

Using Chronic Absence Data to Improve Conditions for Learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

Reducing chronic absence goes hand in hand with cultivating positive conditions for learning. When schools provide engaging, supportive, welcoming and culturally responsive environments, families are inclined to help their children get to school, and students are motivated to attend, even when there are hurdles to getting there. Likewise, when students attend class consistently, positive conditions for learning — from supportive relationships with teachers to substantive, meaningful educational experiences — are more likely to occur.

This brief discusses how education leaders, community partners and policymakers can use chronic absence data to address inequities and improve student outcomes. It encourages efforts aimed at strengthening conditions for learning to fully leverage increasingly available chronic absence data. It reminds those who implement attendance improvement initiatives to take into account the underlying conditions for learning.

Chronic absence is typically defined as missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason: excused absences, unexcused absences and out-of-school suspensions. Nearly 8 million students were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year. Chronic absence serves as a warning sign that a student is likely to be off track for academic success.

A high level of chronic absence in a school or for a particular student population alerts education leaders that they need to diagnose and address both school and community factors contributing to that absenteeism and affecting conditions for learning. In about one fourth of the 94,553 schools surveyed, 20 percent or more of students were chronically absent. Children living in poverty are two to three times more likely to be chronically absent. Students from communities of color (African American, Native American, Pacific Islander, Latinx) and those with disabilities are also disproportionately affected.

Examine Your Data!

A new interactive map, produced by The Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution, provides data on community and school factors that affect learning and chronic absence for every school and ZIP code in the United States. Data are from the 2015-16 school year and are the most recent national data available. (Find the map online at <https://www.brookings.edu/chronicabsence>.)

Chronic absence data help policy makers and community partners identify where to allocate funding and services so that schools have adequate resources to put in place positive conditions for learning and provide the supports needed to address the family and community factors contributing to chronic absenteeism. Chronic absence data is actionable, malleable and more frequently available than measures of emotional health or academic performance. When accurately and consistently collected and analyzed at a school, subgroup and individual level, real-time attendance data help educators and community partners identify, in a timely manner, when early intervention is needed.

Download the full report at: www.attendanceworks.org



Conditions for Learning and Their Connection to Chronic Absence

Drawing upon research, this brief addresses four components of conditions for learning:

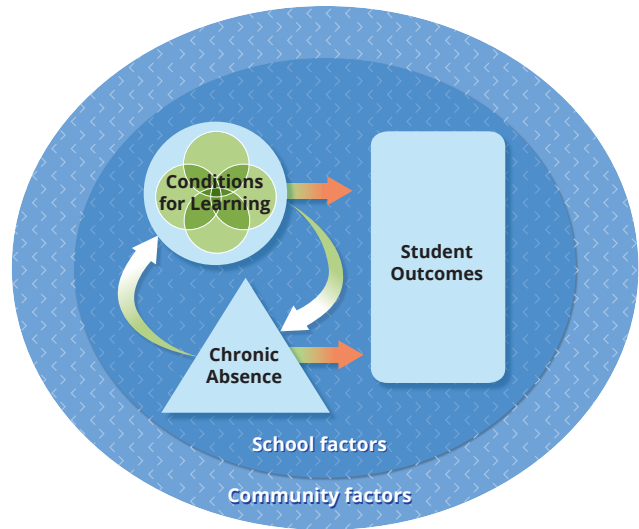
- A. Physical and emotional health and safety
- B. Belonging, connectedness and support
- C. Academic challenge and engagement
- D. Adult and student social and emotional competence

The four conditions identified in this brief help create a conducive learning environment and positively affect attendance, motivation, engagement, achievement and student well-being. The four conditions also affect each other: When one condition is in place, the others are more likely to exist.

Conditions for learning are affected by school practices and policies as well as by what is happening in the communities where students and families live. When communities are challenged by high levels of poverty and violence, inadequate public services and environmental injustices, creating positive conditions for learning in school is more essential and can be more challenging. Positive conditions are particularly important for underserved groups such as students of color, students living in poverty and those diagnosed with a disability.

How Does This All Fit Together?

The diagram (upper right on this page) offers a way to envision the relationships. The school, nested within a community, is affected by the community's economic, social, environmental, health and demographic factors. Although these factors impact the school, they do not have to determine the school's conditions for learning or chronic absence levels. For example, while higher levels of chronic absence often follow the contours of poverty, there are bright spots, such as schools in communities facing hardship that create positive conditions for learning and consequently experience lower levels of chronic absence. Insufficient conditions for learning at school are associated with higher levels



Conditions for learning and chronic absence, embedded within school and community factors, affect each other.

of chronic absence, and it follows that higher levels of chronic absence are associated with insufficient conditions for learning in a school. On the bright side, positive conditions for learning and high attendance rates can boost student outcomes in any school or community.

Case Studies: Georgia and Cleveland

Case studies from the state of Georgia and the city of Cleveland, Ohio help to illustrate how chronic absence and conditions for learning can be addressed through comprehensive and data informed actions.

In Georgia, efforts to foster positive learning climates in the elementary grades have already yielded a 10 percent reduction in out-of-school suspensions (OSS) in K-3. While the decreases in OSS help decrease student absences in the earliest grades, reducing chronic absence requires state leaders to also address external dynamics, such as health and housing. State leaders are leveraging Medicaid reimbursement to significantly increase the number of school nurses. Affordable housing developers are being incentivized to build properties that include supports addressing barriers to educational attainment, such as on-site early learning centers and preventive health screenings.

The **Get 2 School.You Can Make It!** attendance campaign of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District is a comprehensive positive, problem-solving approach that engages families and students and leverages the power of engaging the entire community. The robust array of strategies include starting a phone bank, offering incentives for good and improved attendance, using celebrities and athletes to send a strong message of attendance, and providing students with clothing and uniforms. CMSD is also using its expanded district attendance staff to build the capacity of principals and their leadership teams to adopt effective practice. The work is guided by a district-wide Attendance Campaign Committee, comprising key community partners, such as the Cleveland Browns Foundation, and a data dashboard to monitor progress.

Since the campaign's launch in school year 2015-16, the percentage of students with on track attendance (missing 10 or fewer days) increased from 43 to 58.6 percent, and chronic absence fell from 44 to 30 percent. The attendance gains also reflect and build upon a prior investment in conditions for learning, called the Humanware initiative, which began in 2008 in response to a shooting tragedy the previous year at a CMSD high school.

School Action Framework

This action framework outlines how chronic absence data can be used to diagnose and address factors in a school and community that affect attendance and conditions for learning. To determine what is needed, the framework focuses on analysis at the school level because assets, opportunities and conditions can vary widely across schools. It also encourages action at the school level.

Stakeholders in the community, district and state should keep in mind, however, that they also play a key role in supporting implementation of the action framework. They can equip schools with knowledge, skills and resources to foster positive conditions for learning and reduce absenteeism. They can use chronic absence data to inform how to allocate technical assistance, funding or other supports.



STEP 1: Determine chronic absence levels

The key question is to find out how big a challenge is chronic absence in your school and for whom? Are some student populations, grades or neighborhoods more affected than others? If so, resources should be targeted to better understand and address the challenges for students who face higher levels of chronic absence.

STEP 2: Examine chronic absence data in the context of other school and community factors

Chronic absence and attendance patterns are best understood within the broader context of school and community factors that support a positive learning environment. Consider gaining an initial picture by using the new map, *Chronic Absence: School and Community Factors* by the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution. Keep in mind it is just a starting point that should be supplemented with local information.

STEP 3: Identify school and community factors affecting attendance and conditions for learning

The factors that drive absences and conditions for learning vary by school, community and student population. Use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to examine the extent to which students and their families experience the four conditions for learning and experience barriers to getting to school. Data should be examined overall as well as broken down by classroom, grade, student population and, if possible, neighborhood.

STEP 4: Use insights to strengthen prevention and early intervention

Use insights about the particular challenges and assets in place at your school to put in place universal supports that promote positive conditions for learning and prevent chronic absence, as well as offering early interventions supplemented, when necessary, by intensive supports.

STEP 5: Take coordinated action and engage in continuous improvement

Implementation of these steps requires coordinated action by schools, districts and their community partners. They also need to monitor data and adjust strategies over time, as necessary, and ensure that efforts to improve attendance are integrated as much as possible with a school's overall approach to improving outcomes.

Conclusion

Efforts to reduce chronic absence and improve conditions for learning are interrelated and essential to improving educational outcomes, particularly for our most underserved students. When education leaders, community partners and policymakers work in tandem, they are well-positioned and well-equipped to implement strategies that encourage children to attend school regularly and, in turn, help them thrive academically.

While educators cannot control all of the factors that affect student learning, they can create positive conditions for learning that provide a buffer against or reduce the impact of challenges that students experience away from school. Positive conditions for

learning are even more crucial when students, families and communities face crises, either from policies that result in less access to health care, subsidized housing and other supports, or natural disasters such as fires, hurricanes or earthquakes.

Chronic absence data can be used to identify where additional resources are needed to improve conditions for learning. Monitored regularly, chronic absence data can also help reform efforts to assess early in the process whether the work is on track for success, allowing time for a mid-course correction if it is not having the anticipated impact.

We hope that stakeholders from many quarters, with many interests, will view this brief as a call to action to deploy increasingly available chronic absence data in aid of their work to provide all students with the conducive learning environment they need to thrive in school and beyond.



Attendance Works

(www.attendanceworks.org) is a national initiative dedicated to improving attendance policy, practice and research. It offers a rich array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools and communities work together to advance student success and help close equity gaps by reducing chronic absence.



American Institutes for Research

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