

## Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism in Indiana: The Impact on Student Achievement

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### UPCOMING POLICY BRIEFS . . .

- ✓ *Overhauling Teacher Evaluation Systems: Examining Preparation and Implementation Issues of School Districts*
- ✓ *Charter Schools: Charter Revocation Procedures*
- ✓ *Trends in Virtual Learning in the U.S. and Indiana*

### INTRODUCTION

Student attendance serves as an effective predictor of future academic achievement as well as of high school graduation. An analysis of Indiana attendance data indicates a direct link between absenteeism and school achievement, with chronically absent students scoring lower on achievement tests and dropping out of high school at higher rates than peers with better attendance. Between the 2008-09 and 2010-11 school years, 55,264 students on average missed 10% or more of the school year, a percentage that classifies these students as either chronically absent or severely chronically absent. However, the number of students who fall in these categories is likely higher, as this figure does not include school days missed due to out-of-school suspensions or expulsions.

Data on attendance in Indiana reflect national trends and illustrate definitively that missing school matters. Cohort analysis conducted by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy (CEEP) at Indiana University revealed that for the high school class of 2010, approximately 88% of students with good attendance (missing fewer than five days) throughout high school graduated, compared to 24% of students who missed 18 or more days on average per school year (Spradlin et al., 2012a). Additionally, students with higher attendance rates scored higher on Math and English/Language Arts portions of the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+) than students with lower attendance rates. This held true for students of all racial backgrounds, English language proficiency, socioeconomic status (SES), and ability. For example, in grade 3, students who were chronically absent scored nearly 50 scale score points lower on the Math portion of ISTEP+ than same-age peers who missed fewer than five days.

In this report, *chronic absence* is defined as missing 10% or more of school days, for any reason, including excused or unexcused absences. This is a national definition of chronic absence that is increasingly being used across a number of states. In Indiana, this equates to 18 days or more of school during one school year. Furthermore, *severe chronic absence* is defined as missing 20% or more of days in a school year (36 days or more of one school year in Indiana). This definition of chronic absence does differ from the definition established presently by law in Indiana, but is the definition used here to allow for meaningful comparisons to other states and national statistics.

By comparison, Indiana law defines chronic absence as missing 10 or more days within a school year without being excused (Indiana Code 20-20-8-8). However, Indiana lacks statutory definitions of *excused* and *unexcused* absences, leaving districts to develop these definitions themselves. Many school districts have chosen to define all absences as excused or provide a rather narrow definition of unexcused absence, thus producing an artificially low number of students who are categorized as chronically absent in the state. Chronic absence, as defined by Indiana, also qualifies as truancy under Indiana Code 20-33-2-11, as described by the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) in a 2011 advisory memorandum to Indiana superintendents and principals (IDOE, 2011). Furthermore, though students miss instructional time when suspended from school, out-of-school suspensions are not categorized as absences.

This Education Policy Brief summarizes the research and data analysis completed by CEEP on Indiana's student attendance and absenteeism data. The study was initiated by The Indiana Partnerships Center and conducted by CEEP with funding from USA Funds and State Farm. Additional partners in the study are the Marion County Commission on Youth, Net Literacy, and Attendance Works. The intended use of the study is to

inform educators, families, community partners, and policymakers about the status of attendance in Indiana and the degree to which poor attendance impacts student achievement and attainment. Findings indicate that although the majority of schools report good average daily attendance, chronic absenteeism occurs in schools in all areas of Indiana.

This brief quantifies the prevalence of chronic absenteeism in Indiana and describes the impact of chronic absenteeism on achievement and graduation at the student, school, and locality level. Additionally, best practices for improving attendance are discussed, and examples of successful interventions provided. This brief concludes with a set of recommendations for education leaders and policymakers to consider that will ensure sufficient attention, reporting, and action to reduce chronic absenteeism in Indiana and help improve academic outcomes for thousands of Hoosier students.

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## NATIONAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research on attendance and achievement indicates attendance rates in early grades affect later academic performance. Not only is attendance linked with achievement during a specific school year, it also appears to influence later academic performance (Buehler, Tapogna, & Chang, 2012; Chang & Romero). For example, a study in California found that only 17% of children who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and grade 1 were proficient readers by the end of grade 3. By comparison, 64% of their peers who attended school regularly read proficiently at the end of grade 3 (Applied Survey Research, 2011). Furthermore, students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and grade 1 had the poorest reading achievement levels in grade 5, compared to students with chronic absence in only one of these grades (Buehler, Tapogna, & Chang, 2012). The same trend is evident in Indiana's attendance data. Students with lower attendance rates in early grades performed worse on the English/Language Arts and Mathematics portion of the ISTEP+ in later grades (Spradlin et al., 2012a).

Data from Indiana and other areas of the country suggest a link between attendance rates and graduation rates. Of Indiana students who missed 2.5% or less of school days, 88% graduated (Spradlin et al., 2012a). However, only 24% of chronically absent Indiana high school students in this study graduated (Spradlin et al., 2012a). A similar study that followed grade 6 students in the 1999-2000 school year through graduation in 2006 found only 36.4% of Baltimore's chronically

absent students graduated from high school (Baltimore Education Research Consortium [BERC], 2011b). A study of Chicago Public Schools revealed that students who missed between 15-19 days of school in a year had a graduation rate of 21%, and only 9% of students who missed 20-24 school days graduated (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Attendance is a particular concern for low-income students, as they may have more barriers to attending school, such as mobility, health, and safety (Chang & Romero, 2008; Larson & Rumberger, 1995). Chronic absence rates for low-income students tend to be more pronounced than for other students (Buehler, Tapogna, & Chang, 2012; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Romero & Lee, 2007). In the CEEP study of Indiana, low-income students were considered to be those who qualified for the free or reduced lunch (FRL) program. Reflecting nationwide trends, Indiana students who receive FRL had lower attendance rates than non-FRL students (i.e., those whose families' incomes were higher than income eligibility guidelines). Similarly, in all regions of the state, Indiana schools with higher percentages of students receiving FRL experienced lower average daily attendance rates (Spradlin et al., 2012b).

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## ATTENDANCE AND CHRONIC ABSENCE IN INDIANA

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### Methods and Data Collection

For this report, CEEP collected and analyzed Indiana's attendance data in a variety of ways. First, the school-level data were structured as one set for each school per year. The school-level analysis focused on the descriptive statistics of the average daily attendance (ADA) rates in public schools from the 2003-04 school year to the 2009-10 school year and examined school attendance outcomes at the state, region, county, and locale-type levels. Finally, an in-depth analysis looked at chronic absenteeism of Indiana students using both a cohort dataset and school-level data. The data for these analyses were generated by public schools that submit all official records of enrolled K-12 students to the IDOE. These datasets were provided by the IDOE to CEEP in accordance with a Data Sharing Agreement between the two entities.

At the school level, a variety of academic measures, such as attendance, ISTEP+ passage, graduation, and dropout rates were presented in the aggregate for all students and then by subgroups of students, includ-

ing students qualifying for the FRL program, special education (SPED), and Limited English Proficient (LEP). Students' average daily attendance rates over a 7-year period were summarized and categorized based on **exemplary** ( $\geq 97.5\%$ ), **good** (between  $<97.5\%$  and  $\geq 95\%$ ), **poor** (between  $<95\%$  and  $\geq 90\%$ ), **very poor** (between  $<90\%$  and  $\geq 80\%$ ), and **extremely poor** ( $<80\%$ ) attendance rates. By locale type (urban, suburban, rural, and town), the disaggregated attendance rates by attendance category were summarized with other factors to investigate the influence of the attendance rates on achievement and graduation rates.

Datasets for the student-level analysis were focused on two cohorts: (1) students enrolled in kindergarten and (2) in grade 6 during the 2003-04 school year. The 2003-04 school year was chosen as the baseline year because sufficient longitudinal data on attendance were not available for prior school years and graduation data for the Class of 2011 were not available at the time this study commenced. A focus on these two cohorts enabled CEEP to measure the impact of attendance over time in both elementary education (grades K-6) and in middle through high school education (grades 7-12).

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## Attendance in Indiana

Overall, Indiana's aggregate average daily attendance rates were relatively consistent from the 2003-04 to the 2009-10 school year, and all attendance rates were approximately 96.0% (Figure 1), which falls in the good attendance rate category of this report. However, average daily attendance (ADA) rates can mask the prevalence of chronic absenteeism. When the Indiana data were disaggregated, some alarming statistics regarding student absences were revealed.

*In Indiana, attendance is a key factor in promoting academic achievement for students of all ages and demographic backgrounds.* For all students in both the kindergarten and grade 6 cohorts, those with higher attendance rates scored higher on the ISTEP+ in each year they were tested. For example, among the kindergarten cohort, students' scores on the grade 3 Math portion of ISTEP+ fell as their attendance rates fell. Students who missed less than 2.5% of school days had an average scale score of 437 on the Math portion, while students who missed 5% - 10% scored 410, and students who missed over 10% of school days had an average score of 390. Additionally, scores on the grade 3 English/Language Arts portion among this cohort followed the same pattern;

students who missed less than 2.5% of school days had an average scale score of 447, while students with an absence rate of 5% - 10% scored 427, and students with an absence rate over 10% scored 409. The pattern of decreasing scores with decreasing attendance rates repeated when the kindergarten cohort took the ISTEP+ in grade 6.

Among the grade 6 cohort, the same performance pattern appeared when examining their ISTEP+ scores in grades 6 and 8. For instance, in grade 8, students who missed less than 2.5% of school days had an average scale score of 571 in Math; students missing 2.55% of school days had an average scale score of 555; students missing 5% - 10% of school days had an average scale score of 536; and students missing 10% or more of

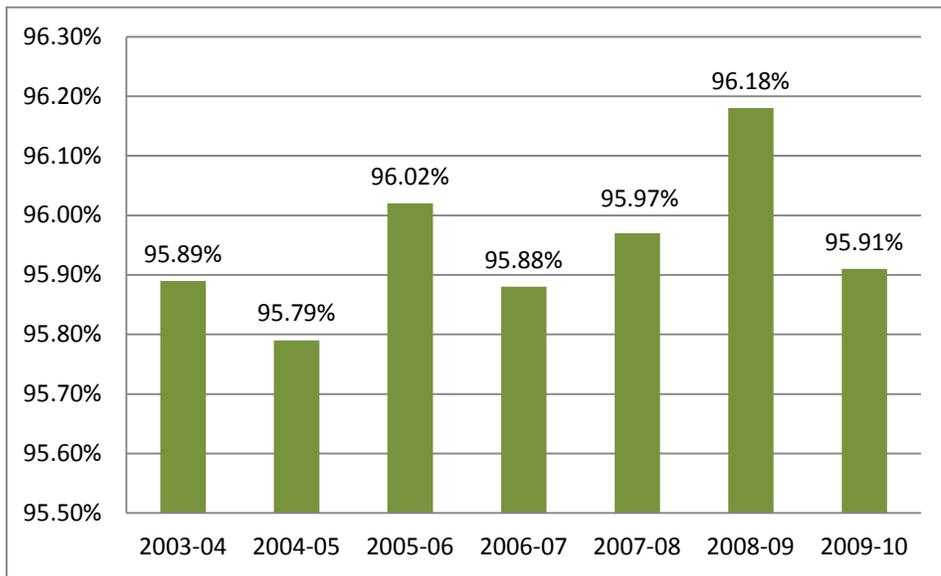
school days had an average scale score of 507. Similarly, students missing less than 2.5% of school days had the highest average scale score on English/Language Arts in grade 8, with an average score of 548; students missing 2.5% - 5% of school had an average scale score of 539; students missing 5% - 10% of days scored 527, and students missing 10% or more of days had an average scale score of 513. Furthermore, these patterns were consistent among all groups (racial groups, FRL, SPED, LEP, etc.) as well as in all locales and all regions of the state. Indiana data thus reveal a consistent trend: students with higher attendance rates score higher on the ISTEP+ measures of achievement.

Similarly, when looking at graduation rates among the grade 6 cohort and their atten-

dance rates in grades 9-12, there is a clear link between attendance and graduation (Table 1). As previously mentioned, of students who missed 2.5% or less of school days, 88% graduated on time. Students who missed 2.5% - 5% of schools days had a slightly lower graduation rate, at 82%. However, the graduation rate begins a sharp decline for students in the 5% - 10% absence range, with only about 64% of students in this group graduating from high school. For students who missed over 10% of days of school, the rate declined significantly, with only 24% graduating. As rates of absenteeism increased, graduation rates decreased for Indiana students.

Like the student cohort analysis, attendance rates have an impact at the school level as well, as the findings from CEEP's descriptive statistical analysis indicate. For schools with overall better ADA rates, higher percentages of students passed achievement tests and graduated from high school (Figure 2). In schools with exemplary attendance rates, for example, 89% of students graduated. For schools with good attendance, 85.1% graduated; and 74.5% of students graduated in schools with poor attendance (5% - 10%). A noticeable drop-off in graduation rates occurs in schools with an ADA rate of less than 90%, or very poor average daily attendance, at a rate of only 45.6%. In schools with extremely poor average daily attendance (below 80%), only 27.7% of students graduate. Similarly, ISTEP+ scores are higher in schools with better ADA rates. Schools with exemplary attendance had an ISTEP+ passing rate of over 70.3%, and schools with good attendance had an ISTEP+ passing rate of 64.2%. By comparison, schools in the poor attendance category averaged an ISTEP+ passing rate of 40.4%. Schools with

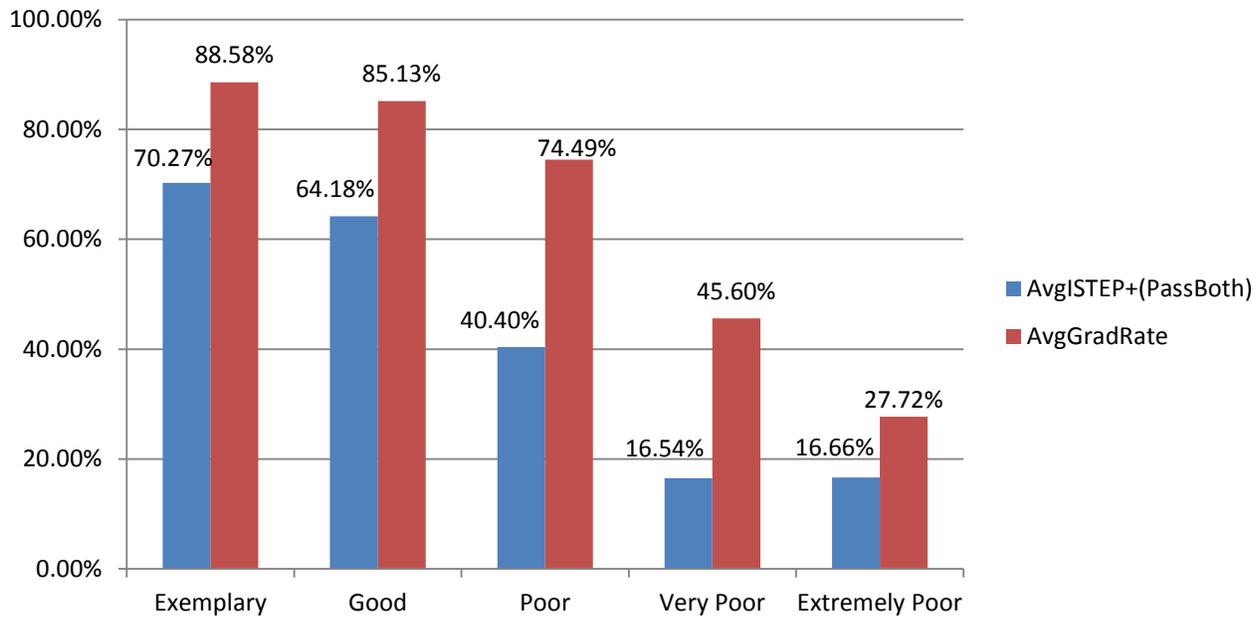
**Figure 1. Indiana's Average Daily Attendance Rates**



**Table 1. Grade 6 Cohort Graduation Rate by Attendance Group in Grades 6-8 and 9-12**

	Graduation Status			
	Graduate		Non-graduate	
	N	Row Percentage	N	Row Percentage
<b>Average % days missed, grades 6-8</b>				
0 to <2.5% absent	28,095	84.32	5,223	15.68
2.5 to <5% absent	16,132	72.54	6,108	27.46
5 to <10% absent	8,754	55.09	7,137	44.91
10% or more absent	1,359	27.00	3,675	73.00
<b>Average % days missed, grades 9-12</b>				
0 to <2.5% absent	22,547	88.07	3,053	11.93
2.5 to <5% absent	17,368	81.97	3,821	18.03
5 to <10% absent	11,668	63.87	6,600	36.13
10% or more absent	2,757	24.13	8,669	75.87

**Figure 2. ISTEP+ and Graduation Rates by ADA Category**



very poor and extremely poor attendance produced comparable ISTEP+ passing rates, at 16.5% and 16.7% respectively (Figure 2).

When looking at attendance patterns across a student’s elementary career, student absences tend to be higher in the early grades, but decline in upper elementary grades (before ultimately increasing again in middle and high school grades). This “U-shaped” trend appears in other states’ data on attendance as well (Buehler, Tapogna, & Chang, 2012). In Indiana, during their first three years of school, 6.35% of the kindergarten cohort missed 10% or more of school days, and another 23.5% missed 5% - 10% of days. However, in later grades, the same cohort had higher attendance rates. In grades 3-5, for instance, 3.6% of students missed 10% or more of school days. The percentage of students missing 5% - 10% of school days also decreased, from 23.5% to 18.45%.

Despite this upswing in attendance in upper elementary grades, attendance rates begin to fall as students approach middle and high school, with increasing percentages of students chronically or severely chronically absent. During middle school, 7.39% of students in the grade 6 cohort missed 10% or more of school days. Another 21% missed 5% - 10% of days during middle school. By the time these students reached high school, their chronic absence rates doubled. Nearly 15% of students in the grade 6 cohort missed 10% or more of school days in high school. Though not considered chronically absent, about 24% of students missed 5% - 10% of days.

As the CEEP study’s data illustrate, chronic absence affects a significant number of Indiana public school students. Due to the exclusion of out-of-school suspensions from absence data, however, these numbers are likely underestimated, especially for older students. Cities and states that include suspensions in absentee data report proportionately higher rates of chronic or severe absenteeism, suggesting that Indiana’s numbers would rise if these numbers were included. For example, when comparing Indiana’s data to Baltimore and Oregon’s data, which include suspensions, a smaller number of secondary students are chronically or severely absent (BERC, 2011a; Buehler, Tapogna, & Chang, 2012). In Indiana, the days missed as a result of a suspension are not counted as absences, even though the student is out of class and missing instruction, which is a policy unusual among other states. Cohort data used in the study show that roughly 10% of Indiana students in middle school and high school were suspended at least twice. In the 2010-11 school year, a total of 81,402 students were suspended at least once and over half of this number was generated in grades 7-10. These students accumulated a total of 412,816 days of suspension for an average of 5 days missed due to said suspensions (Catherine J. Danyluk, personal communication, April 17, 2012). Certainly, if the suspension data were included, the data on attendance would reflect a higher rate of absenteeism. Additionally, given that suspension is significantly correlated with dropout occurrences, including suspensions with attendance data would provide a clearer picture of the ways in which absenteeism is

connected to school dropout data in Indiana.

**Problematic attendance in Indiana is associated with higher levels of poverty.** Research on attendance across the U.S. indicates that higher rates of absenteeism are associated with higher levels of poverty (Buehler, Tapogna, & Chang, 2012; Romero & Chang, 2008). At the student level, those who received FRL had higher rates of absenteeism than non-FRL students. Indiana schools with higher percentages of students receiving FRL had lower average daily attendance rates (Table 2). An exemplary or good average daily attendance standing for schools is associated with lower percentages of the complexity factors of FRL, Special Education, and Limited English Proficient students, while poor or very poor attendance rates among schools are associated with the highest percentages of those factors.

In particular, high percentages of students receiving FRL had the greatest impact on a school’s attendance rates (Table 2). To illustrate, for urban schools the exemplary attendance group encompasses the lowest percentage of FRL (38.87%), and relatively low percentages of special education (16.29%) and LEP (2.75%) students. The poor and very poor categories contain a higher percentage of students participating in the FRL program (approximately 63%), and the extremely poor attendance group (three schools) has the highest percentage of students who are qualified for FRL at 97%.

**Table 2. FRL, Special Education, and LEP by Locality and Average Daily Attendance Category (7-year Average)**

Locale	Category	Number of Schools	Average Attendance Rate	Average FRL	Average SPED	Average LEP
<b>Urban</b>						
	Exemplary	10	98.13%	38.87%	16.29%	2.75%
	Good	342	96.10%	58.91%	16.57%	7.30%
	Poor	81	93.68%	62.73%	19.28%	6.56%
	Very Poor	14	86.95%	63.29%	28.42%	2.36%
	Extremely Poor	3	74.07%	96.72%	14.21%	1.92%
<b>Suburban</b>						
	Exemplary	11	97.71%	13.41%	14.23%	1.44%
	Good	421	96.32%	30.20%	15.02%	3.94%
	Poor	54	94.30%	52.49%	16.08%	6.97%
	Very Poor	6	86.15%	47.97%	51.90%	2.59%
	Extremely Poor	0	N/A*	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Town</b>						
	Exemplary	1	98.85%	5.92%	14.04%	Missing**
	Good	169	96.05%	40.82%	16.59%	4.65%
	Poor	20	94.20%	44.02%	20.43%	2.27%
	Very Poor	1	86.73%	77.89%	86.26% <sup>1</sup>	Missing
	Extremely Poor	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Rural</b>						
	Exemplary	19	97.83%	20.22%	15.00%	1.61%
	Good	625	96.34%	28.87%	15.78%	1.80%
	Poor	39	94.48%	36.55%	16.60%	2.06%
	Very Poor	1	81.91%	Missing	100.00% <sup>2</sup>	Missing
	Extremely Poor	1	74.07%	Missing	Missing	Missing

\* N/A = not applicable; no schools classified in this category and locality

\*\* Missing = no data available in the specific category

<sup>1</sup> North Campus Alternative School.

<sup>2</sup> Wabash/Miami Area Special Education Cooperative

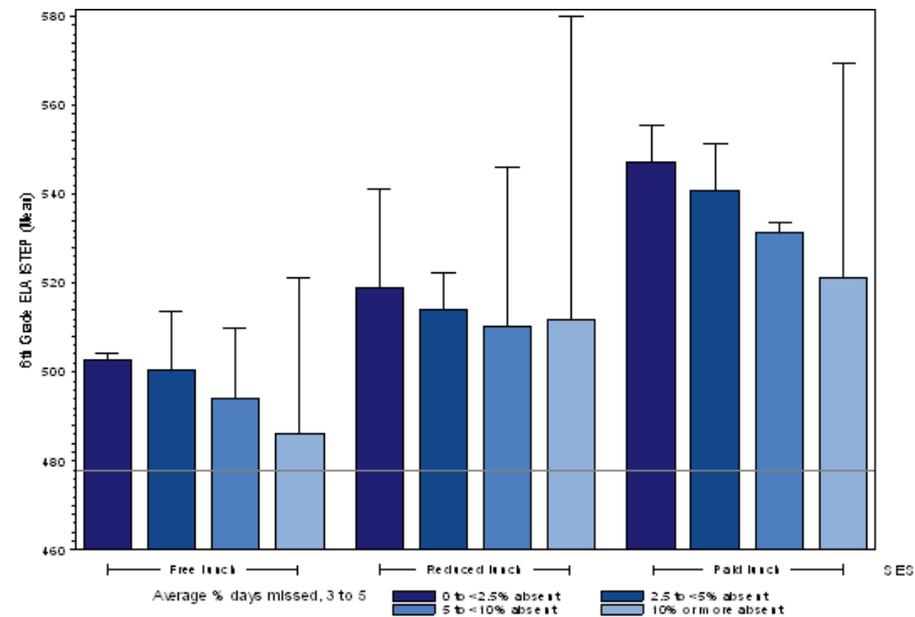
When examining absenteeism in the cohort analysis by socioeconomic status (SES), compared to non-FRL students, students in the kindergarten cohort receiving FRL had higher rates of chronic absenteeism from kindergarten to grade 2. Approximately 33% of students who received free lunch were absent 5% - 10% of days (a range representing students at-risk of chronic absence); approximately 24% of students with reduced price lunch missed 5% - 10% of days, and 17% of non-FRL students missed 5% - 10% of days. Missing 10% or more of school days, or chronic absence, was more prevalent among students receiving free lunch (11.21%) than among students with reduced lunch prices (3.81%) or non-FRL students (2.4%). Among the kindergarten cohort, a similar pattern held in grades 3-5, as a greater percentage of students receiving free lunch (6.25%) were chronically absent than students receiving reduced lunch (3.81%) or students who paid for

their own lunch (2.42%).

Among the grade 6 cohort, the difference between groups is quite dramatic, and becomes more pronounced in later grades. In grades 6-8, 13.8% of free lunch students, 6.78% of reduced lunch students, and 3.57% of paid lunch students were chronically absent. By grades 9-12, there was a significant rise in the percentage of students from each group who missed 10% or more of school days. In the free lunch group, 28.6% were chronically absent, followed by the reduced lunch group at 17%, with non-FRL lunch students at the lowest percentage of 9%. Given that students receiving free or reduced lunch have higher absenteeism rates and high rates of absenteeism are linked to lower ISTEP+ scores, it follows that, chronically absent students with FRL had lower ISTEP+ scores than their peers of a higher SES and with higher attendance rates (Figures 3 and 4).

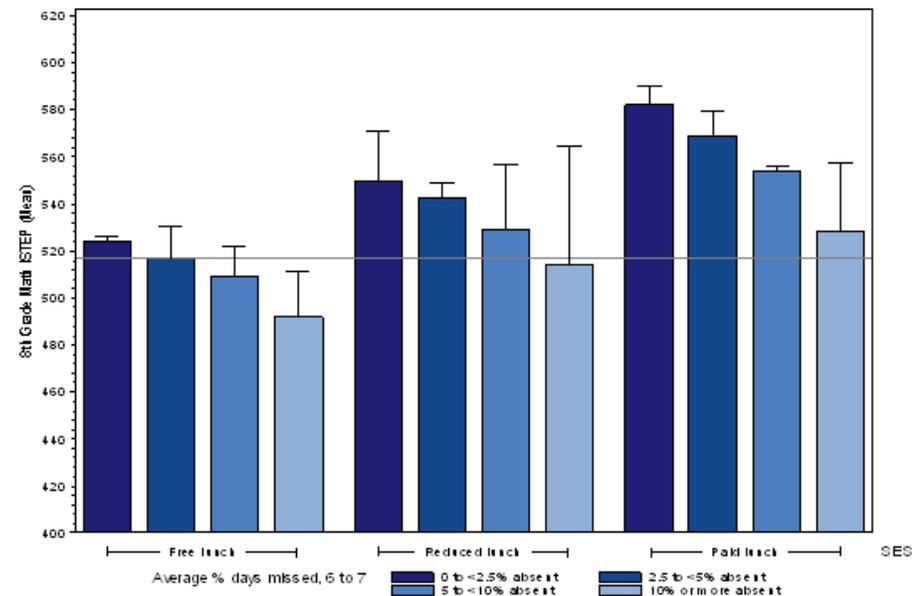
**Attendance rates impact achievement for all racial groups.** Indiana attendance data indicate that for all racial groups, students with higher attendance rates score higher on statewide tests. For example, among the kindergarten cohort, Asian students who missed five or fewer days scored 35 points higher on the English/Language Arts portion of the ISTEP+ in grade 3 than Asian students who were chronically absent (Figure 5). Similarly, Black students missing less than 2.5% of school days scored approximately 30 points higher on the English/Language Arts portion ISTEP+ in grade 3 than Black students who were chronically absent. Hispanic students who were chronically absent scored 26 points lower than Hispanic students who missed less than 5 days of school. Finally, among White students, those who missed 2.5% or less of school days had an average English/Language Arts ISTEP+ score that was 38 points higher than the average score of chronically

**Figure 3. ISTEP+ Score for E/LA for Each Attendance Group by SES for Grade 6 (KG Cohort)**



Note: Horizontal line represents passing score. Lines above the bars represent confidence intervals for the means, which are typically wider for smaller populations.

**Figure 4. ISTEP+ Score for Math in Each Attendance Group by SES for Grade 8 (G6 Cohort)**



Note: Horizontal line represents passing score. Lines above the bars represent confidence intervals for the means, which are typically wider for smaller populations.

absent White students. The same trend was found for the kindergarten cohort on the Math portion of the ISTEP+, as well as among the grade 6 cohort on the English/Language Arts and Math portions of the ISTEP+ (Spradlin et al., 2012a). For all racial groups, in both cohorts, attendance impacted achievement on the ISTEP+ (Spradlin et al., 2012a).

**Chronically absent students are found throughout Indiana.** Indiana’s attendance data clearly illustrate that chronic absence occurs in all parts of the state. Average absence rates for the kindergarten and grade 6 cohorts were consistent across the Northern, Central, and Southern regions of Indiana (Table 3). A majority (70% - 72%) of Indiana’s students fall into “missing less than 5% of school days”

category. In all three regions, roughly 22% of students had absence rates between 5% - 10%. Additionally, approximately 5% of students in each region were chronically absent, missing between 10% - 20% of school. Finally, 0.3% - 0.5% of Indiana’s students were severely chronically absent, missing more than 20% of school days. Clearly, chronic absenteeism is not concentrated in one region of Indiana, but occurs throughout the state.

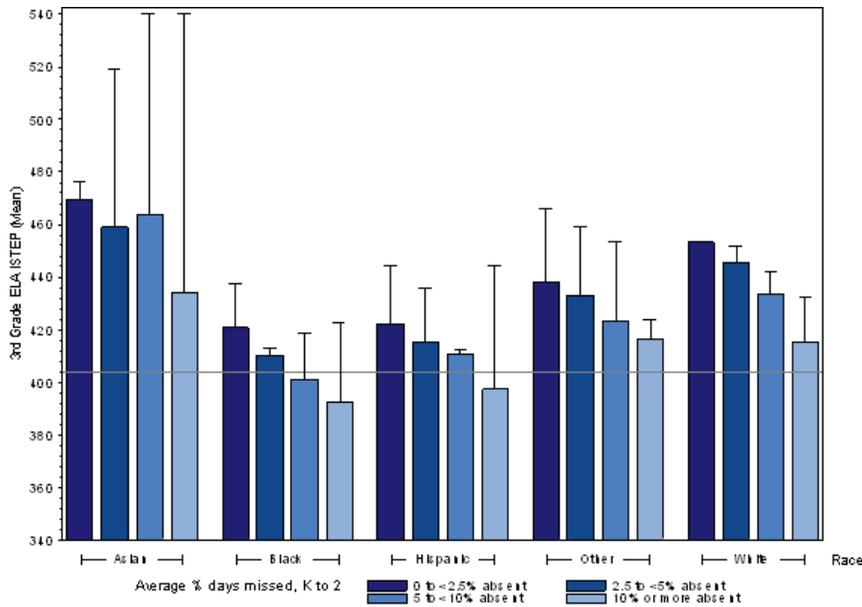
Data on absence rates in Indiana indicate that students are chronically absent in all types of settings throughout the state. Comparing cohort data by locality reveals that more students in the two cohorts attended rural schools than other types of schools, and rural schools had the highest percentage of students with attendance rates of 95% or greater, with 74.39% of students in this category. They also had the lowest percentage of chronically absent students (3.92%) and severely chronically absent students (.21%) (Table 4).

Suburban schools had the second highest percentage (73.13%) of students who miss less than 5% of school, and the second lowest percentage of chronically absent students (4.73%) as well as severely chronically absent students (0.30%). Urban schools had the highest percentage of students missing 5% - 10% of school days, at 24.45%, followed by town schools (23.33%), suburban schools (20.9%), and rural schools (20.7%). Urban schools also had the highest percentage of students (7.1%), and towns the second highest (5.9%) percentage of students, in the chronically absent category.

For both the kindergarten and grade 6 cohorts, urban schools had the highest percentage of severe chronic absences (0.66%), and town schools had the second highest (0.36%). Though percentages of chronic and severe chronic absenteeism vary by locale, chronically absent students appear in all settings (Figures 6-7).

**Poor attendance is concentrated in a minority of schools; chronic absence data can help identify the most challenged.** The final level of data analysis conducted for the CEEP study was the degree of chronic absenteeism for all students by school type (elementary, middle, high school, and other, with “other” including multiple grade configurations such as K-12, K-8, and grades 7-12), not cohort group. These data reflect total absences, both unexcused and excused absences, reported to the IDOE by every school corporation and charter school. Data were compiled for the 2008-09, 2009-10, and 2010-11 school years for the over 1 million students in the state. Fortunately, as the data indicate, high levels

**Figure 5. ISTEP+ Score for Math in Each Attendance Group by Race/Ethnicity for Grade 3 (KG Cohort)**



Note: Horizontal line represents passing score. Lines above the bars represent confidence intervals for the means, which are typically wider for smaller populations.

of poor attendance occur in a small percentage of schools in Indiana. Additionally, most schools have a small percentage of students who are chronically absent. During the 2010-11 school year, in over 82% of Indiana's elementary schools less than 5% of students were chronically absent. At the middle school level, most schools (55.63%) experience less than 5% chronic absenteeism, about one third of middle schools had between 5% - 10% of students with chronic absenteeism, just 8% of middle schools had between 10% and 15% of its students who were chronically absent, and only 3% of middle schools had a chronic absenteeism rate above 15%.

Indiana high school attendance data reveal, however, only around one quarter (25.6%) of high schools had less than 5% of students with chronic absence. In approximately 37% of high schools, 5% - 10% of the student body was chronically absent. In nearly one quarter (22.12%) of high schools, 10% - 15% of students were chronically absent, and more than 15% of high schools in Indiana had a chronic absence rate above 15%. Data for the 2009-10 school year are similar across

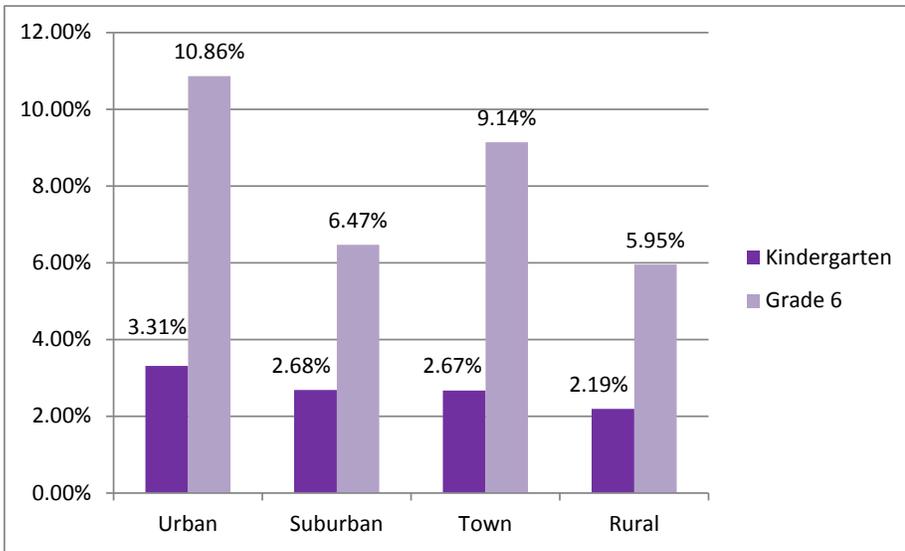
**Table 3. Student Absenteeism Rates for Kindergarten and Grade 6 Cohorts by Region: 7-year Average**

Days Missed		Northern	Central	Southern	Total
<5%	No. of Students	45,135	50,013	17,763	112,911
	Percentage	70.45%	70.86%	72.06%	70.88%
≥5% to <10%	No. of Students	14,697	15,462	5,321	35,480
	Percentage	22.94%	21.91%	21.59%	22.27%
≥10% to <20%	No. of Students	3,343	4,002	1,245	8,590
	Percentage	5.22%	5.67%	5.05%	5.39%
≥20%	No. of Students	215	347	89	651
	Percentage	0.34%	0.49%	0.36%	0.41%
Missing Data	No. of Students	676	755	232	1,663
	Percentage	1.06%	1.07%	0.94%	1.04%
<b>Total Students</b>	<b>No. of Students</b>	<b>64,066</b>	<b>70,579</b>	<b>24,650</b>	<b>159,295</b>

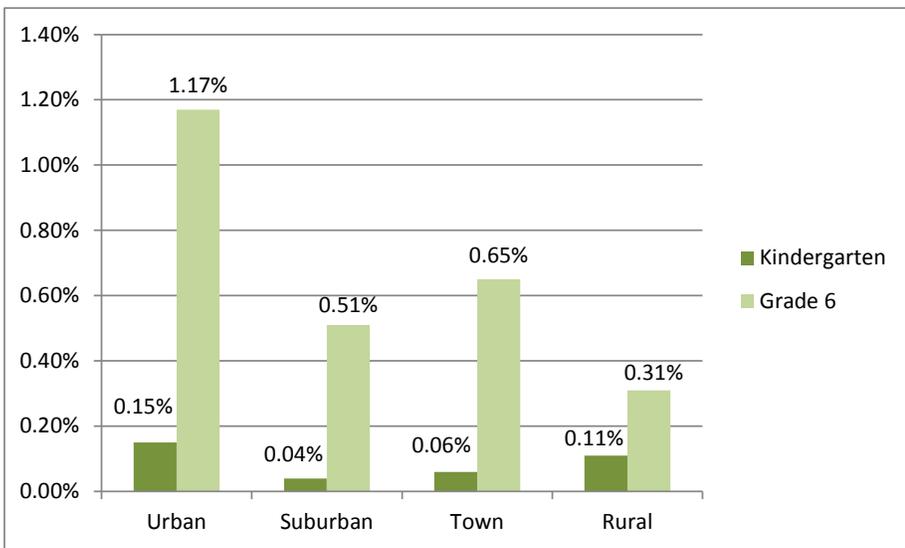
**Table 4. Student Absenteeism Rates for Kindergarten and Grade 6 Cohorts by Locale: 7-year Average**

Days Missed		Urban	Suburban	Town	Rural
<5%	No. of Students	24,881	33,155	10,283	41,948
	Percentage	66.52%	73.13%	69.40%	74.39%
≥5% to <10%	No. of Students	9,071	9,469	3,456	11,641
	Percentage	24.25%	20.89%	23.33%	20.65%
≥10% to <20%	No. of Students	2,649	2,143	887	2,211
	Percentage	7.08%	4.73%	5.99%	3.92%
≥20%	No. of Students	248	136	54	116
	Percentage	0.66%	0.30%	0.36%	0.21%
Missing Data	No. of Students	555	431	136	470
	Percentage	1.48%	0.95%	0.92%	0.83%
<b>Total Students</b>	<b>No. of Students</b>	<b>37,404</b>	<b>45,334</b>	<b>14,816</b>	<b>56,386</b>

**Figure 6. Chronic Absence Rates for Kindergarten and Grade 6 Cohorts by Locality**



**Figure 7: Severe Chronic Absence Rates for Kindergarten and Grade 6 Cohorts by Locality**



grade levels. Chronic absence data can help to identify which schools are experiencing the largest number of students at risk due to poor attendance. Although school-level data can indicate which schools are struggling with attendance, allowing for school-wide interventions, data on individual student absence allow for more targeted interventions.

Table 5 illustrates the total number of students in Indiana in the categories of chronic absence or severe chronic absence by year, and the percentage of chronic or severe

chronic absences at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. For example, during the 2008-09 school year, a total of 45,142 students were chronically absent and 7,686 students were severely chronically absent. Of the number of chronically absent students, 31.7% were enrolled in elementary school, 37.3% in middle schools, 19.3% in high schools, and 11.7% in schools with other grade configurations.

## BEST PRACTICES

Research and experience show chronic absence can be reduced when schools, communities, and families work together to build a culture of attendance and remove barriers to school attendance (Chang & Romero, 2008; Larson & Rumberger, 1995; Smink & Reimer, 2005). One of the key elements of creating a culture of attendance is careful monitoring of attendance data. Without accurate attendance data, schools and districts will be unable to assess the needs of its students and provide appropriate interventions (Chang & Romero, 2008). Attendance Works, a national and state-level initiative aimed at raising awareness of the importance of school attendance, recommends setting attendance goals, providing attendance incentives, communicating with parents and families about the importance of attendance, providing individual intervention and outreach, and partnering with community agencies to address barriers to attendance. Other recommended changes include the creation of a meaningful and relevant curriculum and facilitating positive student relationships with adults or peers in the school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Smink & Reimer, 2005).

Across the nation a number of best practices for improving attendance rates have been identified. Baltimore City Public Schools, for example, has adopted a number of initiatives aimed at raising attendance rates and preventing dropout. Additionally, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES), systematically reviews educational research literature and provides a summary of the effectiveness of interventions. Some of the interventions it has reviewed that have been identified as effective in improving attendance and graduation rates include Check & Connect, Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS), and career academies. We conclude the best practices section with a brief discussion of attendance teams that have been established in middle and high schools in Indianapolis Public Schools.

### Baltimore City Public Schools

Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) partner with child welfare services and have an agreement that allows welfare workers to access attendance data for the youth they are monitoring. The attendance data are used as one means of providing early intervention and support for children who may be facing challenges such as high mobility (frequent

**Table 5. Total Chronic and Severe Chronic Absenteeism by School Type and Year**

		Chronic			Severe Chronic		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Elementary	No. of Students	14,323	17,167	16,552	1,018	1,373	1,249
	Percentage	31.73%	34.84%	35.28%	13.24%	15.83%	15.40%
Middle	No. of Students	16,839	14,870	15,272	3,488	3,358	3,574
	Percentage	37.30%	30.18%	32.55%	45.38%	38.72%	44.08%
High	No. of Students	8,697	11,068	9,825	2,313	2,820	2,323
	Percentage	19.27%	22.46%	20.94%	30.09%	32.52%	28.65%
Other <sup>1</sup>	No. of Students	5,283	6,164	5,267	867	1,121	962
	Percentage	11.70%	12.51%	11.23%	11.28%	12.93%	11.86%
<b>Total Students</b>	<b>No. of Students</b>	<b>45,142</b>	<b>49,269</b>	<b>46,916</b>	<b>7,686</b>	<b>8,672</b>	<b>8,108</b>

<sup>1</sup> "Other" includes schools with multiple grade configurations such as K-12, K-8, or grades 7-12.

moves), homelessness, transportation issues, or physical or mental health problems within the family. Social workers use data on attendance to identify early warning signs and provide support for families. Data on individual student attendance allow for social workers to target support efforts to specific students. Through this program, social workers visited the homes of 315 kindergarten through grade 2 students during the summer, all of whom had been absent during the school year (Attendance Works, 2012a).

At Franklin Square Elementary in Baltimore, the principal and attendance monitor work closely together to address barriers to attendance. They have created a culture of attendance at Franklin Square, and students are expected to come to school. The school principal has an attendance dashboard, allowing daily tracking of attendance, and meets with the parents and families of all new students about attendance and the school's policies. The attendance monitor calls a student's home and sends a letter when a student is absent. Furthermore, community services have joined forces with the school in tackling barriers to attendance. Students receive free in-school dental care, haircuts, or clean uniforms because of the efforts of the community. Franklin Square also strives to provide an engaging environment through an intervention program called *Path to Pax*. The program teaches positive behavior techniques, including how to handle confrontations. A day care center and a Head Start program are housed in the school, and operate through partnerships with local sororities and churches. In recent years, Franklin Square's chronic absenteeism rate has been between 3% - 6%, as compared to Baltimore's citywide average of 14% for elementary and 17% of middle school students. The principal and attendance monitor say they promote the idea in school of treating people the way we want to be treated (Attendance Works, 2012b).

The City of Baltimore has implemented a *School Every Day!* initiative, which utilizes the help of volunteers to break down the barriers to school attendance by delivering alarm clocks, school uniforms, umbrellas, and winter coats to students and families in targeted neighborhoods. Volunteers connect families with support they need, whether material or emotional, create a peer-to-peer messaging system where older students write to younger students letting them know they are missed when they are absent, and solicit gift certificates from local merchants to offer incentives to students for good attendance. The goal of the program is to reduce chronic absenteeism by 20% in the neighborhoods where it operates. The program is funded by the Abell Foundation and housed in the BCPS Office of Engagement (Attendance Works, 2012c).

A number of programs aimed at improving attendance rates have adopted some or all of these measures and subsequently have proven to be effective. Though each program approaches intervention in a slightly different way, they all strive to improve attendance through addressing these common elements. Baltimore City Public Schools have made significant efforts to improve attendance across the district's schools, and have done so in a variety of ways. These efforts are important as the district continues to address high absence and drop-out rates. Currently, attendance data indicate that chronic absence rates in Baltimore's middle grades have been cut in half; however, rates for elementary and high schools have not changed (Attendance Works, 2012d).

### Check & Connect

The Check & Connect program, which started as a dropout prevention program in Minneapolis high schools in the early 1990s, has expanded to elementary schools within the

city as well as to school districts outside of Minneapolis due to its success. According to the program's website "Check & Connect is a comprehensive intervention designed to enhance student engagement at school and with learning for marginalized, disengaged students in grades K-12, through relationship building, problem solving and capacity building, and persistence. A goal of Check & Connect is to foster school completion with academic and social competence" (University of Minnesota, 2012). Districts utilizing the program look at absences and tardiness as signals that a child or family needs support and find mentors for students to provide that support.

In addition to monitoring attendance (*Check*), mentors work with students, parents, and teachers to promote participation and engagement in school (*Connect*). The Check & Connect program assigns mentors at the district level, allowing them to continue working with the same students and families in the event that they move or change schools within the district. The program emphasizes relationship building, problem solving, and strengthening students' and families' affiliation with school and learning. Significant improvements in student attendance, increased engagement in classrooms among students, and increased involvement of parents have been noted as positive effect of the Check & Connect program (Lehr, Sinclair, & Christianson, 2004; Sinclair et al., 1998; Smink & Reimer, 2005).

Research indicates that Check & Connect improves attendance, enrollment, and odds of graduation for students who are at risk of dropout. Anderson, Christianson, Sinclair, and Lehr (2004) reported that the mentor-student relationship improves engagement for elementary students. The What Works Clearinghouse reports that available research indicates the Check & Connect program has positive effects for staying in school and potentially positive effects on progressing in

school (What Works Clearinghouse, 2006c). Additionally, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network lists Check & Connect as one of its model strategies in the area of mentoring/tutoring (Smink & Reimer, 2005).

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### **Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS)**

Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS, which is Spanish for “wings”) is another intervention aimed at middle and high school students to increase attendance and prevent student dropout. The program was developed by Katherine Larson and Russell Rumberger at the University of California, Santa Barbara in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, and aims to address student, school, family, and community factors that influence attendance and student dropout rates. ALAS features six related intervention strategies: (1) monitor attendance, (2) improve student social and task-related problem-solving skills, (3) provide feedback from teachers to parents and students, (4) teach parents how to participate in school and manage child behavior, (5) provide recognition and bonding activities, and (6) connect students and families with community services (Larson & Rumberger, 1995). The What Works Clearinghouse rates ALAS as a potentially positive intervention for staying in school and progressing in school, based on existing literature on the intervention (What Works Clearinghouse, 2006a).

During the implementation of ALAS in Los Angeles County from 1990-1995, students received 10 weeks of problem solving instruction as well as two years of continued problem-solving prompting and counseling (Larson & Rumberger, 1995). Given that “disruptive social and task-related behavior is the student characteristic which most disturbs teachers and school staff” and correlates more with school failure over achievement, Larson and Rumberger felt this focus was necessary (1995, p. A-22). Another core aspect of the ALAS program is bonding activities with students. Larson and Rumberger (1995) utilize research that indicates dropouts and ethnic and racial minorities report feeling much less a sense of membership in the school than other students (p. A-23).

Frequent teacher feedback is also provided to the parent and student, which parents reported to find helpful. Furthermore, the ALAS program worked with parents regarding school participation and teen management. The parent program provided training related to the philosophies of educators, the practices and procedures of the schools, when and how

to contact school personnel, due process and legal rights of parents and students, when and how to monitor adolescent behavior, and how to monitor the adolescent’s school behavior and performance. ALAS personnel worked closely with parents in connecting them with community services and facilitating communication between them (Larson & Rumberger, 1995).

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### **Career Academies**

Career academies seek to make the curricula more relevant, meaningful, and practical for students. Like Check & Connect, career academies were originally developed as a dropout prevention strategy, but have expanded in use because of their effectiveness. Career academies have been around for over 30 years and feature a school-within-a-school structure. Often, the academies “are guided by a career theme such as health care, finance, technology, communications, or public service” (What Works Clearinghouse, 2006b, p. 2). Career academies may partner with local employers who offer internship opportunities and mentoring or contribute resources to students (What Works Clearinghouse, 2006b). The National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC) details three common aspects of career academies: “a small learning community, or group of students within the larger high school, who take classes together for at least two years, and are taught by a team of teachers from different disciplines; a college preparatory curriculum with a career theme, enabling students to see relationships among academic subjects, and their application to a broad field of work; and partnerships with employers, the community, and local colleges, bring resources from outside the high school to improve student motivation and achievement” (National Career Academy Coalition, 2012).

The Career Academy Support Network (CASN) reports that there are over 500 career academies in California alone, and that career academies “have been evaluated since their inception, and have a strong track record of improved attendance, credits, grades, and graduation rates among participants” (Career Academy Support Network (2012). In 2009, the NCAC named 16 career academies in the U.S. as “model” academies. All model academies adhere to the 10 National Standards of Practice and are evaluated by a consortium of career academy organizations (National Career Academy Coalition, 2012). Model academies include The Business Academy (the BIZ) in Florida, Health Sciences and Human Services Academy in Arizona; Technology Tower Academy in Texas, and Ridge-

wood Academy for Health Professionals in New Jersey, to name a few. Career academies continue to be utilized throughout the nation as one means of improving attendance and graduation rates.

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### **Creating Attendance Teams**

During the 2008-09 school year, all middle and high schools in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) adopted an intervention strategy called “College Pathway Teams,” comprised of school administrators, guidance counselors, college support staff, parent liaisons, and families. Teams focused on creating a college-going culture within each school. In the 2010-11 school year, College Pathway Teams were converted to Attendance Teams. Team members met regularly to create goals for increasing attendance rates, through utilizing data on chronically absent students to focus outreach to students and families. During that school year, IPS created a rubric reflecting best practices for engaging families and increasing attendance. While all IPS attendance teams received \$500 as an incentive for engaging families, the four schools that showed the most attendance progress and implemented strategies to engage families each received an award of \$5,000 (J. Garvey, personal communication, April 24, 2012). Attendance Teams provide a means for setting attendance goals, monitoring attendance, collaborating with families, and offering incentives to schools that demonstrate improvement.

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## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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### **Conclusion**

Attendance matters for all students and this report has quantified the degree to which good attendance contributes to student success. However, Indiana must improve its policies and guidelines to ensure the availability of reliable data and timely identification of students at risk of academic failure due to poor performance. Teachers, administrators, community and family members, as well as policymakers should pay attention to the attendance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, since they are more vulnerable to chronic absence. All stakeholders must work collaboratively to provide a welcoming, engaging learning environment at school to encourage these students to attend school regularly. Once truancy begins, early intervention strategies should be implemented.

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## Recommendations

### For Policymakers

1. Indiana should adopt the definition of chronic absence that is consistent with the definition being used in the national discussion of students missing 10% or more of the school year, and include both excused and unexcused absences in this definition.
2. Indiana should change its current statutory definition of chronic absence, which is 10 days of unexcused absences, to serve only as a definition of truancy.
3. Indiana should change existing policy established in the IDOE-AT Report and corresponding guidance that excludes out-of-school suspensions from attendance and absence rate calculations. It is not clear why this exemption exists as students are certainly not in attendance at school nor typically receiving educational services. This allows for artificially higher attendance rates and lower reported levels of chronic and severe chronic absence rates than truly exist. This policy change would align the state with the policies of the other states that have conducted similar chronic absenteeism studies.
4. Indiana should implement either clear and consistent policies and guidance or rules for the definitions of excused and unexcused absences. The data analysis revealed that many schools report no unexcused absences or extremely low levels of unexcused absences – far lower than the excused absence numbers. This appears counterintuitive. Clearly the lack of state-level guidance on this issue has led to discrepancies in the ways that excused and unexcused absences are defined and reported. This must be addressed.
5. Indiana should identify chronic absence as an attendance measure to be tracked, monitored, and reported to enable the IDOE to better assess absenteeism and address it at the school, district, and state level. Similarly, Indiana may choose to explore the possibility of adding chronic absence as a performance index for school accountability, to be considered as a factor in targeting and prioritizing schools for intervention strategies.

### For Educators

1. Indiana schools should track individual students' attendance, identify students with chronic absenteeism, implement appropriate interventions, and work with

- families to improve student attendance.
2. Attendance teams should identify barriers to attendance and address them through interventions, such as partnering (collaborating) with community organizations to address needs of families and students.
3. Administrators should work closely with classroom teachers to identify students with a pattern of absence and collaborate with one another to identify barriers to attendance and provide early intervention.
4. Teachers should strive to create a rich, engaging, and safe classroom environment for students, so they are excited about attending school.
5. Indiana schools should set attendance goals and monitor progress.
6. Indiana schools should provide incentives or rewards, such as recognition certificates, and prizes or gifts cards donated by the community, to students with good attendance.

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