the
Attendance Imperative

How States Can Advance Achievement by Reducing Chronic Absence

Policy Brief | Attendance Works | September 2014

Attendance Works

Executive Summary

Research confirms what we know from common sense: Showing up for class matters. Missing 10 percent of the school year for any reason — excused or unexcused — can leave students unable to master reading by the end of third grade and can signal that a student is more likely to drop out of high school. Nationwide, an estimated 5 million to 7.5 million students (more than one out of 10) miss that much school every year, a crisis in absenteeism that is exacerbating achievement gaps and dropout rates.

The good news is that chronic absence can be turned around when schools, districts, community agencies and families work together to monitor the data, identify and remove barriers for getting students to class, and nurture a habit of regular attendance. State policy and action are essential to advancing such practice.

Policymakers and advocates at the state level can take several key steps to support this work, including:

1 **Public Awareness:** Build public awareness of chronic absence and why it matters for doing well in school, graduating from high school and eventually succeeding in the workplace.

2 **Standard Definition:** Adopt a standard definition of chronic absence (ideally, define it as missing 10 percent of school for any reason) to be used statewide and by each school district. The definition should clarify that chronic absence includes excused as well as unexcused absences (truancy), and should ensure that absences due to suspensions or children switching schools are also counted.

3 **Attendance Tracking:** Track individual student attendance and absences in state longitudinal student databases and ensure that data are entered accurately and consistently as early as preschool.

4 **Chronic Absence Reports:** Regularly calculate and publicly share chronic absence data statewide, providing information by district, school, grade and subgroup.

5 **Reports to Families:** Urge districts to provide families with actionable, real-time data on their child's attendance, as well as an alert if their child is accruing too many absences.

6 **School Improvement:** Require district and school improvement plans to include chronic absence data and strategies for nurturing a culture of attendance, identifying causes of absence and fashioning effective interventions for chronically absent student.

7 **Capacity Building:** Ensure district leadership, educators, parents, staff of community-based organizations and public agencies have the opportunity to learn about evidence-based and promising practices for reducing chronic absence.   Promote comprehensive and collaborative approaches that start with universal supports to nurture a habit of going to school every day and offer personalized early outreach for those with at-risk attendance patterns. More costly and intensive interventions involving legal action and the justice system should be used only as a last resort.

8 **Interagency Resource Allocation and Coordination:**   Use chronic absence rates to facilitate coordination among districts, public agencies, parent organizations, civic organizations, businesses, nonprofits and policymakers. Encourage joint review of chronic absence data to inform the allocation of resources (such as health services, transportation, early care and education, afterschool programming and mentoring) that can improve school attendance as well as relevant local and state policies.

Most states are well-positioned to start this important work because they already track attendance and absences in their longitudinal student data systems. A growing number are beginning to draw upon the power of attendance data to turn around absenteeism and inform strategies for promoting student success. For example, state leaders and advocates in Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Oregon, Rhode Island and Utah have used longitudinal student data systems to produce statewide chronic absence reports showing the scale, scope and concentration of the problem. Several reports confirmed the connection between attendance and student achievement. Each year, more states -- including New Jersey, Indiana, Hawaii, California and Oregon -- are incorporating measures of chronic absence into school accountability systems. Some states, such as Massachusetts and Virginia, have developed early warning systems, which track chronic absence and other metrics to help keep students on track for graduation.

States are starting to recognize that it is no longer enough simply to count how many students show up on average for school every day or to concentrate on truancy (unexcused absences). State policy and action can ensure that districts and schools use chronic absence data to trigger a timely response and collaborate with families and community partners to prevent children from missing so much school that they fall behind and lose hope of ever succeeding in school. When it comes to lost instructional time, an absence is an absence.

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What is Chronic Absence?

Attendance Works defines chronic absence as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason — excused or unexcused as well as suspensions. It is different from truancy, which is defined by each state and typically refers only to unexcused absences.

Why adopt a 10 percent definition?
First, it is based upon research showing that missing this much school is associated with lower academic performance and drop out.

Second, this definition promotes early identification of students because schools and communities can use the 10 percent absence rate as a trigger for intervention from the start of school and throughout the year, rather than waiting for a student to miss 18-20 days before intervening. This definition also allows for better detection of attendance problems among highly mobile students who often move too frequently to ever accumulate 18-20 days of absence in a single school or district.

Third, it offers comparable data across states and districts that have different lengths of school year.

Finally, adopting a common definition of chronic absence across state and federal agencies allows for more efficient data collection and reporting.

Introduction

Chronic absence is a national crisis, dragging down achievement for students across the country. An estimated 5 million to 7.5 million students in the United States are missing so much school that they are academically at risk.[i] In some communities and schools, more than one out of four children are chronically absent.[ii]

This problem affects students of all ages. Nationally, one in 10 kindergarten and 1st grade students are chronically absent.[iii]   Chronic absence occurs among children from low-income families and children of color at far greater rates than other students.

Yet many schools and districts do not realize the scope and scale of their chronic absence problem simply because they are not analyzing absences in that way. Most states ask schools to count how many students show up daily (average daily attendance) and how many miss school without an excuse (truancy), but not how many students miss so much school in excused and unexcused absences that they are academically at risk.

States that have tracked chronic absence data are often surprised by the scope of the problem.

- In Utah, a 2012 statewide analysis showed that 13.5 percent of all students were chronically absent and that those chronically absent in any year between 8th and 12th grades were 7.4 times more likely to drop out of high school.[iv]
- In Oregon, a similar study in 2012 showed that more than 20 percent of the state's students were chronically absent and found a correlation between absenteeism and poor academic performance.

- In Indiana, a 2012 study showed that chronic absence correlates with lower test scores and higher dropout rates for students at all income levels. [v]

Failing to look at chronic absence data can mean lost opportunities to intervene early before students require expensive remediation or simply drop out. Fortunately, this is a problem we can fix. It means monitoring the data, identifying and addressing common and individual barriers for getting students to school, and nurturing a culture of regular attendance. And it requires collective action by districts, schools, community agencies and families.

Although attendance is typically considered a matter for local education agencies, state policymakers can play key roles in raising awareness about why chronic absence matters as well as sustaining and advancing good local attendance practice and policies. States can help districts use their data to monitor how much chronic absence is a problem, identify which schools, grades or populations of students are most affected and develop effective interventions. A growing number of states are already showing the importance and value of paying attention to chronic absence.

The purpose of this brief is examine the role of state policy and action in ensuring chronic absence is monitored and addressed. To provide a common understanding of the issue, it reviews key underlying concepts before offering policy recommendations. The brief includes the following sections:

I.   **Why paying attention to chronic absence matters for student achievement**
II.   **Why chronic absence is overlooked**
III.   **Why students miss school**
IV.   **What reduces chronic absence**
V.   **What states can do**
VI.   **What states could ask the federal government to do**

An Appendix offers profiles of how different states have begun to address chronic absence and improve attendance.

I. Why Paying Attention to Chronic Absence Matters for Student Achievement

Emerging research shows that chronic absence can start as early as preschool and affect performance in later grades. Children living in poverty are more likely to be chronically absent at a young age because of challenges such as a lack of access to health care, housing insecurity and unreliable transportation. And they are more likely to suffer academically because of those missed days because their families often lack the resources to make up for lost time.[vi]

By sixth grade, chronic absence becomes one of three early warning signs that a student is more likely to drop out of high school.[vii] By ninth grade, attendance can be a better indicator of dropout than eighth-grade test scores.[viii] Multiple years of chronic absence at any point in a child's career is a red flag for academic trouble.[ix]

When chronic absence is widespread, it can affect teaching and learning for the whole class, because teachers must deal with classroom churn and continually play catch up for a different group of students and continually help different groups of students catch up and learn material covered during their absences.

Finally, if chronic absence reaches high levels in a school, it can be an indication of systemic challenges within neighborhoods that create barriers to going to school. These can include unstable housing, unreliable transportation, community violence, environmental hazards or a lack of access to health care. Other times high absenteeism rates can point to problems with the school itself: ineffective instruction, high rates of teacher turnover, a poor school climate and ineffective school discipline. High levels of chronic absence are a red alert for challenging conditions — for a student or a community — that will require a substantial collaborative effort to understand and resolve.

II. Why Chronic Absence is Overlooked

Why does chronic absence often go undetected even though most teachers take roll every day? There are several reasons:

1 **Sporadic absences are easy to miss without data:** Chronic absence can be hard to notice without a close look at the data. Especially with increasingly large classes, teachers can easily overlook a child who is absent sporadically, missing one day every other week rather than missing several days in a row. After all, it takes only two absences a month for a student to miss 10 percent of the school year.

Fortunately, with today's technology, many districts can update electronic data systems to track and monitor attendance. With moderate modifications, their systems can calculate chronic absence rates for every school and generate the list of the students who are at academic risk because they are missing too much school.

2 **Average daily attendance figures can mask chronic absence:** Schools and districts may not realize they might have a significant chronic absence problem because they have a reasonably high average daily attendance (ADA) rate, or percentage of students who typically show up every day. Even an ADA rate as high as 95 percent can mask chronic absence.

Consider Chart 1 from Oakland, Calif., which shows the range in chronic absence across elementary schools, all of which had ADA rates of 95 percent. While chronic absence was only 7 percent in school A, it was more than twice that level in school F. Meanwhile, Chart 2 shows how schools in New York City with a 90 percent ADA rate are typically contending with more than 20 percent of their students being chronically absent.

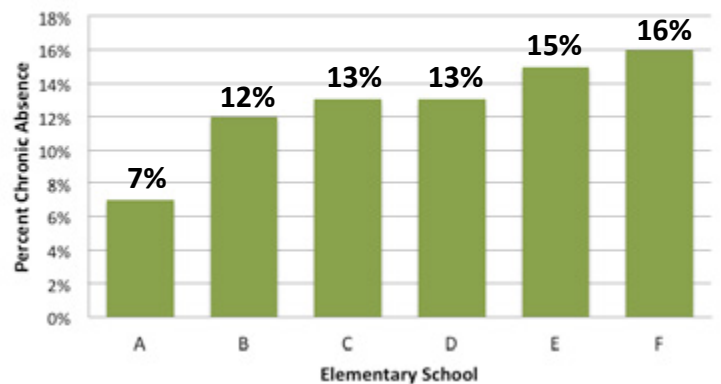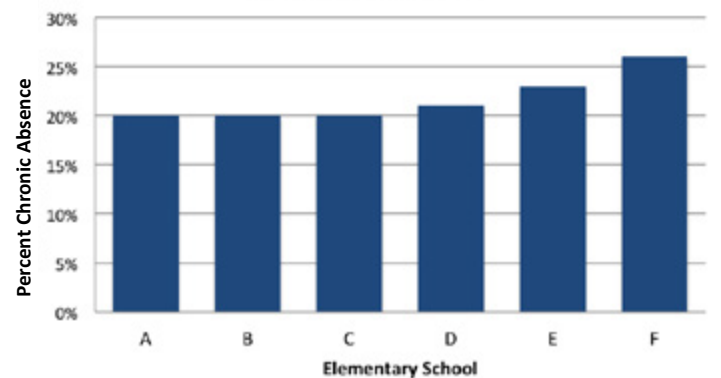Chart 1: Chronic Absence For 6 Elementary Schools in Oakland, CA with 95% ADA in 2012

Chart 2: Chronic Absence for 6 Schools in NYC with 90% ADA in 2011-12

3 **Truancy data paints an incomplete picture:** Many schools and communities focus on truancy, not chronic absence. Often, the terms are used interchangeably but, in reality, they don't mean the same thing. Truancy typically refers to students missing school due to unexcused absences. It signals the potential need for legal intervention under state compulsory education laws. Because the federal No Child Left Behind Act gave states the authority to define truancy, exactly what constitutes truancy varies tremendously.

In Utah, for example, students are counted as truant when they have 10 unexcused absences, whereas in Maryland the trigger is missing 20 percent of the school year — or about 38 days — due to unexcused absences. By contrast, students in California are considered truant if they miss any three days without a valid excuse or they have been late to class by 30 minutes three times.

Truancy overlooks, however, the days lost to excused absences. Particularly when children are young, they can miss a considerable amount of school for reasons that are approved by an adult. Consider Chart 3, which shows that using chronic absence to identify students at risk because of poor attendance identifies significantly more children than simply looking at truancy. The difference is especially noticeable in kindergarten. While 5- and 6-year-olds generally are not missing school without the knowledge of an adult, they can still miss so much school that it affects their academic progress.

Number of Chronically Absent Versus Chronically Truant Students San Francisco Unified School District

— # chronic absentees - 2010-2011
— # missing 10 unexcused absences (as of May 16th 2011)
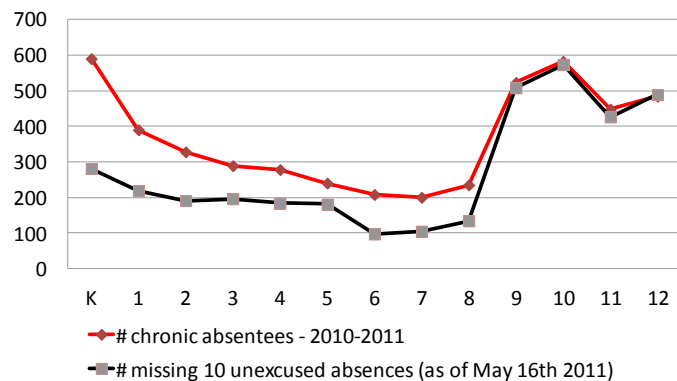
For districts and communities to fully understand attendance patterns and challenges, they should calculate chronic absence in addition to average daily attendance and truancy, as each measure offers different insights into what is happening around attendance.

It is important to track disciplinary absences, as well. A statewide study in Indiana revealed that days missed because of suspensions were not included in the state's database, leaving educators unable to assess the full extent of lost instructional time.

What Counts as an Absence?

Local policy and practice on what counts as an absence varies significantly. It's critical to understand a few key elements before interpreting attendance and chronic absence data.

How often do districts take attendance?
Some take attendance only once or twice a day. A growing number of districts record attendance for each period for middle and high school students. This development reflects improvements in technology as well as recognition of research showing that poor attendance in a core academic course is associated with course failure, which in turn predicts drop out.

Do districts add up partial-day absences?
There is no consensus about how many periods of absence equals a full day of absence. In some districts, the accumulation of multiple late arrivals (tardies) count as an absence.

Is suspension considered an absence?
Policies around suspension also vary by district and state. In Indiana, for example, suspensions are taken out of the attendance calculation. In California and Maryland, an out-of-school suspension is considered an excused absence.

What is the default in the computer system?
In many districts, if a teacher fails to take attendance, the default in the computer software is to assume that a student is present. In Hartford, Conn., for example, the district seeks to improve data accuracy by changing the default to neutral.

Knowing these practices helps to inform policymakers about whether chronic absence rates are likely to be underestimates or overestimates.

4 **Absences for mobile students are harder to detect:** Some chronically absent students escape notice because they move frequently among schools or even districts. A statewide study in Utah found that four in 10 highly mobile students were chronically absent.[x] However, schools receiving new students in the middle of the year often have no access to their attendance records from previous schools.

5 **A focus on compliance creates incentives for marking students present:** Attendance data can be among the most readily available tools that schools and preschools can use to inform and drive action. But attendance has typically been viewed as a matter of compliance, a record-keeping task essential to obtaining funding or avoiding sanctions. This association creates an incentive to paint as rosy a picture as possible and ensure that a child is counted as attending school or preschool whenever viable. If attendance is instead being used as an early warning indicator or to promote continuous improvement, then schools and communities will be motivated to count absences accurately so that they know, as soon as possible, if a student, school or district is in need of intervention.

Tracking Chronic Absence in Preschool

An important strategy for reducing chronic absence and promoting higher levels of school readiness is encouraging parents to send their children to preschool and use this experience to develop the habit of good attendance. But chronic absence is arguably even more overlooked as an issue in preschool and child care programs than in K-12 because:

- Preschools and child care programs are generally part of a highly fragmented system with multiple funding sources and no common data system.
- Attendance is not always collected and if it is, it is typically for funding purposes, not necessarily for identifying students at risk.
- While some larger programs, such as Head Start or state preschool, usually have some form of attendance data that can be manipulated to calculate chronic absence, those programs might not always have staff resources to conduct the analysis.
- Preschool programs, like school districts, also are confused by average daily attendance. Many may not realize that the 85 percent average daily attendance required by Head Start can mask extremely high levels of chronic absence.

Equally critical, the lack of attention to attendance reflects differences in how early childhood programs are viewed. Are they an enriched learning experience or a support for working families? If a program is seen only as work support, then the assumption may be that children should be at home if their parents are not working.

Pioneering work by the Baltimore Education Research Consortium and the University of Chicago Consortium of Chicago School Research shows that good attendance matters as early as preschool. Children who attended preschool regularly arrived at kindergarten with higher levels of school readiness. The children who entered with the lowest skills but had the best preschool attendance benefited the greatest from the experience. Unfortunately, chronic absence, especially if it persisted for multiple years, predicted lower academic performance. The Chicago study also found high levels of chronic absence in the preschools examined by this study: 35 percent of 3-year-olds and 45 percent of 4-year-olds were chronically absent. Few preschool programs, however, have ever examined whether chronic absence is a problem.

III. Why Students Miss School

Taking time to unpack why students miss school in the first place is essential to developing effective solutions. Attendance Works has found it helpful to classify the reasons that students miss school in terms of three broad categories:

Myths: A number of common and pervasive myths about attendance make it less likely to be considered a top priority. Often, parents see good attendance as a matter of complying with rules rather than providing their children with more and better opportunities to learn. Consequently, missing school is seen as a problem only if a child is skipping school or if the child misses several days consecutively. Few realize that too many absences, even if they are excused, can quickly add up and hinder learning. Many principals, parents and teachers do not recognize that missing school as early as preschool and kindergarten can have a detrimental impact on the student's ability to succeed.

Barriers: Many students cannot get to school because of chronic health conditions; inadequate access to medical, mental health or dental care; unstable or poor-quality unhealthy housing; unreliable transportation; or a lack of effective family and community supports and service delivery. This is especially true for children living in poverty or involved in the foster care or juvenile justice systems. An analysis by the University of Utah found that students who were homeless were 2.5 times more likely to be chronically absent. In addition, environmental conditions, such as mold and lead poisoning, can make children more susceptible to absenteeism.

Aversion: Sometimes poor attendance occurs when students are avoiding going to school because of bullying, academic difficulty, dangerous routes to and from school, an unhealthy school climate, punitive disciplinary practices or the lack of effective instruction. Teacher absenteeism can prompt some children to avoid school. Analyzing chronic absence data by classroom can help reveal if the problem is school-wide or concentrated in particular classrooms. In some cases, it is not the student alone who is demonstrating aversion. Poor attendance could be a reflection of a parent's negative experiences with school and their lack of confidence that their child's experience will be different.

What keeps students from getting to school or preschool can and will vary by student, school and community. But keeping these categories in mind can help identify the biggest challenges for the largest numbers of students and can guide interventions and policy solutions.

Students and families with the most severe levels of absenteeism often face multiple barriers to getting to class. These barriers can be community or personal issues that fall outside of the purview of just the classroom to address. If only a small number of students are chronically absent, then challenges are more likely to be individual in nature.

IV. What Reduces Chronic Absence
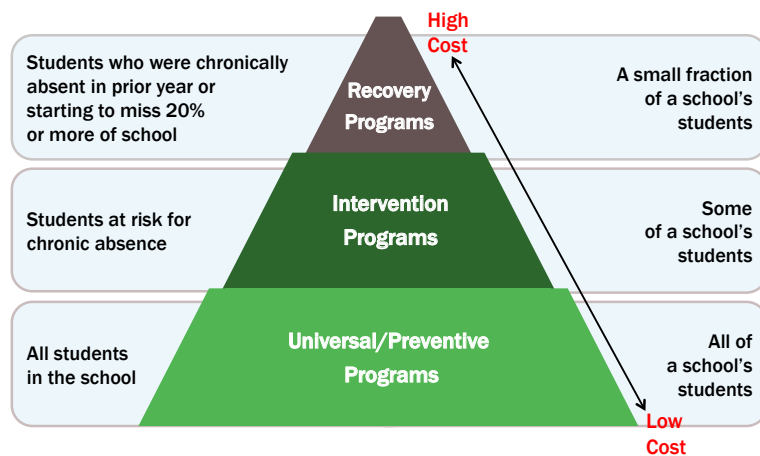
Improving attendance requires taking a comprehensive approach that builds a habit of attendance while identifying and removing barriers to attendance. It involves putting in place a tiered system of responses that begins with prevention and early outreach before resorting to more costly interventions focused on remediation that often involve legal action.

It does not necessarily require creating something new but could be accomplished by incorporating an explicit focus on attendance within existing reform efforts, such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RTI), as well as creating opportunities for community partners to support the work. It requires strategies adopted at school sites as well as by district and community systems.

Essential School Site Strategies

First, at the school site level, chronic absence can be decreased substantially when school communities use these five strategies to nurture a culture and a habit of attendance while also identifying and addressing barriers to getting to school.
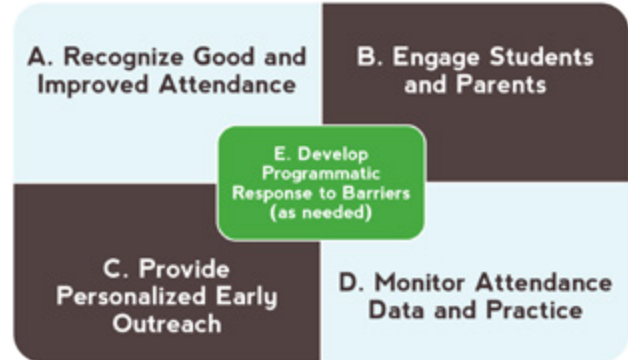
1 **Recognize Good and Improved Attendance:** School communities can send a clear message that going to school every day is a priority by providing regular recognition and rewards to students and families who have good and improved attendance. Keep in mind that the goal is not to focus on perfect attendance since the children who struggle the most will soon be left out of such awards. This strategy can also help improve the accuracy of attendance data since the students, themselves, are likely to help ensure teachers are aware of who is and isn't in class!

2 **Engage Students and Parents:** Attendance improves when a school community offers a warm and welcoming environment that engages students and families and offers enriching learning opportunities. A key component of the engagement is helping families learn about the positive impact of good attendance and the negative effects of chronic absenteeism on realizing their hopes and dreams for their children. Parents may not realize that even excused absences can, if they accumulate, cause their children to fall behind and that building the habit of attendance in the early grades can influence their children's chances of graduating from high school.

3 **Provide Personalized Early Outreach:** Perhaps the most critical strategy is using data to trigger early caring outreach to families and students who are already missing too many days of school. Such outreach is best carried out by an adult who has a strong relationship with the family, who can vary depending on the school or community. Outreach is essential for identifying barriers to attendance — hunger, health, shelter, transportation or other challenges — and the supports or resources that would help improve attendance.

A. Recognize Good and Improved Attendance

B. Engage Students and Parents

E. Develop Programmatic Response to Barriers (as needed)

C. Provide Personalized Early Outreach

D. Monitor Attendance Data and Practice

4 **Use Attendance Data to Inform Practice:** Each school should have a team in place that meets regularly to review the school's attendance data and coordinate efforts to reduce chronic absence. Schools will need to determine whether this should be a team devoted exclusively to attendance or an existing team that has attendance added to its broader functions and responsibilities.

5 **Develop Programmatic Responses to Systemic Barriers:** If large numbers of students are affected by chronic absence, that suggests some type of systemic barrier or barriers are at play. Identifying the barriers to attendance can indicate the appropriate solutions, whether that involves establishing uniform closets, improving access to health care, launching walking school buses, providing tutoring, offering mentoring, developing morning or afterschool care and other approaches.
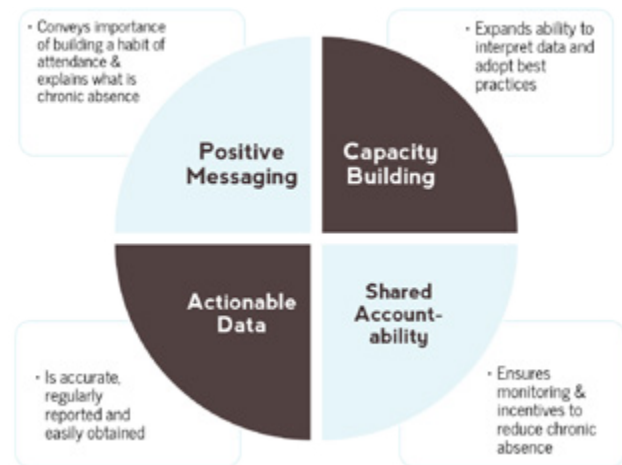
Key Ingredients for Systemic Change

School sites are much more likely to adopt and sustain the above practices when districts and their community partners have put in place the following key ingredients.

1 **Actionable data:** Taking the appropriate action requires having accurate, easily accessible, up-to-date data that shows which and how many students are chronically absent — ideally broken down by school and grade. Such student-level data should be available and reviewed monthly while data on overall levels of chronic absenteeism — again broken down by school, grade and sub-population — might be examined less frequently, possibly at the end of each quarter or semester.

2 **Positive Messaging:** The goal of positive messaging is to help parents and students realize that daily attendance is key to reaching their dreams of a successful future. An intentional shift from using the threat of fines or court action to compel attendance, this approach starts with an emphasis on encouraging families to take advantage of the opportunity for their children to learn. It helps change behavior by debunking the myths that prevent families from recognizing that regular attendance should be a high priority as early as preschool.

- Conveys importance of building a habit of attendance & explains what is chronic absence

Positive Messaging

- Expands ability to interpret data and adopt best practices

Capacity Building

Actionable Data

Shared Account-ability

- Is accurate, regularly reported and easily obtained

- Ensures monitoring & incentives to reduce chronic absence

3 **Capacity Building:** It is essential to build the skills and knowledge of school staff and community partners to understand what chronic absence is, how it differs from truancy, how to calculate it and which practices promote daily attendance. Many do not know the difference between chronic absence and truancy, or fail to recognize the importance of bolstering our investments in prevention and early intervention before resorting to more expensive legal strategies.
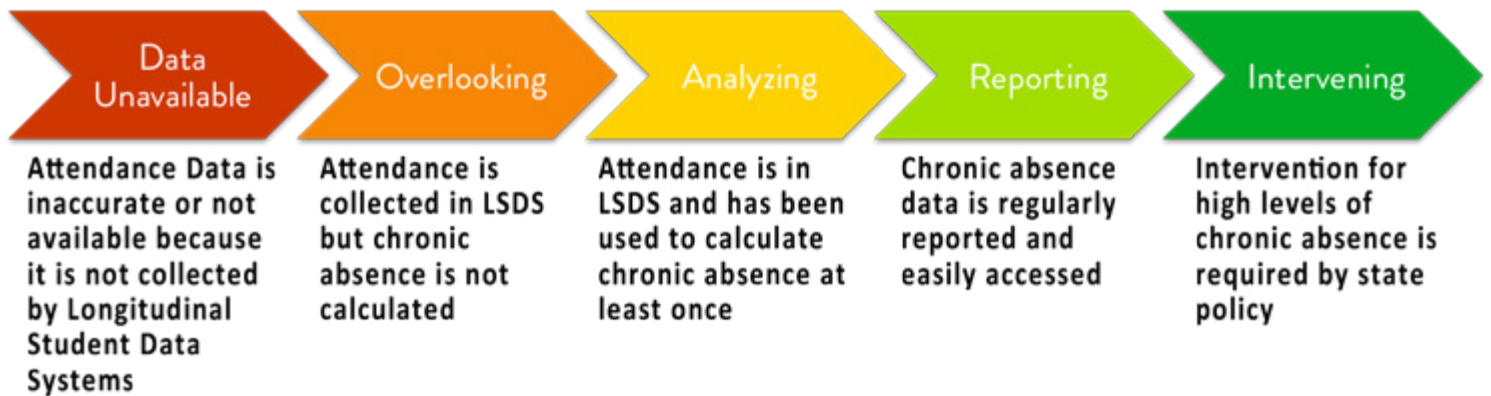
4 **Shared Accountability:** Chronic absence needs to be built into accountability systems used by districts and states to measure progress and identify where additional support is needed to improve student performance. For example, schools should be required to examine the extent to which chronic absence is a problem and to describe how they will improve student attendance, especially among the most vulnerable populations, in school improvement plans.

V. What States Can Do

State policy and action significantly shape whether districts consistently monitor and leverage their attendance data as well as invest in a multi-tiered comprehensive approach that draws upon the collective resources and knowledge of schools, community partners and families.

Given the emphasis on local decision-making on educational issues, it is no surprise that what happens around attendance varies significantly across states. This chart illustrates the continuum along which state systems and policies can fall.

Data Unavailable	Overlooking	Analyzing	Reporting	Intervening
Attendance Data is inaccurate or not available because it is not collected by Longitudinal Student Data Systems	Attendance is collected in LSDS but chronic absence is not calculated	Attendance is in LSDS and has been used to calculate chronic absence at least once	Chronic absence data is regularly reported and easily accessed	Intervention for high levels of chronic absence is required by state policy

Fortunately, most states are past the first stage of this diagram. Every year, the Data Quality Campaign surveys all 50 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico about their longitudinal student data systems. According to *Data for Action 2012: Focus on People to Change Data Culture*:

- 26 states reported collecting data on daily absences
- 10 states reported collecting data on course absences
- 44 states reported collecting data on total absences

According to a [Februrary 2014 fact sheet](#), only six states — Alabama, California, Colorado, Illinois, New York and Pennsylvania — did not have any form of student attendance data in their longitudinal student data systems. And, even in these six states, attendance data can be found in local longitudinal student information systems, even if it is not being sent to the state departments of education for inclusion in their systems.

Components of Smart State Attendance Policy

To leverage the power of attendance data, states need to adopt smart state-level attendance policy. Listed below are the key components of an effective state approach to reducing chronic absence and improving attendance.

1 **Public Awareness:** Build awareness of what chronic absence is, including how it differs from truancy and average daily attendance. Explain why regular attendance matters for success in school and eventually the work place, as well as how a combination of good practice and strong school and community partnerships can successfully improve attendance.

In several states, including Indiana, Utah and Oregon, state chronic absence reports have proven essential to raising awareness and helping policymakers, communities and schools realize that chronic absence is a problem dragging down achievement. Especially in states with a strong history of attention to truancy, these reports can use local data to illustrate how truancy and average attendance rates often mask underlying chronic absence levels.

State officials are also using their public platforms to build awareness. Governors, chief state schools officers and state legislators are joining the nationwide efforts to establish September as Attendance Awareness Month. (Tools and resources for joining this campaign can be found here). For example, California State Superintendent Tom Torlakson has invited all local superintendents as well as his colleagues in other state agencies to join in the effort to promote attendance, starting in September. In Utah, Gov. Gary Herbert partnered with Voices for Utah Children to shoot this video, which can be featured in presentations and on websites.

2 **Standard Definition:** States should promote and adopt a standard definition of chronic absence (missing 10 percent of the school year) to be used statewide and by each school district.

The definition should a) clarify how chronic absence is different from unexcused absences (truancy) and b) ensure the inclusion of absences due to suspensions and those that occur when children switch schools.

According to Data for Action 2012, the vast majority of states do not calculate chronic absence. Even among the 12 states that indicated they reported on chronic absence, the definitions that they used to make this calculation suggested significant confusion between chronic absence and truancy.

Each state will need to determine whether establishing this definition requires legislation or can be advanced through regulation. In Indiana, for example, legislative action was essential because state education code had used chronic absence and truancy interchangeably to refer to any student with 10 unexcused absences during a school year.

3 **Attendance Tracking:** Track individual student attendance and absences in state longitudinal student databases and ensure that data are entered accurately and consistently as early as preschool.

Maintaining attendance data as part of state longitudinal student data systems is important for several reasons. District systems do not always capture students who move in and out of the community during the year. Because highly mobile students are often chronically absent, it is critical that the state help maintain the data to provide a fuller history and trigger support strategies for vulnerable children as soon as they enter a new district. In addition, district information systems may "roll over" attendance data each summer and consequently make longitudinal attendance data inaccessible, while state systems can store this information for years.

States can provide technical assistance and support to encourage local districts to maintain high-quality and accurate attendance information in their own systems. At a minimum, states can encourage districts to share strategies for training staff and can offer tips or issue guidelines for accurate data entry. A common question, especially for middle and high schools, is what constitutes a full day of absence when attendance is tracked by period.

As longitudinal student databases are expanded to include student information for students enrolled in preschool programs, states should ensure attendance and absences are among the data elements collected. States should also consider investing in building the capacity of early childhood education programs to accurately collect attendance data using electronic data systems as well as regularly generate data on which and how many children are chronically absent.

4 **Chronic Absence Reports:** Regularly calculate and publicly share chronic absence data statewide, providing information by district, school, grade and subgroup. School and district report cards are an effective vehicle for dissemination.

States can take two approaches to ensure attendance data is reported and publicly available. If attendance is captured in the state longitudinal student data system, then states can generate chronic absence reports, ideally based upon the 10 percent definition. The frequency would

Does the Way Schools are Funded Guarantee Attention to Chronic Absence?

A common misperception is that schools must be tracking chronic absence because they are funded based upon attendance. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Most states allocate funding based upon enrollment or student membership — the number of students who show up to school on a particular count date or dates. The resources remain the same whether or not a child continues to show up for school after that time.

A handful of states — including California, Illinois, Kentucky and Missouri — base their funding upon average daily attendance. In this situation, districts may take attendance more seriously because they lose money if students do not show up. But, even in these states, districts and schools may not focus on chronic absence and instead monitor only average daily attendance.

depend upon how often the report is updated. This approach is the most efficient because it leverages the power of a state data system.

Alternatively, in the handful of states where attendance is not yet captured by the longitudinal student data system, state leaders can still hold districts accountable for calculating and reporting their data. In June 2013, California, for example, passed Local Control Funding Formula legislation that targets considerable resources to high-need students and enables far greater local discretion over the use of funds. To ensure that student needs are being met, districts are required to adopt Local Control Accountability Plans that must report on chronic absence and average attendance rates as part of planning and monitoring student engagement.

5 **Reports to Families:** Urge districts to provide families with actionable, real-time data on their children's attendance, as well as an alert if their children are accruing too many absences.

Parents and families are essential partners in reducing chronic absence because they have the bottom-line responsibility for making sure their children get to school every day. While children are young, they are especially dependent upon adults or older siblings for helping them get to school. In addition, just as parents should know how their children are performing academically, they have a responsibility to monitor their children's attendance and to know if they are missing so much school they are academically at risk. If absences are unavoidable,

then teachers can use these reports to engage parents in a discussion about how they could help their children make up the work.

One of the challenges, however, is that parents may not know when absenteeism becomes a problem. Very few parents realize that missing just two or three days of school, starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, can affect student achievement. Reports to families need to help parents not only track how many absences their children have accumulated but also alert them if the levels are problematic. States can offer guidance about the best ways to communicate this information to families.

In addition, states should ensure that districts are providing families with access to data on the overall levels of chronic absence in their children's schools. Chronic absence can affect the entire classroom, not just absent students, because teachers must spend time re-teaching material. Parents are key advocates for change if chronic absence is affecting too many students. They can help to unpack barriers and mobilize key stakeholders to address attendance challenges whether they are related to what is happening in school or in the community.

6 **School Improvement:** Require district and school improvement plans to include chronic absence data and strategies for nurturing a culture of attendance. To develop strategies for improving achievement, schools need to know whether students are failing because of problems with curriculum and instruction or because students are simply missing so much school that they cannot benefit from what is being taught.

States can spur action by holding districts and schools accountable for reporting chronic absence and then addressing how they will increase attendance as part of the school improvement process. Indiana, for example, approved legislation in 2013 that defines chronic absence as a separate measure from truancy, adds chronic absence to school data reports and requires addressing absenteeism in school improvement plans for all but the highest-performing schools. Oregon has included sixth- and ninth-grade chronic absence as accountability metrics in its new achievement compacts. New Jersey has added chronic absence to its latest school performance reports. Iowa requires school districts track chronic absenteeism in elementary schools as part of their school improvement plans. The new Virginia Early Warning System includes student attendance as one of three indicators that struggling high schools must track; other schools also are encouraged to use the indicators.

Is Lowering the Age of Compulsory Education a Solution to Chronic Early Absence?

Because many states do not require school attendance until students are age 6 or 7, Attendance Works is often asked whether lowering the age of compulsory education is a viable solution.

The extent to which this would help is unclear. The primary result of such legislation is to make going to school a legal requirement, which would allow for the use of courts to enforce compliance if a child is truant. It does not address the need to engage in less costly universal strategies such as positive messaging and early outreach, especially since many absences among young children are not truancy but excused absences. The effective practices outlined on pages 13-15 can be implemented regardless of whether a child has reached the mandatory age of school attendance.

7 Capacity Building: Ensure district leadership, educators, parents and staff members of community-based organizations and public agencies have the opportunity to learn about evidence-based and promising practices for reducing chronic absence, including strategies that involve community collaboration. These strategies are reflected in the approaches described earlier in this brief: engaging in positive messaging, building capacity to interpret data and understand best practices, and promoting shared accountability. See page 13-15 for more information.

States should encourage districts to identify positive outliers: these are the schools that achieve high levels of attendance despite challenging circumstances, such as many students living in poverty. Positive outliers help illuminate best practices and identify administrators, teachers, attendance clerks, and community partners who can serve as inspiring examples of what is possible. Often, excellent local practice can inform what state policymakers can do to expand good practice to other districts.

States also can promote effective practice by leveraging school climate and parent engagement initiatives. For instance, in Georgia, greater recognition of the need to prevent chronic absence has led to increased investment in improving school climate and legislation that ensures legal intervention is used as a last resort, only after school - and community - based interventions have proven ineffective.

8 **Interagency Resource Allocation and Coordination:** Use chronic absence to facilitate coordination among districts, public agencies, parent organizations, civic organizations, businesses, nonprofits and policymakers.

Encourage joint review of chronic absence data to inform the allocation of resources (such as health services, transportation, early education programs, afterschool programming and mentoring) that can improve school attendance as well as relevant local and state policies.

Chronic absence cannot be solved by schools alone. Districts and schools can take advantage of the insights, perspectives and resources found in other public agencies and community organizations. State policymakers and advocates should encourage districts and schools to create an interagency forum where they can share data on chronic absence and discuss the implications for action and policy within and across agencies.

Data on the levels of chronic absence can be used to guide the allocations of programs or community resources that could help improve school attendance, such as health supports, early education programs, afterschool programs, community and national service programs or mentoring. These community resources can help offer incentives to nurture a culture of improved attendance, engage in personalized early outreach to students with poor attendance or address and overcome a particular attendance barrier.

An interagency forum can serve as a mechanism for discussing and identifying changes in policy or funding among other family-serving agencies that could affect school attendance. Such a forum could explore, for example, how to help families whose children are affected by federal cuts in subsidized food programs or by a local policy decision to raise the cost of public transportation. Alternatively, implementation of the Affordable Care Act could offer new opportunities for schools and community partners to ensure students gain access to needed health services that could decrease unnecessary absences. Another possibility is that communities could use such a forum to examine the need for expanding half-day preschool or kindergarten to full-day. Such a policy shift could have important benefits given the logistical challenges of getting a child to school for only a couple of hours a day as well as the added value of expanding the amount of time a child can spend in an enriched learning environment.

The Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign—led jointly by the school district, the mayor's office and Open Society Foundation-Baltimore—for example, serves as such a forum. The campaign hosts a collaborative partnership comprised of more than 20 nonprofit and public agencies that work together to identify and overcome common barriers to attendance and

inform each other's attendance practices. As part of its work, the campaign has analyzed laws, regulations and policies that govern attendance, transportation, health, homelessness, food and nutrition, data, youth voice and parental engagement. The work has resulted in a number of cross-agency collaborations ranging from building accountability for chronic absence into contracts for afterschool programs to leveraging the resources of mayor's office for attendance messaging.

The resulting collaborative partnership with the Baltimore City Department of Social Services is especially notable. Under a unique data sharing agreement, the city's child welfare workers have been given access to school district data that enables them to see when children in their caseload are chronically absent so they can take steps to improve their attendance. Data show these measures are improving attendance among children in foster care (the average attendance rate is 96 percent for children under age 13) and preventing at-risk young children from entering the child welfare rolls in the first place. On a monthly basis, the social service agency receives data on pre-kindergartners who are missing 20 percent of school days so that family preservation workers can pay home visits to help determine what can be done to improve their attendance. Typical issues identified are related to health, homelessness and behavioral challenges.

New York City's Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism and School Engagement, comprised of the heads of all youth-serving agencies, also illustrates the benefits of an interagency approach. In addition to employing strategies such as interagency data sharing, celebrity wake-up calls and privately funded attendance incentives, the task force is perhaps best known for its Success Mentors. The largest-known school-based mentoring effort in the nation, reaching about 9,000 at-risk students, the Success Mentors program was created by leveraging existing resources — such as AmeriCorps and Experience Corps members and social work interns from nearby universities — as well as school staff. These efforts have resulted in reduced chronic absenteeism at elementary, middle and high schools participating in pilot programs.

Recognizing the potential impact of interagency collaboration, California State Superintendent Tom Torlakson worked with his counterparts in other state agencies to host an interagency forum calling for collective action. Staff members across agencies are working together to determine how to engage a cross-section of agencies in attendance messaging, starting this month, and to expand capacity at the local and state level to support collaborative action.

VI. What States Could Ask the Federal Government To Do

Chronic absence is largely a matter of state and local policy and practice, but the federal government is positioned to inspire more consistent and effective attendance policy. By and large, this is not about adding requirements for data collection but about helping states and localities understand how they can more effectively use the attendance data they already collect. States could ask the federal government to support their work in several ways:

1 **Common Data Definition:** Promote the use of a common and research-based definition of chronic absence in all U.S. Department of Education data and reporting. We recommend defining it as missing 10 percent or more of school, including excused and unexcused absences.

2 **Data Systems:** Support states in developing longitudinal student databases that both track attendance for every student and allow for calculating multiple measures of attendance, including chronic absence, average daily attendance and suspensions. As these longitudinal systems expand into pre-K, the federal government could explore the best ways for capturing preschool attendance data.

3 **OCR Data Collection:** Require the inclusion of the percentage of students who are chronically absent, defined as missing 10 percent of the school year, as part of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights' Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC).

4 **Federal Grant Programs:** Include chronic absenteeism as an indicator to be addressed as part of federal grant programs targeting low-performing schools, such as School Improvement Grants, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Investing in Innovation Fund and Race to the Top. Additionally, include chronic absenteeism in the metrics for Promise Neighborhoods.

5 **School Improvement:** Provide technical assistance to help states and localities include chronic absenteeism as part of the diagnostic analysis and the improvement strategy implemented within priority and focus schools.

6 **Transparency:** Include chronic absence rates in federal school report cards and EDFacts reporting.

Conclusion

What is clear from research and practice is that good attendance is key to academic success, starting as early as pre-K and continuing through high school. Local schools and districts that have started paying attention to chronic absence find that they can turn around attendance numbers quickly and, in some cases, see test score gains.

State policymakers and advocates eager to improve struggling schools can use state action and resources to build awareness of what chronic absence is and how to reduce it, while also motivating districts and schools to take action through enhanced data collection, needed data reports and incorporation into school improvement planning.

This policy brief is a call to action to policymakers and advocates who can promote access to chronic absence data, take action to remove barriers to attendance and support educating families and communities about the critical importance of going to school every day.

Footnotes

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Acknowledgements

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Attendance Works is a national organization dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, research and success stories about reducing chronic absence. Attendance Works also offers technical assistance to school districts and communities.

www.attendanceworks.org