



Press Release

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New Report Calls for the Use of Chronic Absence Data to Improve Conditions for Learning and Student Outcomes

Interactive Map Shows Chronic Absence Along With School and Community Factors for Every ZIP Code and School in the Country

SAN FRANCISCO, September 10, 2019 – Improving student outcomes requires combining attention to chronic absence with investments in school climate, according to a new report released today.

Drawing on the expertise of Attendance Works and American Institutes for Research (AIR), the new report, [*Using Chronic Absence Data to Improve Conditions for Learning*](#), underscores how education leaders, community partners and policymakers can use chronic absence data to create positive conditions for learning for students and teachers, and at the same time address educational inequities.

“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 essential,” said Hedy N. Chang, Executive Director of Attendance Works. “Educators at all levels need to ensure attendance initiatives are not created in isolation but rather are integrated into their overall approach to improving school climate and student outcomes,” Chang said.

Chronic absence data, more available than ever before, are an invaluable tool to identify when students, especially the most underserved, lack the opportunities and support they need to thrive and succeed in school.

Attendance Works defines chronic absence as missing 10 percent of school days for any reason, including out-of-school suspensions, excused and unexcused absences. Nearly 8 million students were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year. 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, the report notes.

These absences can erode student achievement, leaving elementary students less likely to master reading by the end of third grade and high school students more likely to drop out. While there are myriad reasons for chronic absence — from illness to transportation challenges to housing instability — poor conditions for learning such as an unwelcoming school climate and lack of student engagement can exacerbate the problem.

The report describes four conditions for learning that help create a conducive learning environment and positively affect attendance, achievement and student well-being. These conditions — physical and emotional health and safety; belonging, connectedness and support; academic challenge and engagement; and adult and student social and emotional competence — can each be improved through educational leadership and policy reform.

“Chronic absenteeism and conditions for learning are important, interconnected issues that can have an impact on a child’s educational success,” said David Osher, AIR Vice President and Institute Fellow. “Our report identifies specific conditions for learning that can improve school experiences for students and staff, and help reduce absenteeism and improve academic outcomes. We also share examples of where this work is already being done, with promising results.”

Although poverty and its consequences impact schools, these challenges do not have to determine the conditions for learning or predict chronic absence levels. A case study from Cleveland, Ohio details how the district has significantly reduced chronic absence through a comprehensive strategy that began with an investment to improve school climate.

States are key players in using data to develop overall school improvement plans. The report details how the Georgia Department of Education, with partners, used chronic absence data to identify the need to improve school climate in elementary schools. The data also led Georgia educators to address external factors, such as lack of access to health care, that affect the education of young children.

A [new interactive map produced by The Hamilton Project](#) at the Brookings Institution shows rates of chronic absence along with community factors and proxies for conditions for learning – including the frequency of exclusionary disciplinary incidents and the most recently available student achievement information – across the country.

“In every ZIP code and at every school, parents, educators, administrators and policymakers have actionable paths to take in reducing chronic absence,” said Lauren Bauer, Fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution. “By making data on chronic absence, discipline, student achievement, and other school factors available in one place for the first time, this interactive map serves as a resource for those engaged in doing the vital work of improving conditions for learning.”

The report urges schools and districts to dramatically shift the way they address chronic absence by moving away from punitive action to positive problem solving. When schools respond to absences, incomplete schoolwork and other challenges with problem-solving as well as positive and restorative approaches — rather than punitive actions — students are more likely to feel cared about and to stay in school.

“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,” said Chang.

Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org) is a national and state initiative that works to advance student success and help close equity gaps by reducing chronic absence.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) (<https://www.air.org/about-us>) is one of the world's largest behavioral and social science research and evaluation organizations.

The Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution (<http://www.hamiltonproject.org>) offers a strategic vision and produces innovative policy proposals on how to create a growing economy that benefits more Americans.