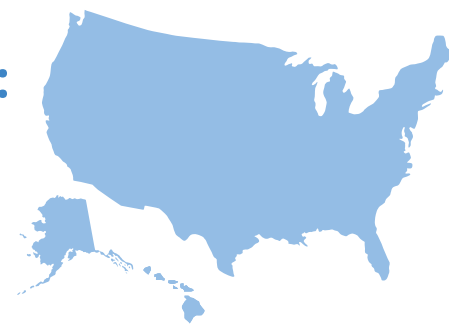# Monitoring Who is Missing too Much School: A Review of State Policy and Practice in School Year 2021-22

A Policy brief   June 2022

Overview

Our country is facing a school attendance crisis. Emerging data suggests that chronic absence has more than doubled since 2019. Monitoring who is missing too much school and making this information publicly available is critical to allocating resources to address today's unprecedented educational inequities. Efforts to support student recovery following school closings and other changes resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic are unlikely to have the desired results unless children and youth are present in school to benefit from the programming being offered.

States have an essential guiding role in the collection, use and public availability of attendance and chronic absence data. Well-crafted state guidance supports districts and schools taking attendance daily in an appropriate and consistent manner. States also need to ensure that data is publicly available so that all stakeholders can monitor, detect and address inequitable access to learning opportunities as well as identify promising practices worth adopting in other places.

This brief examines how state policies and practices continue to evolve in light of the pandemic. It updates our January 2021 report, [Are Students Present and Accounted For? An Examination of State Attendance Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic](). The brief is based upon data provided by 46 states (among which we include the District of Columbia) as of early May 2022. Find the results in [this table]().

Our findings reveal quite a few positive developments. For example, nearly all states require taking attendance daily across all instructional modes, marking a substantial increase from last year, when daily attendance was required in just 31 states plus the District of Columbia. Most states now offer multiple modes of learning: in-person, long-term distance, and short-term distance when in quarantine. A substantial number of states collect data by learning mode. The majority are publishing chronic absence data for the 2020-21 school year. Disaggregated chronic absence data is more publicly available than ever before. Unfortunately, what defines a day of attendance continues to vary. As a result, comparing data within and across states can be challenging.

This brief also explores promising emerging practices including sharing data by types of absence and using attendance data in concert with other metrics to examine opportunities to learn. It concludes with recommendations on how states can further improve data collection and transparency, as well as take data-driven action, starting in the 2022-23 school year.

Every state in the country has schools and districts experiencing significant chronic absenteeism. Making this data publicly available is an invaluable tool, not only for identifying which student groups need additional support, but also to help detect when improvements in collection are needed to make sure the data is consistent and meaningful.

I. Why Monitoring Attendance and Chronic Absence Matters

Monitoring how many and which students are showing up regularly to school has never been more urgent. When students attend, schools have an opportunity to connect and support their learning. When students are chronically absent, it is a warning sign that challenges in their home and community are preventing their participation and/or they aren't being engaged by what is happening in school. Research shows that chronically absent students (those missing 10% or more of the school year or 18 days over a full school year) are less likely to read proficiently by third grade, achieve in middle school and graduate from high school.

Covid-19 recovery efforts are not likely to have the desired impact if students are not present to benefit from the programming that is offered. Chronic absence is an indicator of need and where investment should be targeted to ensure family and student engagement as well as increased opportunities to learn.

Chronic absence has escalated into a full-scale crisis, with historically disadvantaged groups most affected. An analysis by Johns Hopkins University of the most recent federal data prior to the pandemic showed that chronic absenteeism affected 8.1 million students in the 2018-19 school year. A parent survey conducted in November 2021 indicated that chronic absenteeism had increased

2.7 times across the nation, with the highest levels among low-income students. Real-time data confirms significant increases. For example, an analysis by the Los Angeles Times found that by mid-March 2022, 46% of students in the Los Angeles Unified School District had missed 9% or more of school, compared with an average of 19% of students prior to the pandemic. Nearly 57% of Black students, 49% of Hispanic/Latino students and 68% of students experiencing homelessness missed that much school. Connecticut, the only state that produces monthly chronic absence reports, has found that rates have almost doubled during the pandemic, from 12.2% in 2020 to 23.8% at the end of April 2022.

II. The Critical Role of State Departments of Education: Data Collection and Availability

States have an essential guiding role in the collection, use and public availability of attendance and chronic absence data. Well-crafted state guidance can ensure that attendance is taken daily in a consistent and accurate manner. While reporting chronic absence on state report cards is required by the federal government, the details are left to the states. They determine what defines a day of attendance, the frequency of collection and how to present data, including for which school years. A common definition of attendance is important for comparing data across districts and schools. Easy-to-access and timely state data is extremely helpful for allowing stakeholders to monitor, detect and address inequitable access to learning opportunities, as well as identify promising practices worth adopting in other places. The data collected by states and submitted to the U.S. Department of Education is what allows for the creation of a national portrait of chronic absence.

This brief examines current state attendance policies and practices, which have continued to evolve during the changing conditions of Covid-19. It updates the information shared in January 2021 in the brief, _Are Students Present and Accounted For?_

The findings are based data provided by 46 states (among which we include the District of Columbia). We collected most of the information through a survey disseminated to all 50 states during February and March. We then asked state contacts to review their data for accuracy. The

results are found in this table. The brief includes survey information received from all participating states even if a response was missing. We welcome being contacted about a revision when states update their guidance. See Appendix A for more information about the methodology and for the survey form used.

Collection of Chronic Absence Data by the U.S. Department of Education

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) now collects data on chronic absence through its Ed*Facts* initiative. States are asked to include all students in kindergarten through grade 12, and comparable ungraded levels, who are enrolled in the school for at least 10 school days at any time during the school year and who are absent 10% of the school days where they are enrolled. A student is absent if he or she was not physically on the school grounds and was not participating in instruction or instruction-related activities at an approved off-grounds location for at least half the school day. Prior to the collection of chronic absence data by EDFacts in the 2017-18 school year, chronic absence data had been collected in the 2013-14 school year and SY 2015-16 school year by ED's Office for Civil Rights, which had defined chronic absence as missing 15 days or more. In the future, the department should consider examining the extent to which the data submitted to EDFacts reflects local and state definitions and practices or if it was collected in accordance with federal guidance.

III. Key Findings

An analysis of the survey responses yielded the following seven findings.

Finding 1: **Most states require taking daily attendance in every mode of learning.** Forty-four of 46 states (96%) require taking attendance daily during in-person instruction (See Figure 1).

Thirty-nine states require daily attendance-taking during long-term distance instruction (See Figure 2), and 41 require it during short-term distance instruction when quarantined (See Figure 3). One state did not provide information about whether daily attendance was taken during long or short-term virtual learning. Find more information on specific states in this table.

The level of daily attendance taking represents a significant increase from last year when our state policy scan, *Are Students Present and Accounted For?*, found that only 63% required attendance to be taken daily across all modes of learning. Daily attendance taking is critical to ensuring that districts can produce real-time data reports that sound an alert as soon as students begin to experience difficulties with showing up to class whether instruction is distance or in person.

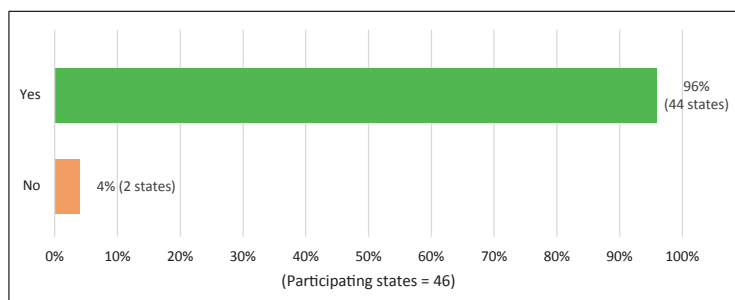**Figure 1: Daily attendance taken during in-person learning**

Yes — 96% (44 states)
No — 4% (2 states)

(Participating states = 46)

Figure 2: Daily attendance in long-term distance

Yes — 87% (39 states)
No — 13% (6 states)

(Participating states = 45)
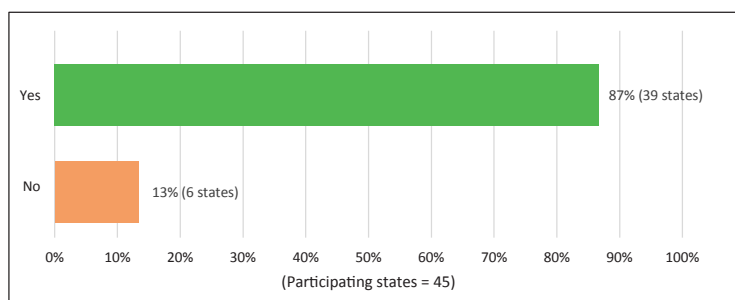
Figure 3: Daily attendance in short-term distance

Yes — 91% (41)
No — 9% (4)

(Participating states = 45)
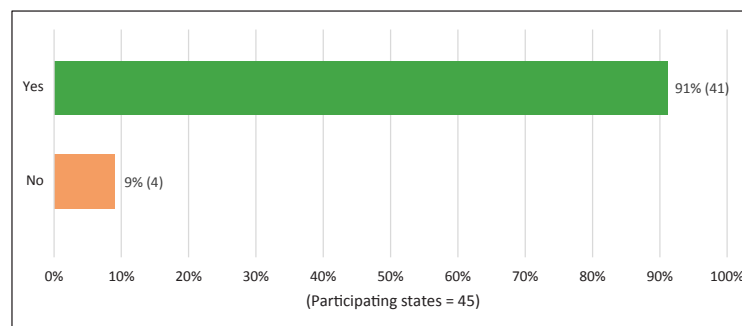
Finding 2: **Most states require or allow for multiple modes of learning (in-person, long-term distance and short-term distance during quarantine).** In our survey we asked which learning modes did states require, allow or not allow districts to offer. Thirty-one states (67%) required in-person learning, while the remaining 15 (33%) said it was allowed. Forty states (91%) allowed long-term virtual learning, while it was required in one state and not allowed in three. One state required short-term distance learning during quarantine, while it was allowed in 42 states (93%) and not allowed in one state. Two states did not provide information about whether long or short-term virtual learning was required or allowed (See Figure 4).

A benefit of offering multiple modes of learning is that it can allow students to stay connected and learning even when they face barriers to getting to school in person, whether the challenge is quarantine, lack of transportation or other issues.

Figure 4. Modes of learning offered by states in SY 2021-22
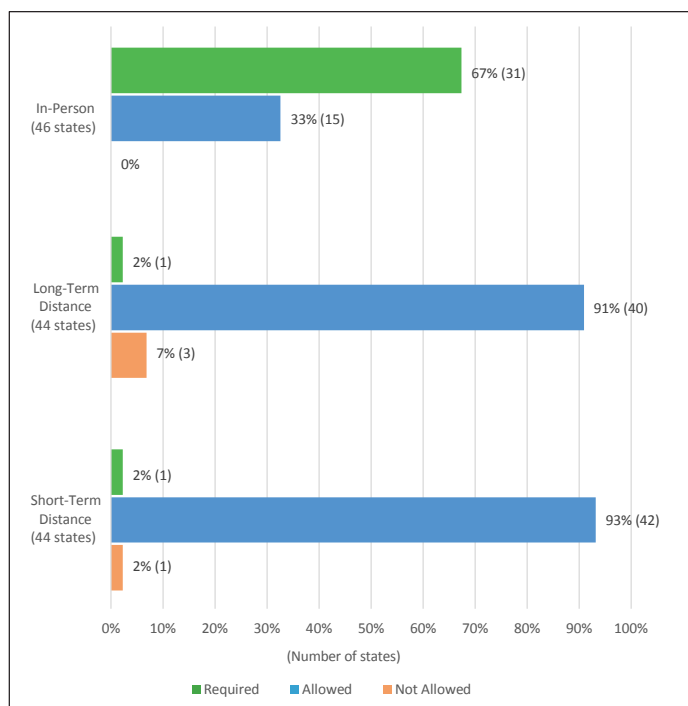
Finding 3: **A large number of states collect attendance data by mode of instruction.** Of those surveyed, 20 states (44%) out of 45 states indicated that they require data to be coded by learning mode. The ability to analyze absences by mode of instruction is critical for better understanding where absenteeism is increasing so that steps can be taken to unpack and address barriers to participation. Challenges that prevent a student from showing up to school are typically not the same for distance and in-person learning.

Data that is coded by learning modes also makes it possible to examine how the mode affects opportunities to learn. For example, the report, _Chronic Absence Patterns and Prediction During Covid-19: Insights from Connecticut,_ found that chronic absence was twice as high for distance learning versus in-person instruction in the 2020-21 school year. Chronic absence in distance learning was especially high for Black and Hispanic/Latino students, particularly in the early grades and ninth grade. Chronic absence in distance learning during the fall was especially predictive of poor attendance later in the school year.

Finding 4: **Definitions of what constitutes a day of attendance vary among states, with even greater diversity in distance learning than for in-person instruction.** Having a common definition of attendance is helpful because it allows states to more easily and fairly compare data across localities. However, establishing such common definitions is clearly a challenge given the extent to which education policy in the United States emphasizes state and local discretion.

For in-person learning, nearly 38% of states (17 states surveyed) define a day of attendance as being present for half of a day or more. This definition reflects guidance from the U.S. Department of Education for the collection of attendance data by EDFacts. An additional 27% (12 states surveyed) indicated that they leave the definition of attendance to local decision-making. Other states define attendance in a variety of ways, ranging from showing up for at least one class period (California) to being present for at least 80% of the school day (District of Columbia).

By contrast, for distance learning, 65% (30 states) provide a state definition of attendance in long-term distance learning, while 20% (9 states) leave it up to localities. State definitions vary widely. Examples include:

- Attendance is counted through course completion or participation requirements (Missouri, North Dakota)

- Students are marked "in attendance" if they attend the equivalent of at least a half day (Connecticut)

- Students are marked "in attendance" if they complete at least two daily attendance checks (Kentucky)

Most states indicated that the definition for short-term distance learning is the same as what is used for long-term options.

Finding 5: **A minority of states are collecting data about the number of absences due to Covid-19 quarantine or exposure.** Twenty-four percent (n- 11) of the surveyed states indicated that they are collecting data about absences due to Covid-19 quarantine or exposure. By contrast, 72% (33 states) indicated they are not, and two states did not know.

Finding 6: Most states define chronic absence as missing 10% or more of the school year. Most states (91% of those surveyed) use missing 10% of the school year as the definition of chronic absence. This figure does not include states that use a roughly equivalent measure. Alabama, for example, defines chronic absence as missing 18 days out of a 180-day school year. Kentucky defines it as being present 90% or less of full-time equivalency. Wisconsin defines chronic absence as being present less than 90% and being enrolled at least 90 non-consecutive days. The two states that use a slightly different cutoff are Florida, where chronic absence is missing 21 days of school, and Hawaii, which considers students to be chronically absent if they have missed 15 days.

Our survey results suggest that a slightly higher percentage of states have adopted a similar definition of chronic absence (missing 10% or more of the school year) than was initially reported in 2017 in the FutureEd report, *Who's In: Chronic Absenteeism Under ESSA*.

Finding 7: Chronic absence data for the 2020-21 school year is, or soon will be, publicly available on the internet in the majority of states surveyed (85%). At the time of our survey, 36 states had published data and provided a link, while six indicated this was forthcoming. (Find links to published data by state in this table.) Four states indicated they will not publish chronic absence data for the 2021-22 school year.

Most states are making the data available by school and district as well as by ethnic group. Some are also reporting by grade and particular student populations (i.e., low-income, foster care, special needs and experiencing homelessness) (See Figure 5).

Figure 5. Disaggregation of Chronic Absence Data on State Websites
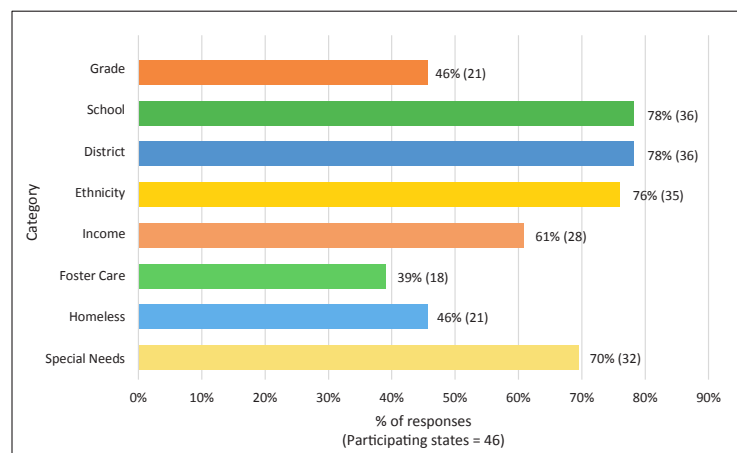
This data, along with the results of the Data Quality Campaign's review of state report cards for SY 2020-21, Show Me the Data 2022 reveals significant progress in the availability of chronic absence data. The Data Quality Campaign found that 43 states report some chronic absence data, an increase of eight states from 2020-21. Of these 43 states, 40 disaggregate chronic absence data by at least one student group, which is ten more states than in the prior school year.

Such increased availability may be a response to federal action. In February 2021, the U.S. Department of Education issued state guidance requiring public reporting of disaggregated chronic absence data as a condition of waving accountability and school identification requirements for the 2020-21 school year.

There are significant concerns about the quality of data from the 2020-21 school year, especially given the challenges and lack of consistency in taking attendance when schools switched to distance learning. Nonetheless, publishing even imperfect data can provide meaningful information: Reviewing attendance data remains important for identifying which student populations struggled with showing up to school. It can also yield insights about how definitions or collection procedures can be improved overall, and in particular when offering distance or hybrid learning in the future.

IV. Promising Emerging Data Practices

As we reviewed data from states, as well as guidance from the federal government, we identified several promising and emerging data practices.

A. **Releasing Timely, Real-Time Data.** The work of the Data Quality Campaign shows that timeliness is an area in need of significant improvement. Its early 2022 review of state report cards found that of 43 states that included chronic absenteeism data, only twenty-five included data from the 2020-21 school year. Ten states had data from 2019-20, five had data from 2018-19, two had data from 2017-18 and one state did not include a year.

By contrast, Connecticut began collecting and publicly releasing data on a ***monthly*** basis on its education website to inform action during the pandemic. While this shift was not easy to make, it allowed Connecticut to produce data analyses that helped the state and its school districts to engage in continual improvement efforts and take timely action to improve student outcomes. Learn more in the report, *Chronic Absence Patterns and Prediction During Covid-19: Insights from Connecticut.*

Key stakeholders, including Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, have and are using this data to inform resource allocation, including the state's Learner-Engagement and Attendance Program. Connecticut has also provided a Protocol for Examining Monthly Attendance Data to help districts review their own data. Connecticut's efforts exemplify the value of treating data as a diagnostic, not an autopsy.

Even if such frequent data collection and reporting is not considered possible at the state level, states could support and encourage school districts to examine and share chronic absence data monthly or quarterly with key stakeholders.

B. **Publishing data broken down by excused versus unexcused absences.** The California Department of Education publishes a report on absenteeism by type of absence in its interactive data portal, DataQuest. The state shares the number and percent of absences that are excused, unexcused, due to suspensions or resulting from incomplete independent study assignments. The data is broken down by ethnic group and is available at the school, district, county and state level.

These types of data create an opportunity for key stakeholders to examine whether the criteria used to determine whether an absence is excused or unexcused is fair. Unfortunately, it is often not fair. For example, a student who stays home when sick and provides the school with a doctor's note is coded with an excused absence, while a sick student who lacks a note is typically considered truant. Disaggregated data can be used to notice and address when disproportionately high levels of absences are considered unexcused among students living in poverty and from Black, Native American, Pacific Islander and Latino/Hispanic groups.

C. **Expanding metrics used to examine the opportunity to learn.** To gain a more complete picture, chronic absence data would ideally be reviewed in combination with other trustworthy metrics, including enrollment, working contact information and access to devices and the internet.

While is still an emerging practice, the U.S. Department of Education acknowledged the importance of multiple metrics in its February 2021 guidance, noting: *As a condition of waiving accountability and school identification requirements, the Department will require all states to publicly report disaggregated chronic absenteeism data and, to the extent the state or school district already collects such information, data on student and educator access to technology devices like laptops or tablets and to high-speed internet at home. Transparency on opportunity to learn measures, such as chronic absenteeism and access to key resources like technology, can help inform decisions about student supports for the 2021-2022 school year and beyond.*

States should continue to explore other meaningful and reliable ways of collecting and capturing data to obtain a fuller picture of whether students have access to learning opportunities, especially if schools now offer multiple modes of learning.

V. Recommendations for State Action

As states continue to develop and evolve their attendance policy and practice, we offer two sets of recommendations. The first set focuses on what states can do to ensure accurate, comparable and transparent data that helps key stakeholders take action to improve student outcomes and assume shared accountability. The second set offers suggestions for how states can use data to inform state and local resource allocation.

A. Ensure Accurate, Comparable and Transparent Data for Action, Improvement and Accountability

- **Track daily attendance:** Require tracking daily attendance and differentiate in student information systems whether absences occur during in-person or distance learning.

- **Establish a common definition of a day of attendance:** To ensure comparable data, student attendance should measure student exposure to instruction across all modes of learning, including in-person and distance, in a consistent manner across all districts in a state. The ED*Facts* definition is that a student counts as present for a full-day of instruction if they attend school for 50% or more of the day. States should establish a common definition and publicize it whenever attendance data is shared.

- **Review and invest in data quality.** Examine data during the collection process to ensure that it is being submitted in accordance with agreed-upon definitions. Identify when definitions need to be clarified or revised in order to ensure consistent and comparable data. If needed, review and audit local data collection procedures. Use insights gained to improve data collection in subsequent years.

- **Monitor and publish chronic absence data:** Monitor and publish data on how many students are missing 10% of school for any reason. Share data, broken down by school, grade, race/ethnicity, family income, home language, disability status, foster care status, homelessness, ZIP code and mode of learning.

When publishing data, provide contextual information to help readers understand and use the data, such as sharing the definitions for a day of attendance and chronic absence, and describing any challenges related to data collection.

- **Report on absences by reason:** Publish data broken down by excused, unexcused or suspension overall and disaggregated by school, grade, race/ethnicity, family income, home language, disability status, foster care status, homelessness, ZIP code and mode of learning.

- **Expand metrics used to examine opportunity to learn:** Promote collection and reporting on trustworthy metrics to ensure equal opportunities to learn and show up through in-person and distance learning. For example, add data on the percent and number of students enrolled, students with updated contact information, and students with or without connectivity (i.e., access to the internet, broadband, computers, tablets). Support analysis of data by school, grade and student group. Learn more about expanded metrics.

B. Improve Attendance Through Data-Informed Programming, School Improvement Planning and Resources

When states ensure that data is meaningful and easy to access, state agencies and local governments can use it to inform how they allocate resources to improve attendance.

- **Use chronic absence data to inform recovery:** Use chronic absence data along with other indicators to identify where the instructional losses are occurring, and invest resources—including tutoring, mentoring, expanded learning, home visiting, community schools' strategies and health services—in engagement and recovery.

- **Invest in adequate and equitable resources:** Expand funding and partnerships to promote greater educational access, including eliminating technology gaps, ensuring access to high-quality instructional materials at home and providing resources to support the safety, health and well-being of students and families.

- **Establish a cross-sector, multi-tiered system of supports:** Adopt a cross-sector (i.e., education, health, housing, justice), multi-tiered approach to reducing student absenteeism. Weave together youth-serving systems (expanded learning, tutoring and mentoring, health, youth employment, etc.) to effectively deliver whole child education, positive youth development and workforce readiness.

- **Provide enriching and engaging opportunities for students:** Ensure that students who are chronically absent benefit from a whole child approach that includes enrichment activities and addresses the health and educational needs of students who have had less access to instruction.

Appendix A: Methodology

Most of the data for this brief was collected through an on-line survey exploring state policies related to taking, defining and coding attendance by learning mode as well as the extent to which chronic absence data for the prior school year (2020-21) was made available publicly. We piloted an initial version with four states in January 2022. Based upon the responses, we refined the survey (see the survey form), which was then broadly disseminated at the end of January.

The survey was sent to contacts in 50 states and the District of Columbia. We began with the contacts who reviewed our 50-state policy scan from the prior year, *Are Students Present and Accounted For? An Examination of State Attendance Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic*. When we had difficulty reaching a colleague, we asked for data and accountability contacts from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). By March 31, 2022, 43 states and the District of Columbia had responded. We then created this table showing information on attendance by state. CCSSO also emailed the table to the communications contact for each state's Department of Education to help with ensuring accuracy. We also asked the survey respondents, as well as members of our Network to Advance State Attendance Policy and Practice to check the results, with responses due by May 10. This led to a few revisions in the responses as well as additional information from two additional states. This brief includes survey data submitted by states even if we lacked a response for a particular question. As a result, not all questions show a response from every participating state (a total of 46 including the District of Columbia).

The participating states are: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming and the District of Columbia.

Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org) is a national non-profit initiative that promotes equal opportunities to learn and advances student success by inspiring and catalyzing policies and practices that prevent and reduce chronic absence. Its website offers a wide array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.