Reducing Chronic Absence: A Springboard for Academic Success

Implications for practice and policy

Director: Hedy Chang
Unpacking Attendance Terms

**Average Daily Attendance**
- The % of enrolled students who attend school each day. It is used in some states for allocating funding.

**Truancy**
- Typically refers only to unexcused absences and is defined by each state under No Child Left Behind. It signals the potential need for legal intervention under state compulsory education laws.

**Chronic Absence**
- Missing 10% or more of school for any reason – excused, unexcused, etc. It is an indication that a student is academically at risk due to missing too much school starting in Kindergarten.
Most Schools Only Track Average Daily Attendance and Truancy. Both Can Mask Chronic Absence.

Chronic Absence for 6 Elementary Schools in Oakland, CA with @ 95% ADA in 2012

98% ADA = little chronic absence
95% ADA = don’t know
93% ADA = significant chronic absence
A 407 alert is issued when a student misses 10 consecutive days or 20 days over a 40 day period. It misses more sporadic absence.

1 out of 5 elementary school children were chronically absent.

Source: Nauer, K et al, Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families, Center for New York City Affairs New School, Oct 2008
Nationwide, as many as 10-15% of students (7.5 million) miss nearly a month of school every year. That’s 135 million days of lost time in the classroom.

In some cities, as many as one in four students are missing that much school.

Chronic absenteeism is a red alert that students are headed for academic trouble and eventually for dropping out of high school.

Poor attendance isn’t just a problem in high school. It can start as early as kindergarten and pre-kindergarten.
The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is focusing on three challenges to reading success that are amenable to community solutions:

- **The Readiness Gap**: Too many children from low-income families begin school already far behind.

- **The Attendance Gap** (Chronic Absence): Too many children from low-income families miss too many days of school.

- **The Summer Slide** (Summer Learning Loss): Too many children lose ground over the summer months.
Students Chronically Absent in Kindergarten and 1st Grade are Much Less Likely to Read Proficiently in 3rd Grade

Percent Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on 3rd Grade ELA Based on Attendance in Kindergarten and in 1st Grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance Risk</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No risk</td>
<td>Missed less than 5% of school in K &amp; 1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small risk</td>
<td>Missed 5-9% of days in both K &amp; 1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate risk</td>
<td>Missed 5-9% of days in 1 year &amp; 10% in 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High risk</td>
<td>Missed 10% or more in K &amp; 1st</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Applied Survey Research & Attendance Works (April 2011)
For children chronically absent in PreK & K, the Baltimore Education Research Consortium found:

- Greater likelihood of continued poor attendance. 50% were chronically absent again in G1, 45% in G2.
- Lower outcomes in G1, G2 in reading and math, and math in G3
- More often retained (26% compared with 9% of students with no chronic absence)
- More likely to be identified as needing special education

By contrast, children who participated in Head Start had better attendance and higher 3rd grade test scores.
The Long-Term Impact of Chronic Kindergarten Absence is Most Troubling for Poor Children

5th Grade Math and Reading Performance by K Attendance for Children Living in Poverty. Academic performance was lower even if attendance had improved in 3rd grade.

Source: ECLS-K data analyzed by National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP)
Note: Average academic performance reflects results of direct cognitive assessments conducted for ECLS-K.
There Is a Clear and Consistent Relationship Between Early Attendance and Later Achievement

Average reading RIT scores for two cohorts of Oregon students, by absence rates in kindergarten and 5th grade

(Note: 23% of students statewide in Oregon were chronically absent)

Source: ECONorthwest analysis of Oregon Department of Education data, 2009-10.
The Effects of Chronic Absence on Dropout Rates Are Cumulative

With every year of chronic absenteeism, a higher percentage of students dropped out of school.

Solutions Only Work if Grounded in Understanding of What Leads to Chronic Absence

Lack of Awareness
- Parents or students don’t realize absences are adding up to academic risk
- School lacks a strong culture of attendance

Aversion
- Child is struggling academically
- Lack of engaging instruction
- Child is being bullied

Barriers
- Lack of access to health care
- No safe path to school
- Poor transportation

Special thanks to Dr. Robert Balfanz, Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD for providing this framework.
Universal Strategies for School Communities

- Recognize Good and Improved Attendance
- Engage Students and Parents
- Develop Programmatic Responses to Barriers
- Provide Personalized Early Outreach
- Monitor Attendance Data and Practice
Increased Attendance Involves a 3-Tiered Approach that Fits with Most Reform Efforts

- **High Cost**: Students who were chronically absent in prior year or starting to miss 20% or more of school.
- **Intervention Programs**: A small fraction of a school’s students.
- **Low Cost**: Students at risk for chronic absence.
- **Universal/Preventive Programs**: Some of a school’s students.
- **All students in the school**: All of a school’s students.

- **Recovery Programs**: All students in the school.
Variation Across Schools Helps Identify Good Practice and Need for Intervention

### Chronic Absence Levels Among Oakland Public Schools (2009-10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># Schools with 0%-5% Chronic Absence</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Schools with 5.1%-10% Chronic Absence</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Schools with 10.1%-20% Chronic Absence</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Schools with &gt;20.1% Chronic Absence</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. Schools</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest % of Chronic Absence</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest % of Chronic Absence</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
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Examples of Successful Efforts

**Baltimore:** Fewer unnecessary suspensions, reduced middle school transitions, expanded monitoring of attendance data, and a citywide campaign have helped cut middle school chronic absence in half. Baltimore is now turning its attention to preschool and elementary school.

**New York City:** School-wide incentives, celebrity wake-up calls, data dashboards, and success mentors for at-risk students have reduced chronic absence in pilot elementary, middle and high schools. Students with success mentors gained 11,800 additional days of school.

For additional examples:  
http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/
Ingredients for System-wide Success & Sustainability

- **Positive Messaging**: Conveys why building a habit of attendance is important and what chronic absence is.
- **Actionable Data**: Is accurate, accessible, and regularly reported.
- **Shared Accountability**: Ensures monitoring & incentives to address chronic absence.
- **Capacity Building**: Strategic partnerships between district and community partners address specific attendance barriers and mobilize support for all ingredients.

Strategic partnerships between district and community partners address specific attendance barriers and mobilize support for all ingredients.
Early Adopter Communities Begin the Work

Local → State Level Strategy

- State Dept of Education
- State Supt Assoc.
- School Board Association
- Unions
- Parent Organizations
- Advocacy Organizations /Coalitions

Communities Throughout State Join In

State Policy
Student Mobility. Chronically absent students are often highly mobile. The state can help provide a fuller history and develop support strategies for vulnerable children.

Equity and Efficiency. States can provide dropout early warning systems based on attendance far cheaper and more equitably.

Accountability. States can hold districts and schools accountable for monitoring and addressing high levels of chronic absence.

New Year Roll Over. District information systems may “roll over” attendance data each summer and, as a result, longitudinal attendance data would not be accessible.
What States Can Do

1. **Data Collection.** Collect total days enrolled and total days absent, ideally through 180 daily attendance records, and include in data bases.

2. **Definition.** Establish chronic absence as missing 10% or more of school. Make sure it is distinct from truancy. Ensure all absences including suspensions are included.

3. **Accountability.** Build chronic absence into measures to be addressed in school improvement plans.

4. **Reporting.** Publish reports that feature multiple attendance measures (chronic absence, ADA and truancy) and show rates by district, school, grade and student sub-populations.
5. **Support for Districts.** Strengthen capacity of districts to track and calculate multiple measures of attendance, and to support chronically absent students, ideally in partnership with other community agencies.

6. **Information to Parents:** Ensure parents regularly receive information about the % of days their child has missed along with information about when they are at risk due to poor attendance.

7. **Resource Allocation.** Use levels of chronic absence in a school to guide the allocations of programs or community resources (for example, health supports, free breakfast in the classroom, early education programs, afterschool programs, or mentoring) that could help improve school attendance.
1. **Common Data Definition.** Establish common definition of chronic absence as missing 10% or more of school including all absences.

2. **Data Systems.** Ensure state longitudinal student databases capture multiple measures of attendance, including chronic absence, satisfactory attendance and suspensions starting in pre-K.

3. **Funding.** Use federal grant programs to encourage schools to track and address chronic absence and to develop a research base for what works.

4. **Accountability.** Promote addressing attendance in school improvement plans. Include chronic absence rates in school report cards & and EDFacts reporting.
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