronic absence is problematic starting in preschool and kindergarten. The academic impact of absenteeism is greatest for children living in poverty whose families typically have fewer – and less access to – resources to make up for the lost school learning opportunities.[2]

This brief shares insights gained about where chronic absence can be found, and provides an overview of what states and districts can do to ensure the collection, analysis and sharing of real-time data is used to spur collective action. Inspiring success stories are highlighted throughout.

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WHERE ARE CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS FOUND?

An analysis of the OCR data, combined with statistics on poverty available from the Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics, yields the following insights:

» **Across the United States, chronic absence at varying levels affected the vast majority of school districts (89 percent) in the country.** Districts with chronically absent students reported numbers ranging from two to 72,376 students.*

» **Half the chronically absent students are, however, found in just 4 percent of the nation's school districts and 12 percent of its schools.** These 654 districts are spread across 47 states and the District of Columbia.

» **This trend of large numbers of chronically absent students affecting a handful of districts also holds true for states.** In fact, 10 percent of the chronically absent students nationwide can be found in just 30 districts in two states with very large student populations, California and Texas.

» **Some of the places with the largest numbers of chronically absent students are affluent, suburban districts known for academic achievement.** For example, Montgomery County, Md., and Fairfax County, Va., two suburbs of Washington, D.C., each have more than 20,000 chronically absent students. While their absence rates are close to the national average, the large numbers reflect the sheer size of the districts and their growing populations of low-income students.

» **Districts serving disadvantaged urban neighborhoods with high rates of poverty typically have both high rates and large numbers of chronically absent students.** In these places, which are also highly segregated communities of color, chronic absence reflects a web of structural challenges that includes the lack of adequate affordable housing, limited access to health care and the absence of well-resourced schools. Children may also suffer from exposure to violence and environmental pollutants, making regular school attendance more difficult. Cities such as Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia report that more than a third of students are chronically absent.

» **Many small, poor rural school districts have few students, but face extremely high rates of chronic absenteeism.** While most of the districts with large numbers of chronically absent students are urban and suburban, the majority of districts reporting rates of 30 percent or higher are rural and town districts. Transportation and other challenges related to poverty can keep students from getting to school regularly in remote areas.

This analysis makes clear that chronic absence affects schools everywhere – from sprawling suburban districts where absenteeism can occur in the shadow of academic achievement, to small rural communities where geography complicates getting to school. It's also clear that chronic absenteeism follows poverty wherever it is found in significant concentrations. This includes big cities and mid-sized communities with sizeable populations of color, as well as small towns and rural areas that are largely white. Analysis highlights are shown in this [Chronic Absence Story Map](#).

Many of the communities with the highest rates of chronic absence are economically, socially and racially isolated. Concentrated chronic absenteeism both reflects and exacerbates the problems these communities face. Unaffordable housing, poor health and unsafe streets can make it difficult for students to get to school every day.[3] Tensions between schools and poor communities, especially poor communities of color, can also exacerbate efforts to address absenteeism. Negative past experiences with schools may make it difficult for families to trust and connect with schools. Punitive reactions (i.e. suspensions, expulsions, threatening letters and lost enrichment opportunities) on the part of school personnel toward children can create more distrust and, in some cases, increase time missed from the classroom.[4] High levels of chronic absence can affect every student's opportunity to learn because the resulting classroom churn can make it more difficult for teachers to offer engaging instruction.[5]

> **Schools need to offer welcoming, engaging, safe school environments as well as positive messaging that emphasizes the need to avoid unnecessary absences.**

WHAT REDUCES CHRONIC ABSENCE?

Reducing chronic absence requires a comprehensive, tiered approach that goes far beyond just enforcing school attendance rules. It starts with prevention. Schools need to offer welcoming, engaging, safe school environments as well as positive messaging that emphasizes the need to avoid unnecessary absences. It takes investing in early intervention, for example, helping students with poor attendance form positive, caring relationships with other adults or peers that encourage them to get to class even when it is not easy. It involves addressing attendance barriers such as unreliable transportation, chronic health issues, unstable housing or the lack of safe paths to school.

Especially in communities with large numbers and high concentrations of chronically absent students, it requires schools to forge strategic partnerships with government agencies and other key stakeholders who can help provide sufficient resources to meet the needs of children, their families and schools.

Successful initiatives to address chronic absence are being implemented across the country.

In Grand Rapids Mich., chronic absence has been reduced, by over a third, from 35.1 percent district-wide to 22.5 percent in three years. The school district's comprehensive, data-driven approaches combine innovative community-wide messaging (The Challenge Five: Strive for Less than Five Days) with building the capacity of schools, especially principals, to adopt best practices and deep partnerships with community agencies to address the needs of families.

In San Francisco, Hope SF, a cross-sector initiative dedicated to transforming public housing without large scale displacement, found over 53 percent of students living in public housing were chronically absent versus less than 10 percent city-wide. Hope SF has reduced chronic absence among students in public housing by combining resident-led strategies like walking school buses, with interagency data sharing, education liaisons based at housing sites, and closer collaboration with schools and the department of public health. Close attention is being paid to the impact of trauma.

A number of the communities hardest hit by chronic absenteeism recently joined the My Brother's Keeper Success Mentors Initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education. This proven intervention provides chronically absent students and their families with school-based mentors, nested in larger support systems.   A major thrust is partnering with proven organizations to reach out and enlist the participation of thousands of caring volunteers.

Diplomas Now targets some of the most challenged middle and high schools in America's largest cities. This innovative model enhances a school's curriculum and instruction, while providing students with the right support to improve attendance, behavior and course performance.   Preliminary results show a 17 percent reduction in chronic absence among 6th graders.

The brief also highlights how state level efforts make a difference. For instance, Connecticut has leveraged data in its longitudinal student data system, and local success stories to help key stakeholders across sectors understand why chronic absence matters. It has built chronic absence into its accountability system for school improvement and has started to see statewide reductions. As part of its comprehensive early literacy effort, the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, launched Make Every Day Count. Three elementary schools - Marvell Elaine, Monitor and Parson Hills - saw substantial reductions. They invested in messaging, offered targeted intervention, such as home visits and attendance buddies, and conducted outreach to immigrant families.

HOW COULD CHRONIC ABSENCE TRIGGER COLLECTIVE ACTION?

Until recently, most states and localities have missed the opportunity to use attendance data to prevent chronic absence. This brief discusses how every state and district should track and monitor chronic absence data so it can be used to target school and community resources. It recommends that we:

1. Invest in consistent and accurate data collection. In order to ensure data are comparable across districts, states should establish a common definition of chronic absenteeism (ideally, missing 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason) and provide a standard approach for calculating a day of attendance. In addition, states and districts should offer guidance to support regular collection of attendance data and monitoring for accuracy.

2. Use data to understand need and disproportionate impact in order to target resources. Leaders need to know the size of their chronic absence problem in order to understand how to improve educational outcomes. Information about the concentration and the severity of absenteeism also sheds light on the intensity and nature of supports required. The concept of multi-tiered systems of support not only helps to promote a prevention-oriented approach with students, but it also can be used to inform how states and districts build capacity to carry out the work. Analyzing the impact of chronic absence on students in particular grades, neighborhoods, or sub-groups (such as ethnicity, English Language Learner, or Special Education) can help further tailor interventions.

3. Leverage data to identify places that are getting results. States and districts should look for the places that are beating the odds – keeping absenteeism rates low despite challenging circumstances. These positive outliers can provide inspiration to other places struggling to turn around chronic absenteeism.

4. Share data with key stakeholders. Chronic absence data can only make a difference if it is widely available. Key stakeholders include those closest to the situation, particularly students, families and school staff, and district leaders, state policymakers, agency partners and even the general public who can provide resources and create accountability. What data should be shared and how often depends upon who is using it. Immediate data access is critical for those closest to a child so it can serve as an early warning trigger for action.

5. Equip stakeholders to unpack barriers and take action. Once data are available, people need to know how to analyze and use them. They need to understand that identifying barriers to attendance requires a combination of chronic absence statistics, qualitative information and other school and agency data. An important strategy for equipping stakeholders is to create teams and forums where they can review the data together and jointly determine the implications for action.

6. Create shared accountability. Chronic absence needs to be built into the accountability systems that are used by states and districts to measure progress and identify where additional support is needed to improve student performance. Implementation of the federal Every Students Succeeds Act also offers states the opportunity to adopt chronic absence as an indicator of school quality and student success, especially since it meets all of the criteria for what would be an appropriate metric.

The challenge and opportunity of improving attendance is to avoid making the all-too-common, incorrect assumption that chronically absent students and/or their parents simply do not care. Rather than responding with blame, we need to use chronic absence to trigger collective, strategic, creative problem solving and action. Part of the power of chronic absence is that it's an easy to understand education metric that motivates and reinforces collaboration across sectors. Schools and districts cannot do this alone, particularly in communities facing concentrated poverty and high levels of chronic absence. Chronic absence requires all of us – schools, public officials, public agencies, civic organizations, business, philanthropy, families and students – to use the data to focus our attention and target interventions so all children have an equal opportunity to learn and succeed.

* **Note:** This analysis was developed prior to data corrections submitted to the OCR for Florida and New York City. Nonetheless, we believe these gaps do not change the overall patterns and suggest the overall levels of students missing 15 or more days are an underestimate.

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