

# Coming to Terms with Absenteeism in Indiana

## *A Research and Policy Brief*

By: Terry Spradlin and Hedy Chang | June 2012



A statewide analysis of attendance data in Indiana shows a direct correlation between absenteeism and poor academic performance, with chronically absent students more likely to drop out of high school and to score below their peers on standardized tests. The trend affects students at all income levels, at all ages and all parts of the state, according to the analysis initiated by The Indiana Partnerships Center and conducted by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy at Indiana University, in collaboration with the Marion County Commission on Youth, NetLiteracy, and Attendance Works. In fact, the study found that only a quarter of chronically absent high school students—those missing 10 percent or more of the school year—finished high school. The study's results underscore the importance of tracking the right attendance data and intervening when students have too many absences or schools record high levels of chronic absence.

Unfortunately, Indiana's current definitions of attendance terms leave many educators and policymakers in the dark about the extent of the problem. The key to this analysis was looking beyond the school wide attendance averages that most districts use. CEEP focused on students in each school

who missed 10 percent or more of the school year or 18 days, the level at which absenteeism often becomes a drag on academic performance. Researchers looked at both excused and unexcused absences to get a full picture of how many students are academically at risk due to poor attendance. The analysis found that at least 55,000 Indiana students are chronically absent in a typical year. This estimate, however is believed to be an undercount since Indiana does not include days missed due to suspensions or expulsions as absences.

The report's authors recommend that Indiana take several steps to address absenteeism:

- Amend the state's attendance definitions to draw a distinction between chronic absence and truancy. Both terms are now used to describe 10 unexcused absences.
- Add days lost to suspensions as absences.
- Identify chronic absence as a measure districts should track and report to the state.
- Launch a campaign spelling out the connection between attendance, achievement and dropout rates.
- Encourage districts to develop consistent definitions for excused and unexcused absences

## **Attendance in Indiana**

The new analysis uses data provided by the Indiana Department of Education to examine seven years of public school attendance records, from 2003-04 to 2009-10. Researchers also tracked two cohorts of students—one set from kindergarten to grade 6 and one from grades 6 to 12—across the years to see how attendance affected later performance. The analysis showed that average daily attendance rates statewide remained consistent across the years at about 96 percent, which is considered a good rate. But the data, when disaggregated, revealed some alarming statistics on absenteeism in schools across the state.

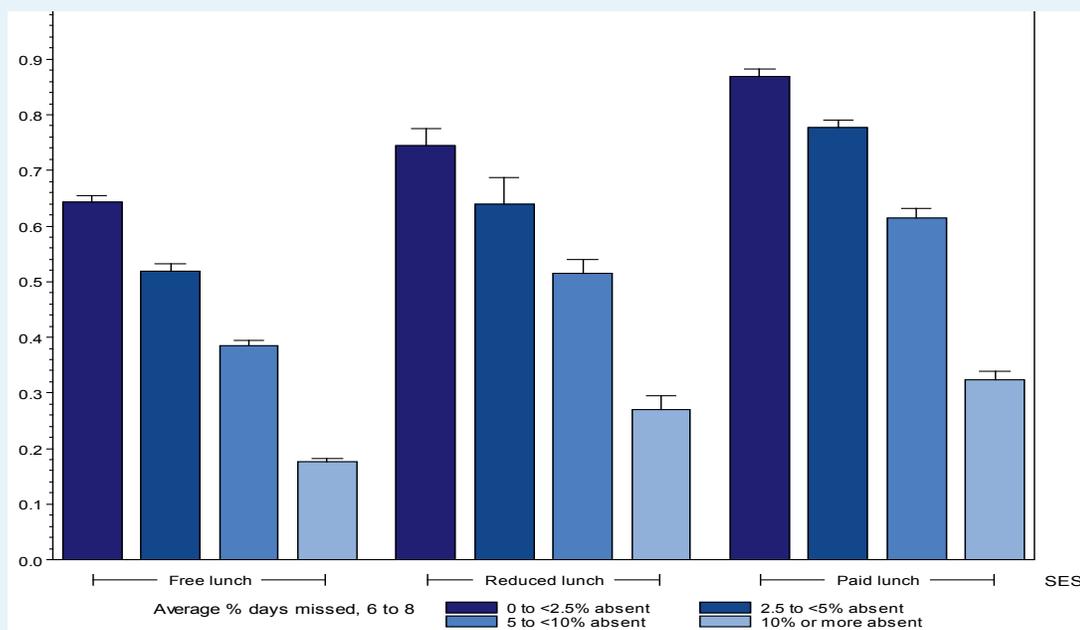
The findings include:

- Attendance levels were directly tied to graduation rates. About 88 percent of the high school students with good attendance (missing five or fewer days) graduated compared to 24 percent to those missing 18 or more days a year in high school. This pattern of lower achievement is consistent with results from studies in Baltimore and Chicago.



- The connection to graduation rates persisted at every family income level. The chart below illustrates graduation rates for students based on their absenteeism rates and their eligibility for meal subsidies, a proxy for family income. In every case, even for higher-income students, graduation rates drop precipitously for chronically absent students.
- Further analysis shows that children from low-income families are more likely to be chronically absent. About 11 percent of elementary students who qualified for free lunches were chronically absent, compared with 2.4 percent of those who received no assistance. The effect is even more pronounced in the high school years, when 28.6 percent of those receiving free lunches were chronically absent, compared with 9 percent of those who received no assistance. This finding is similar to national trends.
- Attendance rates have an impact at the school level as well. Schools with higher average daily attendance (ADA) rates have higher percentages of students passing achievement tests and graduating from high school. A noticeable drop-off occurs in schools with ADA levels below 90 percent, with only 45.6 percent of students there graduating and 16.5 percent passing the ISTEP+ tests.
- As early as third grade, chronic absence is consistently associated with weaker test scores. Students who were chronically absent in the early grades scored nearly 50 scale points lower in math and 40 points lower in reading on third-grade standardized tests than those with good attendance (missing five or fewer days). Likewise, students who were chronically absent throughout middle school had a 70-point gap in math and 35-point gap in English/language arts.
- Chronic absence occurs at every grade level. Data suggests at least 6.7 percent of students missed too much school in first grade, a figure that dropped to 4.3 percent by fifth grade. In the secondary school cohort, the absenteeism rate rose steadily, peaking at 13.9 percent in 10th grade. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these rates, especially in middle and high school, could be significantly higher if absence data had included days missed due to suspension.
- Chronic absenteeism occurs in all types of communities: rural, suburban and urban. While the rates are highest in cities, the actual number of students affected is nearly as high in suburban and rural areas. Absenteeism rates were consistent across the Northern, Central and Southern regions of the state, with about 5 percent of the students in each region missing 18 to 36 days of school.

### Graduation Rates by Attendance Category: chronic absence in middle school predicts dropout rates at all income levels



## Why Does Attendance Matter?

Research backs up the common-sense belief that children suffer academically if they aren't in class to learn. An analysis of a national sample of chronically absent kindergarten students revealed lower academic performance when they reach first grade. Reading scores for Latino children were most affected. Among poor children, who lack the resources to make up for lost time on task, chronic kindergarten absence translated into lower fifth-grade achievement.<sup>i</sup> Nationally one in 10 kindergartners is chronically absent.

By sixth grade, chronic absence begins to predict high school dropout rates, a study of Baltimore students showed.<sup>ii</sup> By ninth grade, missing 20 percent of school can be a better predictor of dropout rates than eighth-grade test scores are, Chicago researchers found.<sup>iii</sup> The Indiana analysis reinforces these findings. Along with behavior problems and failure of core academic courses, poor attendance is a critical early warning sign that a student will drop out.

As the Indiana analysis suggests, children from low-income families are disproportionately affected by chronic absence. National research shows that these absences hit low-income children particularly hard in the early grades: They are more likely to miss too much school and more likely to fall behind academically because of it.<sup>iv</sup>

Eventually, chronic absence can affect all students, as teachers spend more time reviewing concepts for children who missed the lessons in the first place.

## Why Is Chronic Absence Overlooked?

In Indiana, as in most states, schools seldom look at chronic absence figures. Instead they pay more attention to average daily attendance (ADA), or the percentage of students who show up each day to school, and to truancy, typically defined in terms of unexcused absences. These are important measures; ADA can help a school assess how much capacity it needs for everything from desks to school buses. Truancy (or unexcused absences) can signal when students are disengaging from school. But neither provides a complete picture of how much instructional time a student has lost.

Truancy figures can be especially misleading in the early grades, because young children typically do not stay home without an adult who calls in an excuse. School wide averages can also be misleading because they do not reveal whether absences are spread evenly, with all students missing a few days, or whether they are concentrated, with a few students experiencing excessive absences. They also don't show patterns of absences, such as whether students from an unsafe neighborhood or an unruly classroom are more likely to miss school. Indiana's analysis is an important step toward revealing those patterns and demonstrating the effect that chronic absenteeism can have on achievement.

Indiana's calculations are further complicated by the exclusion of suspension days from any attendance data. Most states count disciplinary actions either as excused absences or in a separate category, and they are reflected in attendance totals. In Indiana, a total of 81,403 students were suspended at least once in the 2010-11 school year, and more than half these students came from grades 7 to 10. These students are, however, certainly not in attendance at school nor typically receiving educational services. This allows for artificially higher attendance rates. Adding these absences would align the state with accepted practice in most other states and give a more accurate picture of how much instructional time Indiana's children are missing.

In addition, the data analysis revealed that many schools report no unexcused absences or extremely low levels of truancy – far lower than the excused absence numbers. This appears counterintuitive and suggests a need for better guidance regarding how excused and unexcused absences are defined and reported.

## What Should Indiana Do?

Indiana has an opportunity to narrow the achievement gap and turn around struggling schools by playing closer attention to attendance. While many of Indiana's schools record good attendance, there are particular schools and students that should be targeted for intervention. 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. Districts and schools can deal with this problem on the local level by setting attendance goals, offering incentives to children and families, communication with families about the importance of attendance, intervening when needed and partnering with community agencies to address barriers to attendance such as lack of access to good health care, reliable transportation and stable housing. The first step, though, is to find out the extent to which chronic absence is a problem and for whom, so that schools and communities can determine where attention is most needed. Schools and communities often inspire children to attend and can save resources by starting with universal, low-cost prevention activities before pursuing legal intervention.

The state should:

1. Amend the state's definition of attendance to draw a distinction between chronic absence and truancy. Both terms now are defined as 10 unexcused absences.
2. Count days on which a student is suspended from school as absences.
3. Encourage districts to develop consistent definitions for excused and unexcused absences.
4. Identify chronic absence as a measure that districts should track and report to the state.
5. Launch an attendance campaign spelling out the connection between attendance and achievement and dropout rates.

Spradlin, Terry and Chang, Hedy N., *Coming to Terms with Absenteeism in Indiana*, Attendance Works, June 2012.

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The Indiana data in this brief are drawn from two reports:

Spradlin, T., Stephanie, D., Chen, J., Shi, D., Chen, M., Han, J., & Cierniak, K. (2012). *Examining the prevalence, scale, and impact of chronic absence in Indiana student-level data analysis*. Bloomington, IN: Center for Evaluation & Education Policy.

Spradlin, T., Shi, D., Cierniak, K. Chen, M., & Han, J. (2012). *Attendance and chronic absenteeism in Indiana: Descriptive data analysis*. Bloomington, IN: Center for Evaluation & Education Policy.

Additional citations;

- i. Chang, Hedy N. and Romero, Mariajose, *Present, Engaged & Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty: September 2008.
- ii. Balfanz, Robert et al., "Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions." *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223–235: Copyright 2007, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- iii. Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q., *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and at Attendance in the freshman year*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research: 2007.
- vi. Ready, Douglas D., *Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development, The Differential Effects of School Exposure*, Sociology of Education, October 2010