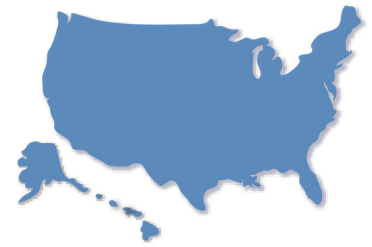


Leveraging ESSA's New Accountability Requirements for Chronic Absence: Investment Recommendations for Philanthropy



Prepared by Attendance Works for the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, June 2017

The adoption of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)¹ represents a sea change in federal education policy and, in our view, it also provides a high-impact investment opportunity for state and local funders focused on grade-level reading. There are numerous ways in which GLR funders can support states in their efforts to plan for and implement the ESSA requirements. At the top of our list are investing in states' adoption of chronic absence as the ESSA-required School Quality or Student Success indicator, promoting use of chronic absence data in school improvement and planning and ensuring publicly reported chronic absence data is easy to obtain and understand.

What is Chronic Absence, and Why Does it Matter?

Children are chronically absent when they miss 10 percent or more of school in a year. There is robust evidence that chronic absence puts children at risk of school failure. Unfortunately, it's a widespread problem. Nationally, more than 6.8 million students are chronically absent.² It affects one out of ten kindergarteners and first-graders.³

Experience, common sense and [research](#) suggest that attendance habits are developed early. Poor attendance can be particularly harmful to young students, because it often sets the stage for poor attendance later on. Even more worrisome is the fact that early chronic absence is more common among children who are most in need of the social, emotional and academic supports that schools provide. For low-income children, those with special needs, or those who experience other challenges at home, [research](#) shows frequent absences have a large negative impact on the timely acquisition of reading and math skills.

Why Should Philanthropy Support Inclusion of Chronic Absence in ESSA Plans?

Chronic absence is one of the few measures of School Quality or Student Success that meet the rigorous criteria⁴ for inclusion in states' ESSA accountability rubrics. Chronic absence is a proven predictor of student performance. Consistent use of chronic absence data equips schools with the information they need to remove barriers to school attendance, to improve school climate and enhance student achievement.

From a cost standpoint, school districts do not have to collect additional data if they choose chronic absence as an indicator. Districts currently collect attendance data, are already required to report chronic absence rates to the U.S. Department of

Education, and must include chronic absence rates in state and local report cards.

Chronic absence indicators offer other advantages to state education officials that philanthropy can emphasize, including:

- By adopting chronic absence as an ESSA accountability measure, states signal to schools and districts that this measure should be included in their needs assessments and school improvement processes.
- Schools can use chronic absence data to alert them to the need to address related, but harder to quantify, issues, such as poor school climate or youth and parent disengagement.
- Chronic absence data provides a golden opportunity to connect early education with elementary school improvement efforts through transition planning and coordination because high levels of kindergarten chronic absence can be used to identify the need for greater supports in early childhood years.
- By monitoring chronic absence, not just truancy (unexcused absences), districts and schools can shift from punitive, downstream interventions to prevention and early intervention.

Investment Recommendations for Funders

Although states have until September 18, 2017 to submit ESSA plans, many have decided, or are seriously considering, chronic absence as an indicator in their accountability rubrics and/or school improvement efforts.⁵ Regardless of their decision, ESSA requires that these data be reported on a biannual basis. The chart below uses Attendance Works' key ingredients of change to offer guidance for tailoring investments to your state's situation.

Attendance Works' Key Ingredients for Systemic Change	Summary of Investments to Consider if Chronic Absence is:		
	Adopted as an Indicator in Your Jurisdiction's ESSA Plan ↓	Under Consideration for Adoption ↓	Reported, But Not Likely to be Adopted as an Indicator ↓
Shared Accountability	Publicize the inclusion of Chronic Absence and its value to school improvement.	Provide materials about value of including chronic absence as a school quality metric, fund advocates to make the case.	Educate stakeholders about the value of chronic absence. Encourage local districts to hold schools accountable for improving chronic absence.
Actionable Data	Advocate for public availability of chronic absence data that is easily understood and disaggregated by grade level and student characteristics. Provide support to state to develop accessible reports and online sites.		
Positive Engagement	Support public messaging campaigns. Disseminate research about chronic absence and its links to student achievement. Highlight schools and districts that have worked successfully to reduce chronic absence, draw upon GLR pacesetters.		
Capacity Building	Invest in technical assistance and peer learning to promote adoption of research-based, positive, problem-solving approaches to improving attendance.	Fund opportunities for stakeholders to learn about how using chronic absence can improve achievement and how to build the capacity of educators to use these approaches.	Support development of school improvement and technical assistance materials about chronic absence and positive approaches to improving attendance.
Strategic Partnerships	Convene schools, community partners and public agencies to review chronic absence data, to work jointly to adopt positive, problem-solving approaches to addressing barriers and to enhance understanding of the importance of regular attendance.		

Local, state and national grant makers can also help to improve attendance by advancing the following:

Build public awareness

- Support messaging campaigns to make it clear to the entire community that every school day counts. Posters, billboards, handouts and stickers will spread the word about the importance of attendance and the adverse impact of missing school. See the [Attendance Awareness Month website](#) for ideas and templates.
- Disseminate research on the impact of chronic absence and effective improvement approaches to thought leaders, philanthropic peers and education leaders.
- Ensure superintendents are signed on to Attendance Works' [Call to Action](#). Not only is participation a public declaration of support for regular attendance by district leaders, but it also ensures superintendents automatically receive resources via email.
- Call upon the superintendents, school board members and mayors and other officials in your funding jurisdiction to form a coalition - or encourage an existing coalition - to spearhead a community-wide effort with partners, including early childhood organizations, to reduce chronic absence. Provide funding to staff the coalition's work and messaging.
- Support dissemination of Attendance Works tool kits to grantees and other community organizations to ensure they are using effective methods for improving attendance.
- Provide support to reward successful attendance improvement efforts and/or to recognize good or improved student attendance.

Promote data-driven solutions

- Fund an in-depth analysis of chronic absence data that shows the prevalence of chronic absence and its patterning.
- Invest in research that demonstrates the local impact of chronic absence on student achievement and the cost-effectiveness of early intervention efforts to reduce chronic absence.
- Publish a report card showing chronic absence rates and other data for local schools. Point to successful schools and districts and spell out strategies for reducing chronic absence. These materials can be especially important in districts where chronic absence data are hard to find or not well known.
- Support training and peer learning opportunities to help school staff and administrators use chronic absence data to develop effective attendance initiatives and strategic interventions.

Encourage grantees to use chronic absence data

- Use chronic absence data to inform your grant making. High rates can tip you off to a community in distress. Use the data to decide where to invest in childcare, early education and afterschool programs. Ask grantees applying for funding to use chronic absence to assess community need and consider funding grantees that focus on reducing chronic absence.
- Use chronic absence as an accountability metric for your grantees. Where appropriate, chronic absence rates can also be a yardstick for measuring grantee results.

The key to reducing chronic absence is making investments that build the capacity of key stakeholders to use quantitative and qualitative data to craft and implement strategies that draw upon lessons learned from other places while responding to the particular challenges, assets and opportunities for action found in their own communities.

¹ The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015) reauthorized the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act and replaced the No Child Left Behind Act. ESSA gives states the power to set their own accountability standards within the legal parameters described in the law. One new requirement is that states define and measure school quality or student success. ESSA also requires that states report chronic absence, and allows federal spending on training to reduce absenteeism. Final plans are due to the U.S. Department of Education for review and approval on September 18, 2017.

² Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, First Look Report [PDF](#) (770K) (issued June 7, 2016; updated October 28, 2016).

³ Chang, Hedy; Romero, Mariajose, [Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades](#), National Center for Children in Poverty: NY, Sept. 2008.

⁴ ESSA indicators must be applicable to every student; be possible to disaggregate; be comparable across school districts; be able to distinguish differences in performance among schools; be valid and reliable; and have a proven impact on achievement.

⁵ See submitted plans: <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/statesubmission.html>.



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Attendance Works is a national initiative dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, studies and success stories about reducing chronic absence.

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