



The Indiana Partnerships Center

ENGAGE • EQUIP • EMPOWER

For immediate release
July 25, 2012

Contact: Leslie Olsen
317-508-6065, leslie@olsencc.net

Study: Chronic absence lowers test scores, chances of graduation for thousands of Indiana students

At least 55,200 Indiana students – and probably many more – are missing so much school each year that they suffer academically and face a greater risk of dropping out of high school, according to a groundbreaking study released today.

These students are “chronically absent,” missing at least 10 percent of the 180-day school year – 18 days a year, an average of two days a month. That many absences – whether excused or unexcused – correlate with lower scores on state tests and higher dropout rates across Indiana, according to the study, which was initiated by The Indiana Partnerships Center, conducted by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy at Indiana University and funded by USA Funds and State Farm.

The study was released at a news conference today, followed by a community forum where more than 70 leaders discussed the problem and sought solutions.

The Indiana Partnerships Center announced that it was undertaking a campaign called “Missing School Matters” to make students, parents and schools aware of the ramifications of chronic absence. Twenty billboards have been placed around Marion County to warn that chronic absenteeism can lead to dropping out, which some studies have shown can lead to teen pregnancy or incarceration. The billboards provide the URL, www.missingschoolmattersIN.org, for more information.

“Students and parents need to know the serious consequences that frequent absences have on the students’ future,” said Jacqueline Garvey, executive director of The Indiana Partnerships Center, a not-for-profit organization that helps parents engage in their child’s school and encourages schools to welcome parents as partners.

“Whether a student’s absences are excused or unexcused, whether the student is cutting classes without his parents’ knowledge or going on vacation with his parents, his chronic absence negatively affects his academic performance in profound ways. Missing school matters.”

The study demonstrates a correlation between absenteeism and poor academic performance – that is, **chronically absent students score below their peers on the ISTEP+ standardized tests and are more likely to drop out of high school**, potentially leading to difficulties throughout life.

It found that Indiana third graders who were chronically absent scored nearly 50 points lower in math and 40 points lower in reading on ISTEP+ tests. Students who were chronically absent through middle school scored 70 points lower in math and 35 points lower in English/language arts.

“We know that kids who fall behind in those early grade levels are going to have a hard time catching up later, so there is long-term impact throughout K-12 education,” said Terry Spradlin, the IU center’s director for education policy. “If kids are falling behind in kindergarten or first grade because of being absent and they’re not developing good literacy skills, that can signify long-term challenges for them.”

Hedy Nai-Lin Chang, director of Attendance Works, a national and state-level initiative aimed at advancing student success by addressing chronic absence, said that attendance patterns often are established when children are young and may miss school because of illness, unreliable transportation or unstable housing.

“We need to start early to build a habit of good attendance among all our children, and we need to look at the right data so that we know who’s missing too much school,” Chang said. “That allows us to intervene with children and families to turn around attendance problems. Indiana’s statewide study is the critical first step to identifying who is chronically absent and improving school attendance.”

Chronic absence occurs in all income levels, all age groups and all parts of the state, though schools that served larger numbers of low-income students, new English learners and special education students had lower attendance rates.

Still, chronic absence has a more profound effect on a student’s achievement than his or her family’s income level, the study found. Among students whose family income was sufficiently low to allow them to qualify for free lunches, 64 percent of students who had exemplary attendance graduated, but only 17 percent of those who were chronically absent did. Among students whose family income was too high to qualify for lunch assistance, 77 percent with exemplary attendance graduated, compared to 33 percent who were chronically absent.

The study found that Indiana schools do not count as absences the school days some students miss because they are suspended or expelled. That means the real depth of the absenteeism problem is masked, Ms. Garvey said.

The study recommends that Indiana:

- 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.
- Count days on which a student is suspended or expelled from school as absences.
- Encourage districts to develop consistent definitions for excused and unexcused absences.
- Identify chronic absence as a measure that districts should track and report to the state.
- Launch an attendance campaign spelling out the connection between attendance and achievement and dropout rates.

Partners for the study were the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy; Marion County Commission on Youth; Net Literacy, which produced a video about chronic absenteeism and posted it to YouTube; and Attendance Works. WFYI’s American Graduate initiative is assisting in the public-awareness campaign and Clear Channel Outdoor is a media partner.

For more information and to read the study, go to www.missingschoolmattersIN.org.