



# Chronic early absence: **What states can do**

Connecticut plays a crucial role in helping its districts reduce chronic absence — beginning with younger learners.

**By Hedy N. Chang, Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, and Kari Sullivan**

Common sense as well as research confirm that showing up regularly to class is crucial to academic success. In fact, according to the June 2016 release of the first national data on chronic absence, missing too much school is a national crisis that affects more than 6.5 million students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

Although the data show that chronic absence is more prevalent among high school students, a growing body of research calls attention to chronic early absence, in which students miss nearly a month of school. This serious challenge undermines educational opportunity for far too many of our youngest students, especially those from the most vulnerable populations. In elementary school, chronic absence is typically highest in kindergarten and 1st grade, pivotal years for gaining the fundamental academic and social skills students need to thrive in their school careers. Research shows that chronic absence in the early grades, sometimes even starting in preschool, can add up to weaker reading skills, higher retention rates, and lower attendance rates in later grades (Connolly & Olson, 2012). This is especially true for children from low-income families, who are more dependent on formal school experiences for their literacy development.

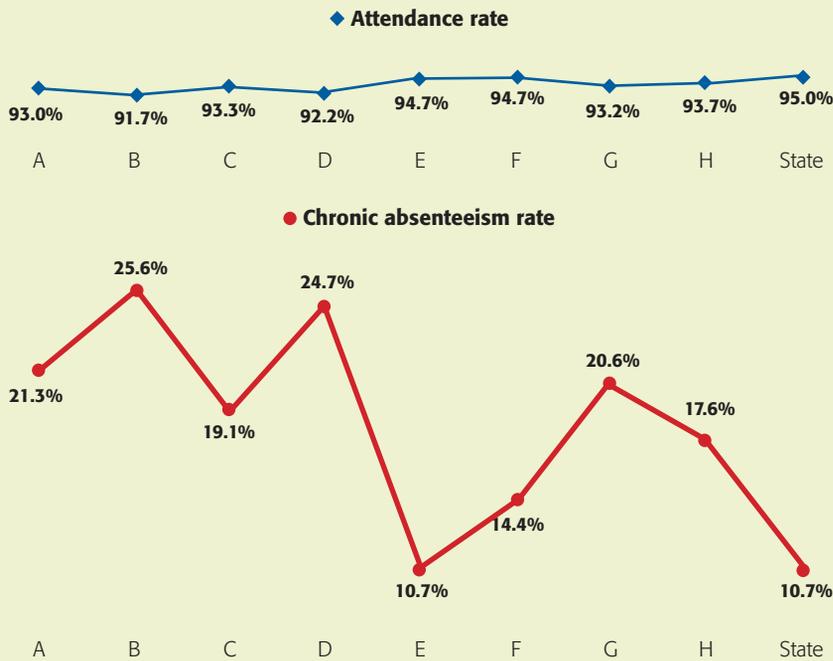
## **Unmasking early absence**

Chronic absence (typically defined by researchers and a growing number of states as missing 10% of school for any reason whether they are excused, unexcused or due to suspensions) has been overlooked because, historically, we've failed to monitor the right metrics. In the past, schools focused only on average daily attendance or truancy (unexcused absences). Although average daily attendance tells us how many students typically show up every day, it

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**FIGURE 1.**  
**Attendance rate and chronic absenteeism in eight Connecticut districts, 2013-14**



doesn't reveal how many or which students have missed so much school that they're academically at risk. Even seemingly high average daily attendance rates can mask chronic absence. For example, a school of 200 students achieves a 95% attendance rate if 10 students aren't in their seats each day. But this doesn't tell us whether the 10 empty seats reflect a range of students who each miss a day or two of school or whether those absences involve a small but significant minority of students who each miss nearly a month of school each year.

Consider average daily attendance rates for eight districts in Connecticut (see Figure 1). Even though the average daily attendance rates (shown in blue) hover around the same level, the chronic absence rates (shown in red) involve 10% to 25% of students.

Detecting chronic absence also involves looking beyond truancy, which typically only refers to unexcused absences. Among young children, absences are often excused. More often than not, parents know young children are missing school and will call to explain why or send in a note. But even when absences are excused, they can add up to lower academic success. Especially among the youngest students, absences are often tied to health factors like asthma and dental problems or to learning disabilities and mental health issues related to trauma and community violence.

Finally, monitoring poor attendance among young students requires calculating chronic absence by grade, not just for the school as a whole. High levels of chronic absence in the early grades can be masked by the typically higher attendance rates of students in 3rd through 5th grade.

### **A district's success**

The good news is that once communities look at their data to determine whether they have a chronic absence problem, they can use that information to develop effective solutions. Consider the experience of New Britain, Conn. When school officials first crunched their numbers, they discovered some startling realities:

- An alarming 30% of kindergartners and 24% of 1st graders were chronically absent — that is, they had missed 10% of the school year or more, or about 18 days.
- Nearly half of the district's chronically absent students were in elementary school. In New Britain's urban school system of about 10,000 students, that represented hundreds of students at risk academically.

- Fewer than half of New Britain’s elementary students had “satisfactory” attendance — that is, had attended more than 95% of the school year.

Such troubling attendance data caught school district leaders by surprise and prompted them to reconsider their singular focus on truancy in the older grades and take action in the elementary schools. With support from local philanthropy and assistance from Attendance Works, the school district put the following strategies in place:

- *Professional development.* Principals and school staff receive ongoing training to help them interpret attendance data, adopt best practices, and engage in peer learning.
- *Actionable data.* Every 10 days, the school district sends schools information on the percentage of students who are chronically absent, as well as a list of students with poor attendance so school leaders can intervene in a timely way.
- *School attendance teams.* Each school organizes a team to monitor the data and ensure that appropriate interventions and supports are in place.
- *Home visits.* The district secured a combination of state funding and philanthropic support to hire two outreach workers who conduct home visits to families whose kindergartners are chronically absent. This has now been expanded to preschool as well.
- *Parent engagement and communications.* Schools actively communicate the importance of attendance through newsletters, daily interactions with parents, and a rich array of attendance incentives.
- *Community partnerships.* Community partners, ranging from the Department of Children and Families to the local Boys & Girls Club, offer supports at school sites and through a district Attendance Review Committee formed to avoid referrals to juvenile court.

As a result of these efforts, during the 2012-13 school year, New Britain experienced a drop in chronic absenteeism in grades K-8 from 20% to 13%, with the largest decrease in kindergarten — from 30% to 18%. During this same period, scores on the kindergarten reading assessments showed that the percentage of

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students reading at or above goal rose from 43% in January 2013 to 52% in May 2013.

Since that first year, New Britain has strengthened its work. Most recently, it has adopted a board policy and a district school attendance manual that institutionalize expectations in terms of policy and practice. For example, New Britain not only describes what teachers and principals can do to promote a schoolwide culture of attendance but also explains how school attendance teams should monitor data and organize a tiered schoolwide approach to reduce chronic absence. This consistent approach has allowed New Britain to further its gains in improved attendance.

The New Britain experience illustrates some important lessons about what works to reduce chronic absence. Using data is a powerful tool for identifying where to target resources to improve student attendance. Building capacity is essential to address the attendance barriers facing students and to champion the work. New Britain demonstrates the effectiveness of a comprehensive approach that begins with prevention and positive attendance messaging and offers personalized early interventions before intensive case management or legal action is needed. Finally, New Britain’s experience confirms that addressing attendance is not a one-time inoculation but involves using data on an ongoing basis to identify and address the needs of students at risk because of poor attendance.

### **Taking it to the next level: Connecticut’s story**

As New Britain was tackling chronic absenteeism, so was the state of Connecticut. The Connecticut General Assembly’s Committee on Children developed a statewide infrastructure, and the Connecticut State Board and Department of Education adopted agency policies to address chronic absenteeism with state and local partners. This cross-sector collaboration focused on the effect of chronic absence on the well-being of K-12 students, including their educational outcomes.

Connecticut leveraged policy and practice to inspire statewide efforts that reduced chronic absenteeism from 11.5% in 2012-13 to 10.6% in 2014-15, resulting in about 5,000 fewer students who were chronically absent. A five-year plan — Ensuring Equity and Excellence for All Connecticut Students (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2016) — includes decreased rates of chronic absenteeism as an

outcome and will strengthen efforts to reduce the problem.

Identifying what enables state government to pinpoint strategies at the local level and advance innovations statewide is especially important, given the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The legislation requires reporting on chronic absence, considers chronic absence as an alternative quality metric for school improvement, and permits using Title II funds to fund professional development to help school staff adopt strategies to reduce chronic absence.

### Six strategies that work

The Connecticut experience suggests that states are well-positioned to reduce chronic absence by engaging in six strategies.

#### Strategy #1. Build awareness.

The early work in Connecticut was to educate and inform a wide variety of audiences about the research concerning the effect of chronic absence on student well-being and future success. This included a spotlight on the effects of absences on learning for children in the early years and working with families to build their awareness of the importance of developing good habits for daily attendance. Leadership at the state level ensures that the issue of chronic absence is an essential element in the state's comprehensive efforts to support children and families. To build awareness, states can:

- Convene a forum for legislators that highlights research on chronic absence and local success stories.
- Conduct presentations at both the state level (at commissions and task forces) and the district level (at conferences for school district administrators).
- Target outreach to a variety of stakeholder groups, such as faith communities, nonprofits, health providers, and philanthropic community and social service agencies.
- Leverage opportunities that reach new audiences, such as the Association of Children's Museums National Conference.

#### Strategy #2. Use data to promote action.

Recognizing the negative effect of chronic absence on student outcomes, the Connecti-



#### Just the facts

Low-income students are four times more likely to be chronically absent than others, often for reasons beyond their control, such as unstable housing, unreliable transportation, and a lack of access to health care.

**Read more:** *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades* by Hedy Chang and Mariajose Romero. National Center for Children in Poverty, September 2008.

[www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_837.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf)

cut State Department of Education used its longitudinal data system to calculate chronic absence rates, which refocused state efforts on chronic absence rather than average daily attendance. Regarding data use, states can:

- Use data to identify where high levels of chronic absence exist and generate reports by district, school, grade, and student population. Providing attendance data for all grades enables a focus on the crucial early years of learning, as well as on the important efforts taking place in middle and high school. Connecticut started by creating and distributing specialized chronic absence reports and now has made chronic absence data available online through its searchable data portal EdSight (<http://edsight.ct.gov>).
- Include chronic absence data in state-level reports. For example, Connecticut's Committee on Children's Results-Based Accountability Report Card includes chronic absence as a headline indicator. The data are updated and monitored for trends annually.
- Use data to present high-impact visual representations to make the case for focusing on chronic absence — such as the graph shown in Figure 1, which compares average daily attendance rates to chronic absence rates.

#### Strategy #3. Cultivate champions to build a state-level infrastructure.

Connecting strong and influential leaders to this effort is vital to creating a sustainable state-level infrastructure to reduce chronic absenteeism. To build leadership around the issue, states can:

- Make chronic absence a statewide priority. State legislation in Connecticut requires implementing an annual results-based accountability report card that evaluates state policies and programs affecting children. The Connecticut General Assembly's Committee on Children facilitates implementation by way of a leadership committee composed of cross-sector, high-level leaders.
- Mobilize committees and partners. The Committee on Children established a strategic action group around chronic absenteeism that disseminates promising

new practices, promotes communication and collaboration among state agency and community-based partners, and reports to the legislature on statewide progress. As a key partner, Connecticut's Office of Early Childhood ensures alignment of policies and practices for programs serving children in the early years.

- Include chronic absence as a crucial item in the master plan. Connecticut's lieutenant governor convenes a mandated council of state agency leaders to address a master plan focused on closing the state's achievement gap. The council works to align efforts across education, early childhood, health, housing, child welfare, social services, juvenile justice, and other state agencies. Chronic absence is one of the key items addressed.
- Leverage nationally recognized entities to help in the work. Connecticut called on Attendance Works, Children's Aid Society, and The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading to support local efforts to reduce chronic absence.

#### **Strategy #4. Build capacity.**

Building capacity and providing opportunities for districts and communities to develop strategies for reducing chronic absence have been essential to expanding the work at the local level. To build capacity, states can:

- Connect with networks, both education- and community-based, that are positioned to integrate strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism into their efforts to improve outcomes for children and families.
- Use the networks to share chronic absence research, data, guidance documents, and other resources and supports. Venues for messaging can include meetings, workshops, peer-to-peer learning sessions, and keynote addresses at conferences. All guidance should include strategies and best practices for grades preK-12.
- Develop a prevention and early intervention guide for grades preK-12 that offers success stories and concrete guidance on how to implement a comprehensive approach to reduce chronic absence.
- Designate an attendance lead to coordinate efforts across the state education agency and with districts and



#### **Just the facts**

Most school districts and states don't look at all the right data to improve school attendance. They track how many students show up every day and how many are skipping school without an excuse but not how many are missing so many days in excused and unexcused absence that they are headed off track academically.

**Read more:** *Chronic elementary absenteeism: A problem hidden in plain sight* by Attendance Works. November 2011.

**[www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ChronicAbsence.pdf](http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ChronicAbsence.pdf)**

communities to maximize efficiencies in responding to the demand for technical assistance and support.

#### **Strategy #5. Identify and leverage bright spots.**

Showcasing bright spots, like New Britain has done, demonstrates that chronic absence is a solvable problem. To spread the good word about reducing chronic absenteeism, states can:

- Uncover and promote best practice stories, including local policies and practices that are producing results.
- Create opportunities to share successes with other districts and communities through web sites, guidance documents, events, presentations, and peer-to-peer networking. Share success stories to leverage relationships with potential partners, funders, and local leaders.
- Use successful strategies to inform program design and funding decisions. For example, school leaders used New Britain's strategies for reducing chronic absence in kindergarten and 1st grade to design a program model for a grant to address chronic absence in other districts.

#### **Strategy #6. Foster accountability.**

Accountability systems serve an important purpose by ensuring that all students are receiving a high-quality education. They track progress, help schools and districts improve, and show where support is needed most. As noted, ESSA now lists chronic absence as a quality metric and requires schools to report on it. As the following examples show, Connecticut is ahead of the curve:

- Connecticut recently launched the Next Generation Accountability System, a new, broader set of performance measures that gives a more comprehensive and holistic picture of how schools and students are performing. Chronic absenteeism is one of 12 indicators and includes all grades K-12 and is also measured separately for our most vulnerable student subgroup that includes English learners, students with disabilities, and students who are economically disadvantaged.
- The guide, *Using Accountability Results to Guide Improvement* (<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/evalresearch/>)

using\_accountability\_results\_to\_guide\_improvement\_20160228.pdf) provides information and resources related to every indicator, including chronic absenteeism, in Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System.

- In February 2015, the Connecticut State Board of Education adopted a resolution that requires districts to include plans to address chronic absence in their application for state Alliance District grant funds, which are intended to increase student outcomes and close achievement gaps.
- State legislation includes an official definition of chronic absence, consistent with the research-based definition, and requires district and school-level attendance teams in areas where chronic absence rates are high. It also requires the development of a Chronic Absenteeism Prevention and Intervention Guide.

#### A solid investment

As state policy makers across the United States consider what steps to take to address chronic absence, they should keep in mind that

Addressing attendance is not a one-time inoculation but involves using data on an ongoing basis.

they don't need to start from scratch. Rather, they can move more quickly by finding out what has worked for their peers, like Connecticut, and about approaches they can tailor in light of their own realities. By monitoring chronic absence in grades K-12 — and paying particular attention to the youngest students — states can address the needs of students and their families before they require more expensive intervention and remediation. **◀**

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