Portraits of Change: Aligning School and Community Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence

More than seven million students nationwide are chronically absent from school – missing so much school, for any reason, that they are academically at risk. Starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence erodes students' ability to learn and achieve in school. It increases the likelihood that children will be unable to read well by third grade, fail classes in middle school and drop out of high school. Children living in poverty, from communities of color and diagnosed with a disability are disproportionately affected.

When chronic absence reaches high levels, all students – not just those missing from the classroom – may suffer, because the resulting classroom churn, with many students sporadically attending, hampers teachers' ability to engage and meet all students' learning needs. While not a substitute for quality teaching, reducing chronic absence is key to realizing the benefits of investments in improved instruction and curriculum.

The good news is chronic absence, even when it reaches high levels, is a solvable problem. What works is taking a data–driven, comprehensive approach that begins with engaging students and families as well as preventing absences from adding up. The key is using data as a diagnostic tool to help identify where chronic absence is a problem and target where additional resources are needed for prevention and early intervention. Schools with higher levels typically require a more comprehensive approach as well as more support from community partners and public agencies. Previously rarely calculated, chronic absence data is increasingly available, providing more opportunity than ever before to use data to align resources and take timely action.

To better understand the challenge we face as a nation and its implications for action, Attendance Works asked researchers at the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University to use available data to examine three key questions:

1. **What are the chronic absence levels in schools across the country?**

2. **How do levels of chronic absence in schools vary across states?**

3. **Is there a relationship between particular school characteristics (e.g., ages of students, type of locale and presence of poverty) and higher or lower levels of chronic absence?**

Based on data from the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, combined with data from the Common Core of Data, provided by the National

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Center for Education Statistics, and revised numbers from New York City Schools, this analysis provides the following insights:

◆ One out of ten schools in the nation has extreme chronic absence (30 percent or more of students chronically absent), while another 11 percent face high levels (20–29 percent of students chronically absent) and almost half of all schools have a more modest problem, with less than 10 percent of students chronically absent.

◆ Across states, the percentage of all schools with extreme chronic absence (30 percent or more of students) varied significantly from two percent to 29 percent. An issue worth further exploration is what factors might explain these variations, including differences in data collection, social and economic challenges (e.g., poverty, access to health care, prevalence of chronic illness) as well as prior investment in policies and programs to improve attendance.

◆ Chronic absence levels are higher in schools with larger percentages of low-income students. Schools with greater percentages of students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to experience high and extreme chronic absence levels, whereas those with the least percentage of students from low-income backgrounds typically experience modest or low levels.

◆ While national data show that schools with extreme chronic absenteeism are more likely to be located

Defining Chronic Absence:

Attendance Works recommends that chronic absence be defined as missing 10 percent of school — the equivalent of two days every month or 18 days over a 180-day school year — because this better enables early detection and action to improve attendance. In this brief's data analysis, however, chronic absence refers to missing 15 or more days because this is the data used in the Civil Rights Data Collection for School Year 2013–14, the only currently available national data set.

in urban areas — rather than suburban, town or rural locations — this pattern did not hold true across states. One in five urban schools reports extreme chronic absence as compared to about one in ten suburban, town or rural schools. This pattern does not always hold true when examining state-level data. For example, in Wyoming and California chronic absence levels were higher in rural communities than in cities.

◆ Nationally, high schools have the highest chronic absence. About one-quarter of all schools with students in grades 9–12 have extreme chronic absence. While these findings are true at the national level, chronic absence levels vary depending on the local context.

◆ Among different types of high schools, special education and alternative high schools are most

TABLE 1

% Students Chronically Absent	# Schools	% Schools
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	9,921	11%
High Chronic Absence (20–29%)	10,330	11%
Significant Chronic Absence (10–19%)	28,320	31%
Modest Chronic Absence (5–9%)	21,190	23%
Low Chronic Absence (0–5%)	22,572	24%
Grand Total	**92,333**	

likely to have extreme chronic absence. About half of these schools have 30 percent or more of students missing 15 or more days, and more vocational high schools than regular high schools report extreme rates of chronic absenteeism. High levels of chronic absence among students in special education and alternative schools holds true for elementary and middle school as well.

Inspiring examples found throughout the country in a variety of schools — urban and rural, in large and small districts — demonstrate that chronic absence can be turned around, even when it reaches high levels in a school or district or among a particular student population. Portraits of Change, for example, from Cleveland (Ohio), Grand Rapids (Michigan), New Britain (Connecticut) and Long Beach (California) illustrate the power of a district-wide effort. The portraits illustrate the power of offering universal prevention strategies for all students, providing early intervention as soon as a student becomes chronically absent and turning to intensive supports only when needed. The size of the challenge can inform the level of resources needed. Addressing higher levels of chronic absence typically requires more support from community partners and public agencies.

Enlisting Partners for Change

Fortunately, many potential partners can be enlisted to help improve attendance, including:

◆ Businesses

◆ Community Schools

◆ Family Support Organizations

◆ Early Childhood Education Programs

◆ Faith-Based Organizations

◆ Health Providers

◆ Housing Agencies

◆ Hunger Relief Organizations

◆ Institutions of Higher Education

◆ The Juvenile Justice System

◆ Local Governments

◆ Parent and Youth Leadership Organizations

◆ Volunteers and National Service Members

◆ Out-of-School-Time (OST) Programs

◆ Philanthropy

◆ Social Service Agencies

◆ Population-Specific Service or Civic Organization

Recommendations for Action

Reducing chronic absence requires action at the state and local levels. State-level action is critical to ensure a consistent approach to collecting accurate data as well as ensuring that schools and districts, especially those facing the highest chronic absence, have supports to reduce chronic absence. District-level action is essential to ensure that strategies are implemented on the ground and tailored to local needs and strengths.

State Action

Step 1. Examine data and ensure quality.

Review data trends. Assess whether steps need to be taken to improve the accuracy and consistency of data.

Step 2. Form a state leadership team.

This cross-sector team assumes collective responsibility for advancing the work.

Step 3. Develop a data-informed comprehensive system of technical assistance.

This approach ideally includes:

◆ Universal supports designed to provide all districts and schools with access to chronic absence data as well as guidance on how to improve attendance.

◆ Group professional development aimed at building districts' and schools' capacity to reduce chronic absence. These investments may include peer

networks that meet in-person or online – or some combination of the two.

◆ Intensive technical assistance to districts or schools with the highest chronic absence. This could include a comprehensive needs assessment that identifies factors contributing to chronic absence, the resources to improve attendance, the top-priority actions and the support needed to implement them.

Step 4. Publicize the challenge and available resources.

States can generate support by publicizing the size and scope of the chronic absence challenge, sharing plans to tackle it, and enlisting key stakeholders' help.

District Action

Step 1. Form a local leadership team.

Operating at the district level, this cross-sector team takes responsibility for monitoring data, setting priorities, implementing a work plan, engaging key partners and continually assessing how to strengthen the work.

Step 2. Map assets and secure additional partners.

Identify the people and organizations most likely to care about chronic absence and enlist their support.

Step 3. Unpack Causes.

Use quantitative and qualitative data to pinpoint major factors causing chronic absence. Understanding why students miss school is essential to designing effective solutions.

Step 4. Develop and implement solutions.

Put in place a tiered approach that begins with prevention and then provides the most at-risk students with personalized interventions that address their barriers.

Step 5. Assess results.

Use attendance and chronic absence data to secure immediate and ongoing feedback about the effectiveness of current strategies and how they can be improved.

Conclusion

Increasingly widespread public access to chronic absence data allows a broader array of stakeholders than ever before to use this information to promote earlier intervention and supports aimed at setting students on a pathway for success. But educators, families and community members need to know how to interpret and use chronic absence data. Chronic absence is not solved if the issue devolves into a blame game directed at children, families or educators. The power of chronic absence information is using it to trigger a deeper inquiry into the barriers to getting to school and to make strategic investments in prevention and early intervention.

Everyone needs to pitch in to tackle chronic absence. Districts and schools are on the front lines. Educators determine whether data is accurate, analyzed and reviewed in a timely manner and shared with other community partners. Students' and families' insights are critical to unpacking barriers and identifying what might help. Community and public agency partners often provide additional data and perspectives on barriers as well as resources to help students and families overcome attendance challenges. Funders and elected officials are uniquely equipped to convene stakeholders and garner public support for needed action. By reducing chronic absence and ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to learn, we lay a foundation for vibrant, healthy, economically viable communities today and in the future.