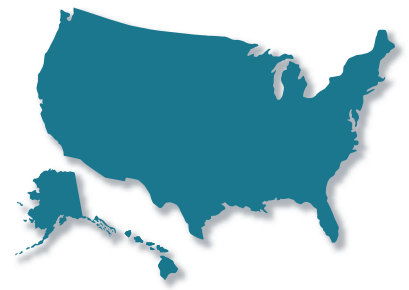


# Are Students Present and Accounted For? An Examination of State Attendance Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic

A Policy brief

December 2020



## Overview

States have an essential guiding role in the collection and use of attendance data. State guidance ensures that attendance is taken daily in a consistent manner and is monitored to detect and address inequitable access to learning opportunities. The recent shift to distance and blended learning as a result of the coronavirus pandemic disrupted the collection and utilization of attendance data.

This report is a call to action to states to support the collection and use of attendance data. This data is an invaluable tool for examining which students are participating, which need additional support to engage in school, and which schools, districts or student groups are most affected by absenteeism.

It discusses how the coronavirus pandemic impacted attendance data, and through an online scan of state restart and reopening plans, memos and relevant legislation, examines the extent to which recent state guidance guarantees the availability of consistent, reliable data taken on a daily basis. The report also offers recommendations for state action.

## A. Why Monitoring Attendance and Absenteeism Matters

The coronavirus pandemic has worsened existing inequities and increased barriers to learning and development. Millions of children are losing out on learning and opportunities for positive development, due in part to a lack of digital and personal connectivity, unstable housing, illness and trauma. The potential long-term impact of these worrisome trends, particularly for Black, Native American, Pacific Islander and Hispanic/Latinx young people, and children from low-income communities, is likely to be devastating without immediate intervention by the government at every level.

Prior to the pandemic, chronic absenteeism (commonly defined as missing 10% or more of school) was already identified as a major national crisis. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights reported in 2018 that over 8 million of the nation's children regularly miss enough school to be at academic risk. [Early data](#) from the 2020-21 school year suggests that the number of students missing significant amounts of school has dramatically increased.

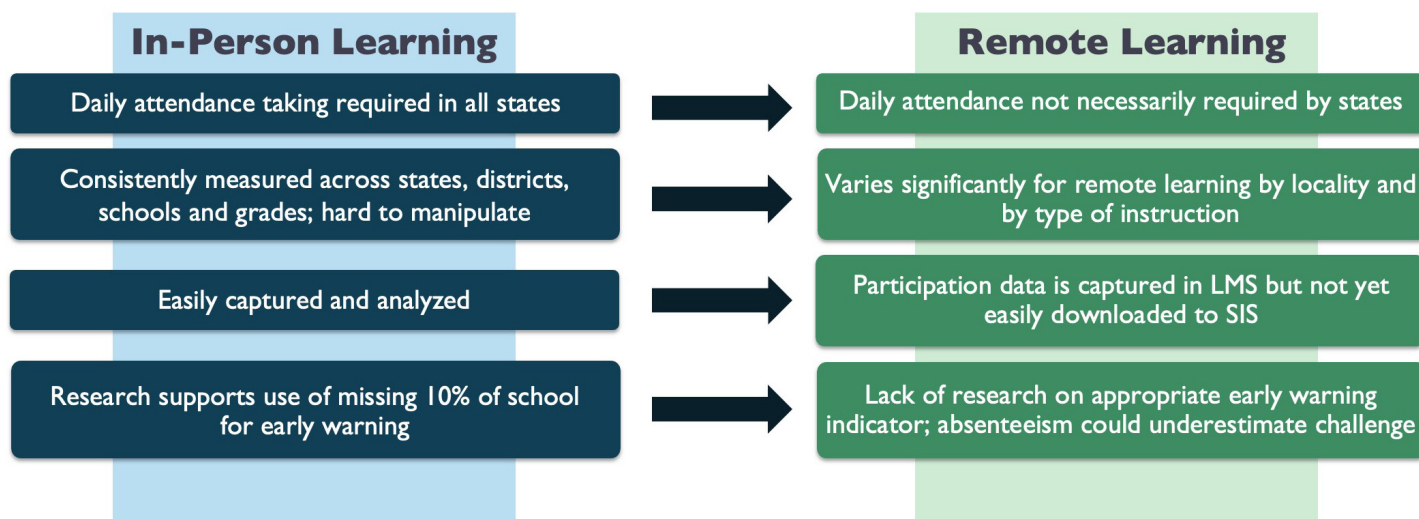
[Research](#) shows the clear benefits of regular school attendance, and the high cost related to chronic absenteeism, including students not being able to read by third grade and increased risk of students dropping out of high school. Chronic absence is a clear signal that particular students and families or a population of students and families are not being served well by current systems and need additional engagement and support. It can also indicate that a school, district or community is struggling to put in place [positive conditions for learning](#) (physical and emotional health and safety; a sense of belonging, connection and support; academic challenge and engagement; and adults and peers with social emotional competence).

Monitoring when students miss opportunities to learn and develop—whether offered in person or remotely—is an essential tool for strengthening the efforts of educators, community partners and families to reduce the adverse impact of Covid-19 on the country's more than 55 million school children. Effective, preventative monitoring of absences helps everyone take action

early—before costly interventions are needed—to ensure students are learning, passing classes and ultimately graduate from high school prepared for

career and college. Knowing how many and which students have missed too much school informs current and future practice, investment strategies and policies.

## B. The Impact of School Closures and Distance Learning on Attendance Data



While monitoring absenteeism remains essential, the shift to distance and blended learning has dramatically affected the ability to secure and use high quality, reliable attendance data. (See image above).

Prior to Covid-19, attendance in the United States was taken at least once a day and consistently measured by marking when a student physically showed up to school. The biggest difference in the data was that attendance was typically taken once or twice a day in elementary schools and often by period in secondary schools.

The availability and reliability of attendance data contributed significantly to its widespread adoption, under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, as [a measure of accountability](#) in the state plans of 36 states and Washington D.C. The straight-forward nature of attendance-taking helped ensure consistent record keeping.

The coronavirus has, however, dramatically changed this situation. Initially, in spring 2020, the pandemic caused a dramatic decrease in attendance data collection. [An analysis](#) by the Center for Reinventing

Public Education found only 27% of districts continued taking attendance when school buildings closed and learning shifted to remote learning. Attendance-taking and expectations were less likely in lower-income and more rural districts.

As the long-term nature of the crisis has become clearer, the practice of taking attendance daily has been partially reinstated with the restart of schools for the 2020-2021 school year. But what constitutes attendance has become much less clear when learning is offered remotely.

State, district, and school leaders are grappling with these questions: Is attendance showing up to a virtual class? Is it logging on to a learning management system? Is it turning in an assignment? Is it an interaction by phone or computer between the teacher and a student or a family member? How often should attendance be taken? Can and should attendance data be reviewed across modes of instruction? How can absences be examined for a particular mode of instruction, i.e. in person versus remote, synchronous versus asynchronous?

## C. Examining State Attendance Guidance

This brief explores the question: *Are states, that historically play an essential role in ensuring the daily collection of high quality and consistent attendance data, able to offer guidance to districts to ensure the continued availability of data on absences?*

### Methodology

Attendance Works gathered and analyzed state department of education reopening and restart plans and memos as well as copies of relevant legislation available online. Based upon this information, we placed states into one of four categories: daily attendance taking required; attendance taking required but not daily; attendance taking decisions, including how and when, is left to local districts; and, attendance is unaddressed by state guidance. We asked members of our Network to Advance State Attendance Policy and Practice as well as selected colleagues to review the information summarized in an online table.

We then asked the Council of Chief State School Officers to contact the members of their Accountability Systems and Reporting (ASR) collaborative to review the analysis for accuracy. Attendance Works also used discussions with educators operating at the local and state level to inform our understanding of challenges, especially related to the collection of data in electronic systems.

Information gathered through this scan is a snapshot in time as of early December 2020. The data can be found in [this table](#). We welcome being contacted about a revision when states update their guidance.

### Key Findings

The results of our 50 state scan reveal the following:

- 1. Taking attendance on a daily basis has been reinstated in many, but not all states.** We found that the following 32 states + the District of Columbia maintain requirements that attendance be taken daily: AZ, CA, CO, CT, DC, HI, ID, IL, IN, IA, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, NC, NJ, NM, NY, OK, OR, PA, SC, TN, TX, VA, VT, WA, WI, WV. Five states require attendance be taken, but not daily: GA, MO, NV, OH, WY. Eleven states leave the decision about how and when to track attendance to local discretion: AL, AK, AR, DE, KS, MT, NE, NH, ND, RI, SD. In two states, attendance expectations are not explicitly addressed in available guidance: FL, UT.
- 2. What constitutes attendance during remote learning is highly variable across and often within states.** Even when state guidance was available, the guidance offered by states for taking attendance during distance learning varied widely. Consider the following four examples of state guidance:

**Alaska:** For students who are receiving instruction through distance delivery methods, attendance will be tracked the same way as it is tracked for correspondence schools. In other words, *during the duration of school building closures due to Covid-19, students are considered to be in attendance 100% of these days.*

**California:** Daily participation is used to track attendance and ensure daily engagement by all students in learning activities. However, documenting daily participation may be met through *daily live interaction with a teacher or virtual assignments*. Daily participation *may also be documented through participation in online activities, completion of regular assignments, and contacts between employees of the [local education agency] (LEA), including those other than teachers, and pupils or parents or guardians.*

**Connecticut:** A remote student can be considered as being 'in attendance' on a particular day if the total time spent on one or more of the following activities (virtual synchronous classes or meetings, time logged in to electronic systems, assignment submission/ completion) *equals at least half of the school day.*

**Mississippi:** For virtual (online/distance learning) attendance, the student shall be marked present or absent based on the following: For a student to be marked present when attending school through virtual learning, the LEA shall meet one of the following conditions: *If the LEA uses a learning management system (LMS), the student shall be authenticated and engaged in education consistent with the LEA's prescribed policy;* or *If the LEA does not use an LMS, the LEA shall make one-on-one contact with a student for the day to authenticate their presence and provide daily evidence of engagement consistent with the LEA's policy.*

As these four examples illustrate, the potential variations are numerous. Even where statewide guidance exists, there is plenty of room for taking different approaches to operationalizing attendance metrics at the local level.

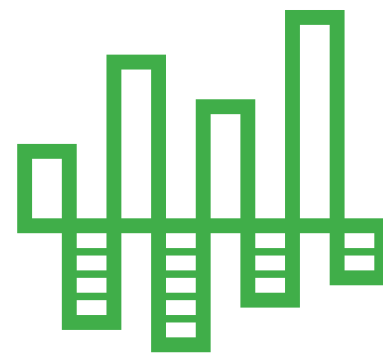
Prior to the pandemic, taking attendance was used to measure access or exposure to learning opportunities and identify when students and families were facing challenges to their well-being or were disengaging. While attendance taking when school is in person can serve these multiple purposes, it is harder to gather information for these combined purposes during the pandemic. For example, a brief two-way interaction with a family helps monitor well-being and engagement. But it does not measure participation in learning. As states refine their attendance metrics, they should consider if it makes sense to adopt multiple measures during remote learning that reflect the different purposes for which attendance data has been used.

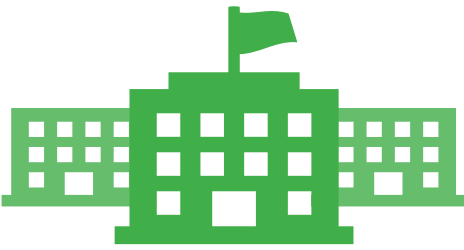
Despite these variations, most localities will still find it helpful to use their current attendance data to identify students who are experiencing challenges. They can look at which students have missed 10% or more of school in the current school year, and which students missed 10% or more of school prior to the pandemic.

### 3. Data systems that allow for easy collection and meaningful analysis of attendance data across different modes of instruction are not in place.

A major challenge of the current situation is that attendance data has historically been captured in a district's student information system. But when learning is occurring remotely, the data on whether a student attended (e.g. logged on or submitted an assignment) often exists elsewhere, typically in the Learning Management System (LMS) or captured by a virtual platform such as Zoom. Ensuring data can be downloaded electronically, as opposed to manually, into the student information system is critical to avoiding an undue data entry burden on educators. Yet such technological fixes are just being developed.

In addition, many systems are not yet set up to ensure attendance data is coded by mode of instruction (e.g. remote synchronous, remote asynchronous or in-person learning). The ability to analyze absences by mode of instruction is critical for better understanding where absenteeism is increasing so steps can be taken to unpack and address barriers to participation. It also will improve the ability to fully understand how much mode of instruction might matter for educational achievement, for students of different ages or from different student populations.





## D. A Call to Action

These findings are a call to action to states to take immediate steps to ensure that districts and schools can use attendance data to monitor attendance, track participation and make available resources to reengage and reconnect with students who have missed a significant amount of school during the pandemic.

State government is uniquely positioned, especially in this moment of crisis, to take the following actions:

### 1. Promote tracking daily attendance for all

**students:** Require tracking daily attendance and differentiating in student information systems whether absences occur during in-person, synchronous or asynchronous learning. Taking attendance frequently, ideally daily, is what allows attendance and chronic absence to be a leading indicator that can be used to examine lost learning time and issues of inequity. It allows educators, their community partners and policy makers to understand who is starting to miss school so they can take preventive action in a timely manner. States, even if they have not yet required taking attendance daily, could promote localities doing so as a matter of effective practice.

### 2. Leverage currently available data to inform

**action and resource allocation.** Although there are wide variations in what constitutes attendance, data on absences is still a critical source of information about which students are struggling. Attendance Works recommends states help districts continue to monitor when students are missing 10% of school as well as adopt [other key metrics](#) (i.e., availability of working contact information, connectivity, participation and presence of relationships) to help identify whether students lack an equal opportunity to learn and need additional support.

This information can be used to identify individual students who need outreach and support. It can also be used to detect groups of students who face greater barriers to getting to school, and help educators notice if certain practices or policies are

better at helping students to show up for learning, whatever form it takes. Current absenteeism data won't paint a full picture of who has missed out on learning, but it can offer important actionable data available for immediate use.

If possible, states can follow the example of the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), which has shifted from an annual to a monthly collection, publication of data on attendance and participation and eventually chronic absence. CSDE publishes this data to encourage all stakeholders, including other public agencies, to use it to inform their actions to support children, youth and families.

If states are unable to secure this data, they could encourage districts to release it. States can also provide online access to data on chronic absence collected before school buildings closed, since that information is still helpful for alerting educators and communities to students and populations likely to face greater challenges during the pandemic.

### 3. Promote interagency collaboration and review of

**data:** Ideally states would use this data to catalyze conversations across disciplines, departments and agencies about how to create a more equitable opportunity to learn. Such a cross-sector approach is more essential than ever given that the challenges that keep students from participating during a pandemic and economic crisis are far from what can be addressed by educators alone. Publicly released and available data is a key tool for interagency collaboration.

**4. Invest in research and data systems:** Engage in research and data analysis to determine which attendance metrics are associated with lower academic performance in remote or hybrid learning.

This research currently doesn't exist. Ideally states can analyze the data collected this fall to determine what are the most meaningful metrics, so they can issue more consistent guidance for the 2020-2021 school year.

As part of this effort, attention should be paid to how to reconcile the need for taking daily attendance with leveraging the opportunity to incorporate information about submission of assignments, which may be taking place over a longer time frame. Invest in technology to ensure the availability of meaningful and actionable attendance metrics that can be collected without undue burden to educators, given the need to integrate and visualize data across learning management systems, student information systems or other online platforms.

**5. Build capacity among districts to collect, analyze and use data on attendance and absenteeism.**

Create opportunities for districts to participate in communities of practice where they can learn from each other about effective practices and policies and strategies for modifying data systems. Use insights gained to inform state policy and technical assistance.

**6. Refrain from high stakes accountability:** Refrain from using chronic absence as an accountability measure until more research evidence is developed on attendance and absenteeism during in-person, remote or hybrid learning. The federal government should waive accountability requirements for the purposes of identifying schools for improvement for the 2020-2021 school year, but still require that data be collected and reported so that we can understand the scale and scope of the impact on education that the pandemic has had.

**7. Ensure adequate funding:** Introduce state policies that protect schools and school districts that have experienced significant drops in enrollment and attendance against major losses in funding. Enrollment and attendance during the pandemic has suffered, especially in districts that serve the most vulnerable groups of students. The 2020-2021 school year data is skewed and cannot be independently relied upon for accurate information about how many students will show up in the coming school year. Policies that ensure adequate funding would also help to address the pressure that schools currently feel to document students as participating in school in order to protect their funding, rather than making sure they notice which and how many students are losing out on learning.



### Attendance Works

[www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org) is a national initiative dedicated to advancing student success and helping to close equity gaps by improving attendance policy, practice and research. Its website offers a rich array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.

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