



# EMPTY SEATS

## Mississippi School Attendance Officers' Perspectives on Chronic Absence

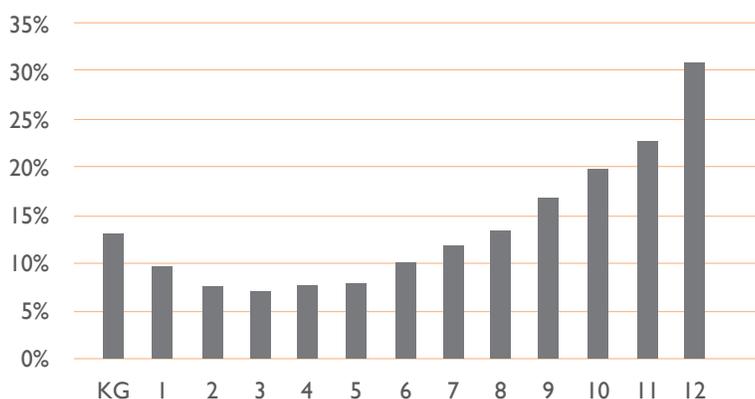
School attendance is one of the strongest predictors of student success, even in the early grades. When students do not attend school, they miss valuable instruction time and fall behind their peers. Students who miss 10 percent or more of the school year are considered chronically absent and academically at-risk.<sup>1</sup> In a 180 day school year, chronically absent students miss approximately one month or more of instruction time. Chronic absence differs from truancy by including both excused and unexcused absences.<sup>2</sup> Any absence is a missed opportunity to learn.

Mississippi has taken several critical steps to measure and improve attendance in the state's public schools. In 2013, researchers at Mississippi KIDS COUNT partnered with the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) to track chronic absenteeism across the state. During the 2014/15 school year, the statewide chronic absence rate dropped to 13 percent, down from 15 percent during the 2013/14 school year.<sup>3</sup> Several school districts have taken initiatives to reduce chronic absenteeism within their schools. For example, Petal School District notifies parents when a child has accumulated 10 total absences (excused and unexcused) and works with parents to develop a unique attendance plan for the child.<sup>4</sup> Vicksburg-Warren School District allows parents to excuse only five absences during the school year without a doctor's note or other documentation.<sup>5</sup>

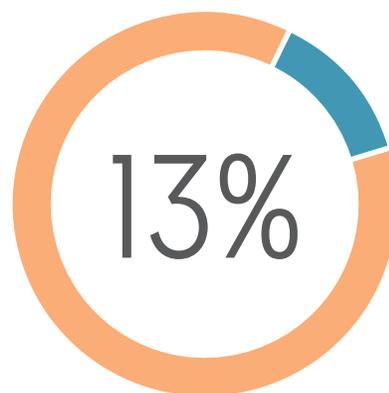
Statewide since 1998, MDE has employed school attendance officers who are physically located in local school districts or government buildings. Each attendance officer must have a college degree and at least three years of experience as a teacher, administrator, law enforcement officer, or social worker.<sup>6</sup> Duties include notifying parents about absences, keeping track of absenteeism data, and connecting parents with social services that might enable a child to attend more regularly. School attendance officers receive referrals from individual schools after a student has accumulated five, ten, and twelve unexcused absences. Each month, school attendance officers are required to submit referral data to MDE. Currently, there are 126 officers in the state. School attendance officers are closely connected to the school community and therefore provide valuable frontline support in reducing chronic absenteeism.

With support from MDE, researchers at Mississippi KIDS COUNT conducted a web-based survey of school attendance officers in the state. The aim was to collect critical information about why children miss school and how school districts handle attendance issues. Questions specifically addressed reasons officers believe children in their districts miss school; the degree to which they consider chronic absenteeism a problem in their districts; characteristics of students who are chronically absent; methods for contacting and working with parents; and school and district-level efforts to address chronic absences. Additionally, the survey provided school attendance officers with an opportunity to address program or policy changes that might help their districts.

Chronic Absence Rates by Grade in Mississippi, 2014/15



Chronic Absence in Mississippi, 2014/15



Chronic absence rates start high in kindergarten, decrease through elementary school years, and increase again in middle and high school. During the 2014/15 school year, 12.9% of kindergarteners, 13.2% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and 30.9% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders were chronically absent. Source: Mississippi Department of Education, 2014/15 school year

# ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

- Implement a teaching system to identify specific reasons for school absence
- Ensure that all students have access to school supplies in order to be adequately prepared for class work
- Urge school districts to provide families with real-time attendance data along with an action plan for improvement
- Bring school attendance officers and school administrators together to address chronic absence in their schools

## References

1. Attendance Works. (2013, September). The attendance imperative: How states can advance achievement by reducing chronic absence. Retrieved from <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/AAM-Policy-Brief-Final-9.16.pdf>
2. Bruner, C., Discher, A., & Chang, H. (2011, November). Chronic elementary absenteeism: A problem hidden in plain sight. Retrieved from Attendance Works website: <http://www.edweek.org/media/chronicabsence-15chang.pdf>
3. MS KIDS COUNT. (2016, February). Counting the future: Early attendance charts a path for future success in Mississippi schools. Retrieved from <https://kidscount.ssrc.msstate.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Counting-the-Future-Early-Attendance-Charts-a-Path-for-Future-Success-in-Mississippi-Schools.pdf>
4. Petal School District. (2014). Elementary school student handbook [PDF]. Retrieved from <http://petalschools.com/cms/lib03/MS01000823/Centricity/Domain/37/PSD%20Elementary%20School%20K-6%20Handbook%202016-2017.pdf>
5. Vicksburg Warren School District. (2016). K-12<sup>th</sup> grade student handbook [PDF]. Retrieved from [http://www.vvwsd.k12.ms.us/images/handbooks//2016\\_17\\_student\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.vvwsd.k12.ms.us/images/handbooks//2016_17_student_handbook.pdf)
6. Mississippi Compulsory School Attendance Law, Miss. Code Ann. § 37-13-89 (2017) (Lexis Nexis).

## Data Notes

**Survey methodology:** A web-based survey was administered to all school attendance officers in Mississippi. The response rate for the survey was 68%.

**Chronic absence:** Data was provided by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) for the 2014/15 school year. The chronic absence rate was calculated by dividing the number of students in each district who missed 10% or more of the school year by their 2014/15 membership. Rates for 2014/15 school year do not include students who either enrolled or withdrew during the school year. Caution should be used in comparing to the original 2013/14 rates since this method was introduced after acquiring student-level data from MDE.

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# KEY FINDINGS



of school attendance officers surveyed report their district has a **PLAN** for preventing chronic absenteeism

## Who are Mississippi's Attendance Officers?

- **33 percent** hold master's degrees
- **17 percent** are licensed social workers
- Average **12 years of experience** in their current position
- **58 percent** are African-American
- **82 percent** are female

**Very few schools have programs in place to deal with chronic absenteeism.** Only ten percent of school attendance officers surveyed said their district had any sort of plan for preventing chronic absenteeism. Some provide awards and incentives for children with good attendance, but these programs are not consistent within each school district or across the state.

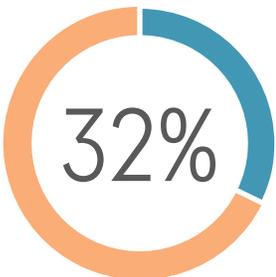
**School attendance officers consider administrators the first line of defense in cases of chronic absenteeism.** School attendance officers want to be more involved and meet more often with their administrators. Administrators can keep school attendance officers updated on students before a referral is needed. By holding more meetings, events, and strategy sessions, administrators can bring their school attendance officers into the loop.

“I would love to have quarterly meetings with school personnel to review and discuss attendance data for my schools.”

**Increased involvement and communication within the school district would create a more collaborative process.** Many school attendance officers want to attend meetings with students, parents, teachers, and administrators. They see improving attendance as a team effort and need more district support.

“Improving poor attendance rates should be one of the main concerns of every educator and support staff in the school.”

Most Frequent Cause of Chronic Absence: Adverse Events in the Child's Home Life



**When asked specifically to rank the most common cause of chronic absence, adverse events in the child's home life were most frequently cited (32.4%).** Lack of motivation (21.1%) and behavioral, developmental, and/or emotional problems that interfere with learning (14.1%) received the second and third largest percentages.

“I believe chronic absenteeism is often in close relation with the poverty level of the child in question. Often times parents do not have access to proper transportation or the ability to keep in contact with the school.”

## Attendance Officers' Perspectives on Most Common Reason for Chronic Absence

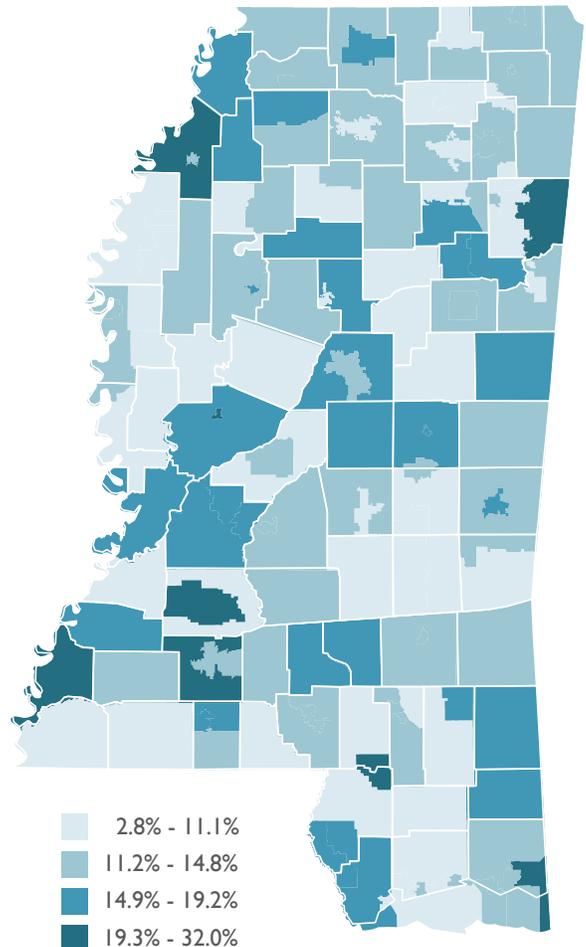
Ranked as Number 1 Cause	%
Adverse events in the child's home life	32.4%
Lack of motivation	21.1%
Behavioral, developmental, and/or emotional problems that interfere with learning	14.1%
Unprepared to do school work (don't have books, papers, pencils, haven't completed their homework, aren't prepared for exams)	11.3%
Acute and infectious illnesses such as the cold and seasonal flu	11.3%
Chronic illnesses such as asthma	5.6%
Transportation Issues	1.4%
Being bullied or harassed by peers at school	1.4%
Parents taking children on vacations during instructional days	1.4%
Do not feel safe and secure at school	0

# CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN MISSISSIPPI

## Highest Percentage Chronically Absent

District	Chronically Absent	Poverty	Graduation
Monroe County	23%	19%	82%
Yazoo City Municipal	22%	44%	61%
Lincoln County	21%	20%	82%
Hazlehurst City	21%	39%	77%
Lumberton Public	21%	35%	77%
Moss Point Separate	20%	27%	62%
Natchez-Adams	20%	46%	72%
McComb	19%	42%	70%
Vicksburg Warren	19%	31%	66%
Holly Springs	18%	33%	91%

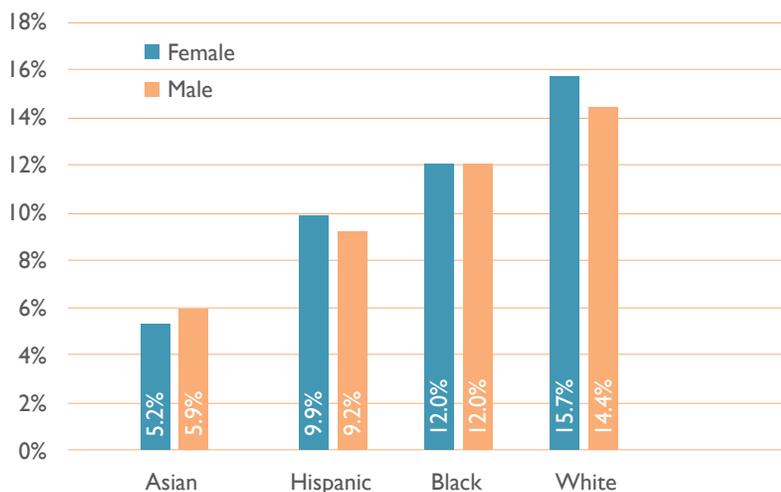
## Percent of Students Chronically Absent by School District, 2014/15



## Lowest Percentage Chronically Absent

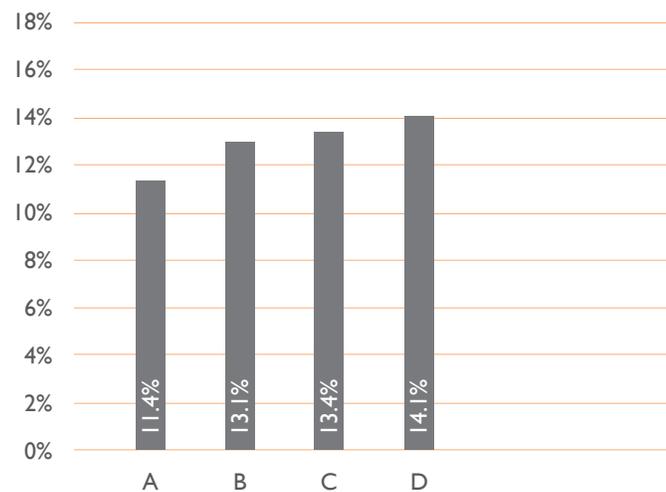
District	Chronically Absent	Poverty	Graduation
Hollandale	3%	47%	89%
Coffeerville	6%	28%	71%
Pass Christian Public	6%	19%	86%
Claiborne County	7%	47%	69%
Oxford	7%	25%	87%
Madison County	7%	12%	89%
West Tallahatchie	7%	47%	80%
South Delta	8%	51%	72%
Union County	8%	20%	88%
Smith County	8%	29%	78%

## Chronic Absence by Race and Gender, 2014/15



Source: Mississippi Department of Education, 2014/15 school year

## Average Chronic Absence Rates by District Accountability Rating, 2014/15



Source: Mississippi Department of Education, 2014/15 school year