



The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to students gaining the academic and social skills they need to succeed. Reducing absenteeism is a simple, cost-effective, but often overlooked strategy for improving academic performance. Starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence—missing 10 percent of the academic year—can leave third graders unable to read proficiently, sixth graders struggling with coursework and high school students off track for graduation. Chronic absence is especially problematic among students living in poverty who are most likely to have poor attendance over multiple years and least likely to have the resources to make up for the lost time in the classroom. In some communities, chronic absence affects more than one out of four children.

Unfortunately, many schools and communities don't realize the extent of the problem because districts don't look at all the right data. They're paying attention to how many students show up every day and how many skip school, but not how many miss so much school in excused and unexcused absences that they're at risk academically.

The good news is chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture a habit of regular attendance and address hurdles that keep children from getting to school every day such as lack of access to health care, unhealthy environmental conditions, unreliable transportation, housing instability or the lack of safe paths to school.

Why we should care: Chronic absence represents both a symptom and a cause of many problems that foundations and donors are working to solve. High rates of absenteeism can:

- Signal a community in distress, whether because of unstable housing, violence or little access to healthcare
- Reflect a breakdown in family functioning or an ineffective school district
- Erode initiatives to improve schools and improve graduation rates
- Stall efforts to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty or to boost the local economy

At the same time, reducing chronic absence can be a winnable strategy for engaging the entire community. Local funders are well positioned to help because attendance is inherently an intensely local challenge requiring locally informed solutions.

This is a problem we can solve. We can build a strong culture of attendance in every community. We can ensure that school districts are tracking the right data to identify the students and schools headed off track. And we devote resources to addressing the challenges that may be keeping many students from getting to school: illness, transportation problems, housing instability and concerns for community safety.



How philanthropy can make a difference:

Build public awareness

- **Support a public messaging campaign** to convey that every school day counts. Posters, billboards, handouts and stickers can promote the importance of attendance and the adverse impact of missing too much school. See these [key messages](#) and [promotional materials](#).
- **Join with your superintendent and mayor** to encourage an appropriate existing coalition with an aligned mission to help spearhead a community-wide approach to reducing chronic absence. See if your community is involved with the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#).
- **Create a toolkit for your grantees and other community organizations** providing [handouts](#) and tips for improving attendance.
- **Recognize and appreciate good and improved attendance.** Support school efforts and reward students and families who are turning the corner on attendance.

Promote data-driven solutions

- **Fund an in-depth analysis of chronic absence data** that shows the prevalence and patterns in your community.
- **Publish a report card** showing chronic absence rates and other data for local schools. Point to bright spots and spell out strategies for turning around attendance.
- **Support training for teachers and principals** to understand how to use chronic absence data to determine the right interventions for at-risk students.

Encourage grantees to use chronic absence as a metric

- **Build chronic absence data into your grant making.** High rates can tip you off to a community in distress. Use the data when deciding where to invest in child care, early education and afterschool programs.
- **Use chronic absence as an accountability metric.** Make sure your education grants include improved attendance as an outcome. Ask grantees applying for funding to explain how they will reduce chronic absence.

Tackling chronic absence is a smart strategy for improving your community and reaching your goals. It can also be a yardstick for measuring grantee results. Attendance is a simple, common sense metric already recorded by teachers and understood by parents. It's essential to other education reforms, and it's a winnable strategy. Schools, districts and communities that work together to reduce chronic absence often see attendance increase quickly.

For more information, go to Attendance Works at www.attendanceworks.org.

