



For School Board Members: Frequently Asked Questions About Chronic Absence

1. How does chronic absence affect student achievement?

Research shows that chronic absence as early as prekindergarten and kindergarten is associated with lower third grade reading scores. By sixth grade it becomes a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school. In ninth grade, it's a stronger indicator of dropout than eighth grade test scores.

2. What constitutes chronic absence?

Chronic absence is missing excessive amounts of school for any reason including excused and unexcused absences, as well as days missed to suspensions. Attendance Works recommends defining chronic absence as missing 10% or more of school days. This research-based threshold allows for easy comparisons across districts and promotes earlier identification of students to trigger intervention. It is different from truancy, which is typically defined based upon unexcused absences.

A school's chronic absence rate is the percentage of students who are chronically absent.

3. Why should board members get involved in monitoring and tracking attendance/chronic absence? Isn't this mostly a matter for administrators and teachers?

School board members should pay attention to chronic absence because it is integral to advancing academic achievement. Poor attendance will affect whether your district increases kindergarten readiness, advances third grade reading, narrows achievement gaps and increases graduation rates.

The truth is, your efforts to improve schools won't matter much if students aren't in class to benefit. Too much absenteeism can cause so much student churn that it slows down instruction for entire classrooms. In some states, like California or Illinois, where aid is tied to average daily attendance, reducing chronic absence can also result in greater financial resources for the entire district.

4. Our district is busy implementing Common Core and other important matters. Why should we pay attention to attendance?

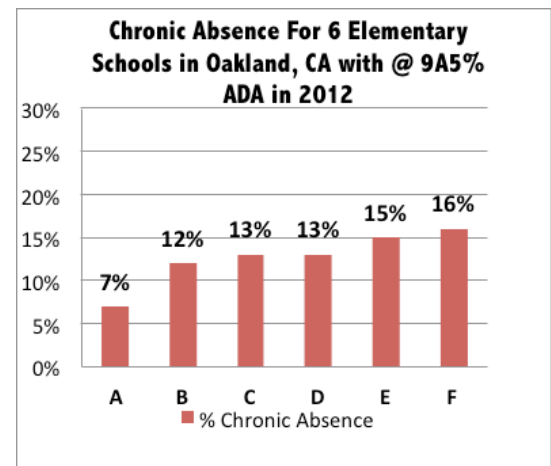
Students will not benefit from improvements to instruction or curriculum if they are not in school. Under the Common Core State Standards, regular attendance will be even more important because students will have an even harder time making up for lost time in the classroom as the work becomes even more rigorous.

5. How can we know whether chronic absence is a problem in our district/school(s)?

As a school board member, you are well positioned to call for a data report on chronic absence that would demonstrate whether you have a problem district-wide or with particular groups of students or schools. Ask district staff to provide data on chronic absence rates by grade, student-sub-population and school.

If such a report is not already available, producing it is not difficult as long as you have a student information system that includes data on the total number of days enrolled and total days of absence for each student. Make clear that you want the number of students who miss a certain percentage or number of days—not the average daily attendance or truancy figures that most districts already track. Your district can go [here](#) to obtain free data tools offered by Attendance Works to help with calculating chronic absence.

Once the numbers have been calculated, the results can point you to solutions. Perhaps a chronic absence problem is concentrated in a few schools, which could use extra support. Or certain neighborhoods may have high rates, suggesting problems with transportation or other challenges. Most studies show that low-income students have higher rates of chronic absence.



6. Our district already has high levels of average daily attendance –at least 95%. Why the need to do more?

Even an average daily attendance rate of 95% can mask the fact that 15% to 20% of students are chronically absent. Consider this data from Oakland, California, which shows that the range in chronic absence across elementary schools all of which had average daily attendance of 95%. While chronic absence was only 7% in school A, it was more than twice that level in school F.

Even chronic absence is relatively low district-wide, a data analysis may point to pockets of chronic absence that could be pulling down achievement for particular schools or populations of students.

7. What policy steps can we take?

Board members can make sure their district monitors and addresses chronic absence, as a matter of policy by calling for their district to:

- Publicly report chronic absence rates by school, grade and sub-population
- Build the capacity of school staff and community partners to interpret chronic absence and engage in best practice for improving student attendance
- Adopt goals for improved attendance and hold schools accountable for addressing high levels of chronic absence as part of their school improvement plans; and
- Convene key community stakeholders to work together to review data, identify and address common barriers to student attendance and build a strong local culture of attendance

Board members can ensure their school district receives resources aimed at helping them monitor and address chronic absence by encouraging their Superintendent to sign on to this [Superintendents Call to Action](#). In return, by signing on, your Superintendent commits to owning the issue, mobilizing the community and driving with data to reduce chronic absence.

8. What about legal action? Shouldn't we be taking these students and families to truancy court?

Certainly there is a role for legal action, but it should come as the last resort, not the first response. Preventive efforts aimed at educating families about the importance of attendance and reaching out to students with real challenges to getting to school have proven more effective and less costly than legal action.

Some truancy courts have begun taking proactive approaches, using the meetings with parents to find out why students are missing so much school and to put supports in place.

9. Why should we look at excused absences? Young kids sometimes miss school when they are sick. Shouldn't we be paying more attention to truancy in middle and high school? Isn't that where the real problem lies?

Even if absences are excused, students are still missing valuable instructional time. Absenteeism rates are surprisingly high in the early grades—one in 10 kindergarten and first grade students nationally misses 10% of school days. And research shows those missed days add up to weaker reading skills, higher retention rates and poorer attendance habits later.

We know that illness is the leading cause of absences in the early years, and we don't want sick children at school spreading germs. But some youngsters, anxious about attending school, will complain of a stomachache. Others are missing days, if not weeks, to asthma or dental pain.

10. Isn't regular attendance the responsibility of the parent? What steps can or should we take to help parents take more responsibility?

Parents are our first line of defense against absenteeism, but sometimes they need help. School districts that have successfully reduced chronic absence have identified some simple preventive steps. The first is to make sure parents know the pernicious effects of absenteeism. In most districts, 10% of the school year is 18 days, or about two to three days a month. That can add up before many parents realize it. Parents don't always understand how much literacy and math instruction happens in early grades. So the right message from the school board can help.

Some parents face challenges to getting their children to class because of transportation problems, health concerns or homelessness. School board policies and partnerships can facilitate support for these families from community partners.

11. How can our district address chronic absence without creating another initiative or reform effort?

Reducing chronic absence is not necessarily about creating something new but incorporating an explicit focus on attendance within existing reform efforts and creating opportunities for community partners to support the work. These efforts fit well with a tiered approach, such as PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports) and RTI (Responsive to Intervention). Ideally reducing chronic absence is treated as a key component of creating annual school improvement plans

12. What are the most effective strategies that districts are using to reduce chronic absence?

Reducing chronic absence requires strategies adopted at school sites that are then supported, reinforced and promoted by the school district. Schools should:

- » Recognize good and improved attendance
- » Engage students and parents
- » Provide personalized early outreach
- » Monitor attendance data and practice

School boards and superintendents can support these efforts by providing positive messaging, actionable data, building capacity among teachers and principals, using attendance in accountability systems and developing strategic partnerships with community organizations.

13. How quickly can we expect to see results?

Based upon our work with local districts and schools, Attendance Works estimates that schools or districts that have been able to implement these strategies with fidelity over the course of the entire school year should be able to reduce chronic absence by 20% from baseline in the first year of operations. This means, if a district's chronic absence rate was 10%, it would drop by 2 percentage points.

Research is only just beginning to document what happens to achievement when attendance improves. New York City found that their intervention, which combined a comprehensive approach with mentors assigned to chronically absent students, resulted in higher achievement and greater retention in school. Costs depend upon the nature of the interventions that a district and community put in place.

14. What can I do to raise the issue of chronic absence with my Board? Our district? Our staff? Our parents and students? And our community as a whole?

Attendance Awareness Month is a great place to start. You can issue a proclamation or resolution declaring the importance of attendance or hold an event to communicate that getting kids to school every day is the responsibility of the entire community. A next step can be to ask the superintendent to calculate chronic absence rates and prepare a plan for reducing absenteeism. You can also build chronic absence rates into your metrics for evaluating schools and administrators. The school board's attention to this critical issue will raise its profile among parents, educators and community partners. Click [here](#) for more resources on Attendance Awareness Month.

For more information, visit www.attendanceworks.org or contact:

Hedy Chang

Director, Attendance Works
hedy@attendanceworks.org

Cecelia Leong

Associate Director, Attendance Works
cecelia@attendanceworks.org