FEBRUARY 2021

Using Chronic Absence

to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss and Educational Inequity: Insights from School Year 2017-18 Data

EVERYONE GRADUATES CENTER

Attendance Works
Advancing Student Success By Reducing Chronic Absence

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center are pleased to partner on ***Using Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss and Educational Inequity: Insights from School Year 2017-18 Data***.

Attendance Works played the lead role in conceptualizing, writing and producing this brief. While Hedy N. Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, is a co-author, this brief reflects significant contributions from a number of individuals from the Attendance Works team. We especially appreciate Catherine Cooney for her skillful editing as well as her leadership in the design, production and dissemination process. This report benefited from the thoughtful insights offered by Sue Fothergill and Cecelia Leong during their reviews of multiple drafts and the assistance offered by Molly Balfe in proofing the data reports. The design of the brief reflects the artistic talents of Rhonda Saunders.

The Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University's School of Education conducted the data analysis and contributed significantly to the overall framing of the report. We are especially indebted to Professor Robert Balfanz, a report co-author, for his compelling write-up of the key findings, as well as to Vaughn Byrnes for his thorough analysis of the national data and for producing each of the fifty state data reports.

We would also offer a debt of gratitude to Lauren Bauer at the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution. Lauren's perspectives on the data and framing of the findings were invaluable. She is the author of the accompanying interactive data map.

This brief was made possible by the generous contributions of our individual donors, as well as multiple foundations, including Heising-Simons Foundation, Gregory Annenberg Weingarten, GRoW @ Annenberg Foundation, the Skillman Foundation and the Stuart Foundation. We thank our foundation investors for providing Attendance Works with the flexibility to respond to the release of a national resource, such as the 2017-18 school year chronic absence data from the U.S. Department of Education, and to produce a publication that benefits their priority geographic areas as well as many other districts and states. While the support of our funders is appreciated, the conclusions in this report are those of the authors alone.

Attendance Works
(www.attendanceworks.org) is a national initiative dedicated to 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.

Everyone Graduates Center
(www.every1graduates.org) at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education seeks to identify the barriers to high school graduation, develop strategic solutions to overcoming these barriers, and build local capacity to implement and sustain the solutions so that all students graduate on a pathway to adult success.

Citation:
Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss, and Educational Inequity: Insights from School Year 2017-18 Data. Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center, January 2021.

Introduction

Covid-19 has driven home that being *in* school on a regular and sustained basis truly matters for creating an equal opportunity for students to learn, thrive and achieve their potential. Moreover, recently released national data shows that the coronavirus pandemic is not the first time that too many students across the nation have experienced interrupted schooling and instructional loss. The most current data from the U.S. Department of Education shows that more than 8 million, or 1 out of 6 students were chronically absent in the 2017-18 school year.

Research shows that students who are chronically absent (missing 10% or more of school, for any reason) can translate into students having difficulty learning to read by third grade, achieving in middle school and graduating from high school.[1] This makes chronic absence a leading indicator and cause of educational inequity. Chronic absence is not the result of a once-in-a-century event, but largely the continual grind of poverty and inequitable access to learning opportunities, especially for nonwhite students and students who are differently abled.

Early school year 2020-21 data released by Connecticut suggests that chronic absence could increase substantially, especially for students most impacted by the pandemic. In this state, chronic absence has, for example, jumped from 17.2% to 35.2% for English language learners and risen from 20.3% to 34.9% for students eligible for free meals. As a result of challenges brought on by the pandemic, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) took the unusual step of collecting attendance data monthly, and regularly releasing it to the public. It is, as far as we know, the first publicly available state data on chronic absence for School Year 2020-21. Learn more about this early data from Connecticut in Appendix A and about Connecticut's efforts to reduce chronic absence on page 11.

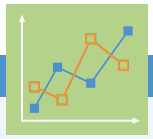
In this report, we share our analysis of national data from the 2017-18 school year and how it is relevant today. We offer recommendations for how schools, districts and states can use chronic absence data to assess and take action to address the learning loss experienced by so many students during the pandemic.

The 2017-18 data, released in October 2020, offers critical insights into which student groups, schools and districts are likely to need additional support to recover from the effects of the pandemic. This data is more accurate than prior data collections and for the first time report rates of chronic absence by our preferred calculation: 10% of school days missed. *Please see Appendix B for details*. High levels of chronic absence in years past are a sign that it is still a problem today, since it reflects conditions within communities and schools that are likely to persist unless and until intervention occurs.

Our analysis of more than 91,000 public K-12 schools nationwide reveals significant challenges. Across elementary, middle and high schools, in urban, suburban and rural areas, far too many students are missing far too much school. Twenty-seven percent of the nation's schools have either high or extreme levels of chronic absence, levels that negatively impact the whole school, including students who attend regularly. We find that over half of all students who are chronically absent in the United States attend 25,000 schools with high or extreme rates of absenteeism.

When chronic absence affects large numbers of students, it often indicates the existence of systemic challenges that prevent students from getting to school, such as unreliable transportation, inadequate access to health care and unstable housing, or policies and practices that push students out of school settings, such as biased disciplinary policies, unequal access to quality instruction, or a lack of teachers who reflect cultures, ethnicities and languages of the student population.

The pandemic has exacerbated these systemic issues. Insufficient attention to policies and programs that address such common barriers has widened the gap in opportunities to learn during Covid-19. The students with the highest levels of chronic absence in the 2017-18 school year are also in the populations hardest hit during the pandemic by poor health, economic hardship and unequal access to schooling.



The Detrimental Impact of Covid-19 on Attendance Data

Covid-19 has taken a significant toll on the availability of data on attendance and chronic absence which had, prior to March 2019, been increasingly available and easy to obtain at multiple levels. This brief overview shares how the availability of data has changed over time.

Taking attendance at least once a day and marking students present when they physically showed up to school has been common practice for years in the United States. Prior to 2010, however, data on chronic absence — missing too much school for any reason — was not available for several reasons. Until a decade ago, most educators took attendance by paper and pencil, which made monitoring chronic absence impossible until the widespread adoption of longitudinal student data systems. Even after attendance data was collected electronically, it took several years before educators realized the need to generate reports on chronic absence, not just truancy (unexcused absences) or average daily attendance (how many students show up each day).

As discussed in Appendix B, national data on chronic absence was first collected in the 2013-14 school year and released in June 2016 by the Office for Civil Rights as part of the Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). It was collected again in 2015-2016 and released in 2018. Because these early collections defined chronic absence as missing 15 days, as opposed to missing 10% of the school year, a comparison with the most recent data is not possible, even though the 2015-16 data also showed that approximately 8 million students were chronically absent nationwide. Read about 2015-16 school year data in the Attendance Works report, *Data Matters Using Chronic Absence to Accelerate Action for Student Success*.

The biggest shift in the availability of chronic absence data occurred as a result of passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. This law requires all states to include chronic absence data in their school report cards and to choose a fifth, non-academic accountability metric in their ESSA implementation plans. Widely known to fit the rigorous selection criteria for this additional indicator, and as a metric that can be improved when schools and communities work together, chronic absence was chosen as a school accountability measure by 36 states and the District of Columbia. Unlike national data, which can take several years to release, state level chronic absence data is typically collected at the end of the school year and then released in the subsequent fall and winter. Equally important, these policies helped inspire a growing number of school districts to create real-time chronic absence data reports that would help them take action to address poor attendance in a timely manner before students missed 10% of the entire school year.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting shift to distance and blended learning has had a significant impact on the availability of comparable high-quality attendance and chronic absence data. When school buildings first closed in spring 2020, the majority of schools and districts stopped taking attendance. As the long-term nature of the crisis has become clearer, the practice of taking attendance daily has been partially reinstated by states with the restart of schools for the 2020-21 school year. But what constitutes attendance has become much less clear when learning is offered remotely. (Read the Attendance Works brief, *Are Students Present and Accounted For? An Examination of State Attendance Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic*). As a result, this chronic absence data from the 2017-18 school year is the best, most comparable national data, currently available to help inform action across states and localities.

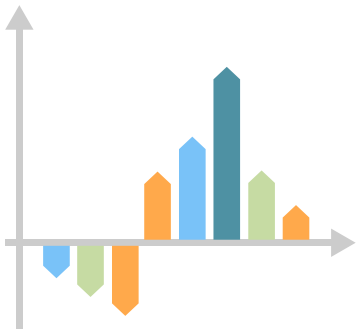
National chronic absence data, collected by the U.S. Department of Education, is comparable across states, districts, and schools. It helps policymakers to see where inequities likely exist and where resources could be targeted for maximum impact.

Practitioners, policy makers and researchers can use variation in the data to locate places with potentially still unresolved attendance barriers as well as communities working to reduce chronic absence.

High levels of chronic absence prior to Covid-19 are red flags that a school, district or community is struggling with the economic, social and educational factors that are being compounded by the pandemic, contributing to even greater learning losses. Low levels of chronic absence despite high levels of poverty is a sign of a potential bright spot demonstrating how students and families can thrive when provided with opportunity and support. State-by-state analyses of school-level chronic absence can be obtained here.

With easy-to-understand absence data in hand, parents, businesses, public agencies, nonprofits and other stakeholders can determine whether to push for resources to detect and address barriers that currently keep students from showing up for and engaging in school. Given the lack of metrics collected more recently (see box on page 5), this data from the 2017-18 school year is one of the best available resources for assessing where supports are likely to be needed.

Attendance Works, the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, and the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution have worked together to make the recently released national data on chronic absence more accessible. The Hamilton Project has updated its easy-to-use interactive data map. The Everyone Graduates Center produced state data charts, which can be found here. Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center worked together to create this brief, which first summarizes the patterns revealed by the national data and then offers implications for action.



Key Trends for 2017-2018 School Year Chronic Absence Data

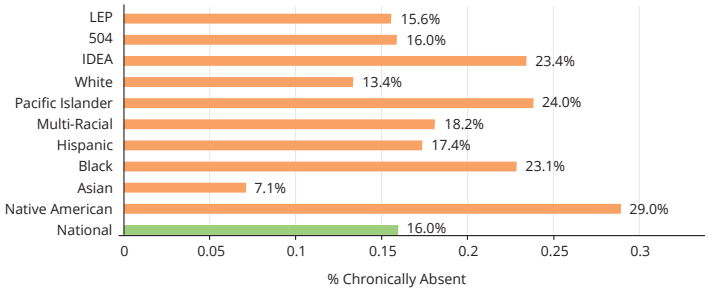
This section shares key findings about the scale and prevalence of chronic absence nationwide. It also explores the relationship between school-level rates of chronic absence and key characteristics of schools, including grades served, geography and demography, to illustrate the magnitude and complexity of the chronic absence situation.

1 Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, chronic absence from school was already a crisis affecting 8 million (8,051,239) students, and it disproportionately affected vulnerable student populations. The most accurate and recent data on chronic absence data shows that, across the United States during the 2017-18 school year, 16% of students — or 1 out of 6 students — were chronically absent (missed 10% or more of the school year). Missing this much school significantly interferes with students' academic progress and social-emotional development.

In Table 1, national data shows that the student populations hardest hit during the pandemic by poor health, economic hardship and unequal access to schooling[2] were already experiencing chronic absence rates exceeding the national average, often considerably so, in 2017-18. The chronic absence rate for students with disabilities was 23%, for Native Americans 29%, for Blacks 23% and Hispanics 17%.

FIGURE 1

Chronic Absence Rates by Demographic Sub-Group, 2017-18



2 Chronic absence is pervasive in a quarter of U.S. schools. Twenty-seven percent of the nation's schools have either high (20% to 29%) or extreme (30% or more) levels of chronic absenteeism.

Over half of the chronically absent students in this country attend the 25,000 schools with high or extreme rates. Chronic absence rates of this magnitude negatively impact the whole school, including students who attend regularly.

Table 1. Nationwide Chronic Absence Levels, by School and Student Concentration, 2017-18

5 Levels of Chronic Absences	Number of Schools	Total Enrollment	Percent of Total Enrollment	Number of Students Chronically Absent	Percent of Students Chronically Absent
Extreme (> = 30%)	12,493	5,264,967	10.6%	2,459,025	30.5%
High (20-29%)	12,419	7,440,326	15.0%	1,800,916	22.4%
Significant (10-19%)	31.651	18,506,052	37.3%	2,664,863	33.1%
Modest (5-9%)	22,426	12,346,931	24.9%	929,253	11.5%
Low (< = 5%)	12,134	6,058,173	12.2%	197,182	2.4%
Total (n)	91,123	49,616,449	100.0%	8,051,239	100.0%

The other half of chronically absent students are spread over almost three times as many schools with lower overall rates of chronic absenteeism. Slightly more than a third of schools (35%) have significant chronic absenteeism (10% to 19%). An additional 25% of schools have modest chronic absenteeism (5% to 9%) while just 13% of schools have low levels (0 to 4%).

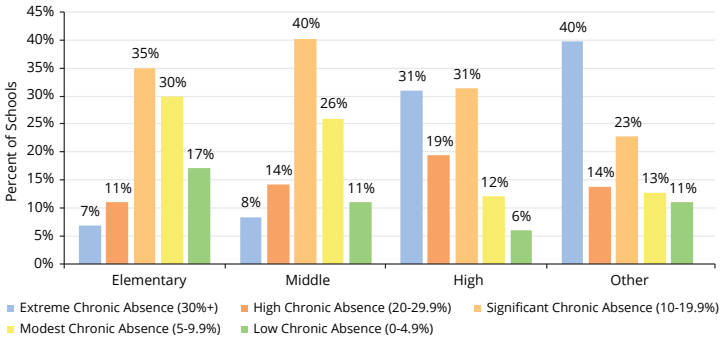
3 Throughout the nation, there are elementary, middle and high schools with high and extreme rates of chronic absenteeism.

Distressingly, 20% or more of students are chronically absent in almost one in five (17%) of elementary schools and one in four (22%) of middle schools. High schools are even more challenged. The most recent and accurate data shows that half of all high schools in the US have either extreme or high rates of chronic absenteeism. In nearly a third of high schools (31%), at least 30% of students are essentially missing a month or more of school. Eighty percent of alternative schools[3] have extreme rates of chronic absenteeism. See Figure 2.

Examination of low rates of chronic absenteeism further highlights the attendance challenge: about half of elementary schools (47%), and 37% of middle schools have chronic absenteeism rates under 10%. For high schools, the figure is just 18% (or one in five high schools.

FIGURE 2

Chronic Absence Levels by Grades Served, 2017-18*



* Other stands for schools whose grade ranges overlap between two or more of the other categories, such as schools that run K-8, K-12, 6-12.

Credit: Courtesy of Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action.

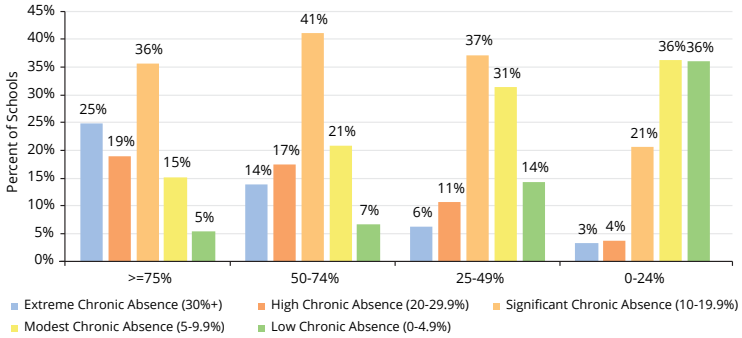
4 The vast majority of schools with extreme rates of chronic absenteeism (30% or higher) educate high concentrations of students living in low-income communities.

In approximately 11,000 schools,[4] more than 30% of students are chronically absent. In 52% of these schools, at least three-quarters or more of the students are classified as low-income. In 30% of the 11,000 schools, the percentage of low-income students ranges from 50% to 74%. Only 4% of schools with extreme rates of chronic absenteeism have fewer than 25% of students living in poverty. See Figure 3.

However, as strong as the connection between poverty and chronic absenteeism is, it is not destiny. The data for 2017-18 show that one in five high-poverty schools (with 75% or more students receiving free and reduced price lunch) have fewer than 10% of their students chronically absent. At the same time, chronic absenteeism rates below 10% are the norm for low-poverty schools (with 24% or less students receiving free or reduced price lunch), as 72% achieve it.

FIGURE 3

Nationwide Chronic Absence Levels, by School Concentration of Poverty, 2017-18*

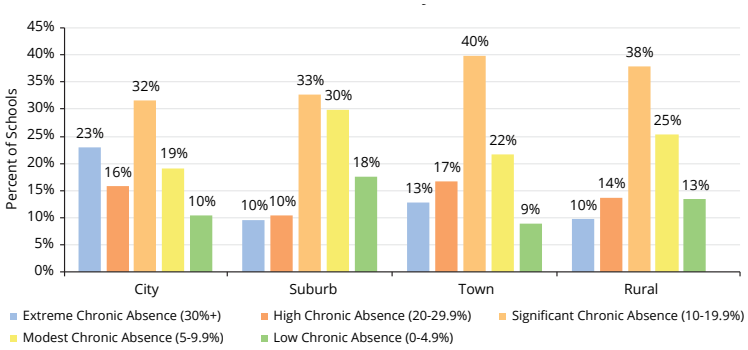


* Defined as percent of students eligible for free-or-reduced price lunch

5 Schools with high and extreme rates of chronic absenteeism are found in cities, suburbs, towns and rural areas. In Figure 4, national data shows that almost half (46%) of schools with extreme rates of chronic absenteeism are found in the nation's urban areas, and half of urban schools have either high or extreme rates of chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism, however, is not just an urban problem. National data shows that about one third of the nation's schools are located in suburbs, and 20% of them have extreme or high rates of chronic absenteeism. In rural areas, one in four schools have high or extreme rates of chronic absenteeism, as do 30% of schools in towns. Overall, about one-third of schools with the highest rates of chronic absenteeism are in towns and rural areas.

FIGURE 4

Nationwide School Chronic Absence Levels by Locale, 2017-18*



* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

However, these trends vary significantly by state. In Washington for example, rural areas have the most pronounced levels of chronic absence with 27% experiencing extreme rates and 28% with high rates. This is somewhat higher than what is found in schools in urban areas or towns. In contrast, Pennsylvania mirrors the national trends. Over half (54%) of its urban schools, but only 14% of its rural schools, have either extreme or high chronic absence rates.

6 Poverty combined with residential segregation results in high chronic absenteeism rates in four out of ten schools that predominantly educate students of color. Structural racism and residential segregation result in students of color being much more likely to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and attend schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism.

More than half of schools (52%) with extreme rates of chronic absenteeism are predominately attended by students of color. Seventy-seven percent of the schools that educate primarily students of color and have extreme rates of chronic absenteeism are high poverty schools, and in 95% of them the majority of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Only 15% of the schools with extreme rates of chronic absenteeism are predominately attended by white students. Overall, 41% of schools with 75% or more students of color have high or extreme rates of chronic absenteeism, compared with 17% of schools with 75% or more white students.

Table 2. School Chronic Absence Levels by Nonwhite Student Composition, 2017-18

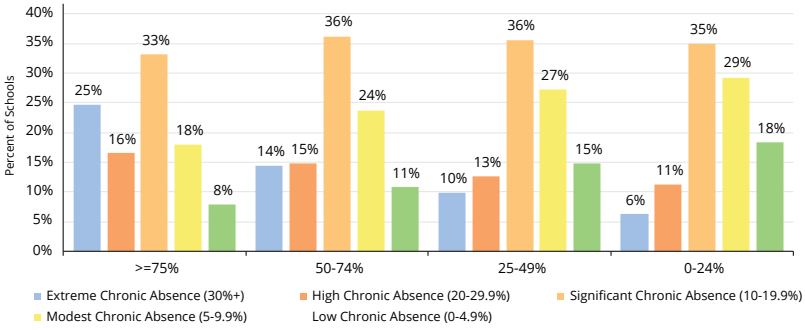
	Number of Schools by Percent Nonwhite Student Population				
5 Levels of Chronic Absences	**>=75%**	**50-74%**	**25-49%**	**0-24%**	**Total**
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	6,500	2,159	1,937	1,897	12,493
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	4,344	2,226	2,485	3,364	12,419
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	8,731	5,435	7,016	10,469	31,651
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	4,705	3,568	5,359	8,794	22,426
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	2,080	1,628	2,914	5,512	12,134
Grand Total (n)	**26,360**	**15,016**	**19,711**	**30,036**	**91,123**
	Percent of Schools by Percent Nonwhite Student Population				
5 Levels of Chronic Absences	**>=75%**	**50-74%**	**25-49%**	**0-24%**	
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	25%	14%	10%	6%	
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	16%	15%	13%	11%	
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	33%	36%	36%	35%	
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	18%	24%	27%	29%	
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	8%	11%	15%	18%	

*Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

In addition, when data is broken out for Black students, more schools serving a greater percentage of Black students experience chronic absence levels of 30% or more. See Figure 5.

FIGURE 5

Nationwide School Chronic Absence Levels by Black Student Population, 2017-18



Despite these circumstances, high poverty schools that educate primarily students of color do not always have high rates of chronic absenteeism. For over a quarter of schools (26%) serving 75 percent or more students of color, less than 10 percent of students are chronically absent. For 15% of schools with a predominantly Black student population, chronic absence is less than 10%. The majority of these schools serve large numbers of students experiencing poverty: In over 80%, more than half of students are from low-income communities.

This again drives home that the composition of a school's student body does not in itself dictate the school's chronic absenteeism rate. That is the result of the circumstances facing students and their school's, district's and community's ability to respond to them, and the provision of resources that mitigate against past segregation and disinvestment.

The data suggests the existence of bright spots that show it is possible to have lower rates of chronic absenteeism despite challenging circumstances. Determining whether they are in fact bright spots involves first making sure that the data demonstrating positive results is of high quality. Then look for practices or policies that are in place and working to improve attendance and reduce educational inequities.

Reducing Chronic Absence: Success Stories

Across the nation, schools, districts and communities are successfully tackling chronic absence. Working together and leveraging chronic absence data, community outreach and business and agency partnerships, and sharing straightforward resources with families and students, communities are making a significant impact on attendance. These stories are proof that absenteeism is not intractable, but that it is a solvable problem.

Attendance Works has collected many of these stories to inspire and encourage action. Read the success stories on our website, or choose from stories published in our reports:

From Long Beach, California to Trenton, New Jersey, find 11 stories of school communities successfully reducing chronic absenteeism in the Attendance Works report, *Portraits of Change*.

Brief case studies from the state of Georgia and the Cleveland Metropolitan School District illustrate how chronic absence and conditions for learning can be addressed through comprehensive, data informed actions. Read the case studies in, *Using Chronic Absence to Improve Conditions for Learning*.

The trust developed between educators at Maine's Waterboro Elementary School and local families helped ensure that students continued learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The strong relationships built in this rural community, an area with high levels of poverty and homelessness, didn't happen overnight. Read how educators and families are working together to help students get to school in this district.

It's important to scrutinize a state carefully to see whether exemplary practice, rather than problematic data or the absence of students living in poverty, explains low chronic absence rates.

7 Substantial variation in chronic absence levels exists across states. Each state has its own story to tell that helps to explain the variation in levels of chronic absence. The variations are in part the result of differences in the concentration and spread of poverty in each state. In some cases, the variation may be driven by differences in data collection, including inaccurate counts or no data at all.

These differences also can result from differences in how states, their school districts and schools have responded to chronic absenteeism. As such, state and local differences can help us identify bright spots and success stories. As Figure 6 shows, 13 states, for example, have overall rates of chronic absenteeism that are well above the national average, with 20% of more of their students chronically absent. Yet there are also seven states with rates substantially below the national average, with no more than 12% of students are chronically absent.

State variation is even greater when we look at the school level. In 13 states, 20% or more of the schools have extreme rates of chronic absenteeism. In 23 states, it's less than 10%. In 11 states more than 20% of schools have low rates of chronic absenteeism, in 11 it's less than 5%.

As with local bright spots, it is important to scrutinize a state carefully in order to ascertain whether exemplary practice, rather than problematic data or the absence of students living in poverty, explains the relatively low rates.

The state of Connecticut, for example, has invested in the collection of accurate and consistent data, which showed reductions in chronic absence over time. Connecticut is known for its exemplary policies and practice. (See box).

Policy Changes Improve Attendance in Connecticut

Connecticut provides a notable example of how a state can achieve a relatively low level of chronic absence. The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) has a long and robust history of taking a data driven approach to monitoring and addressing chronic absence.

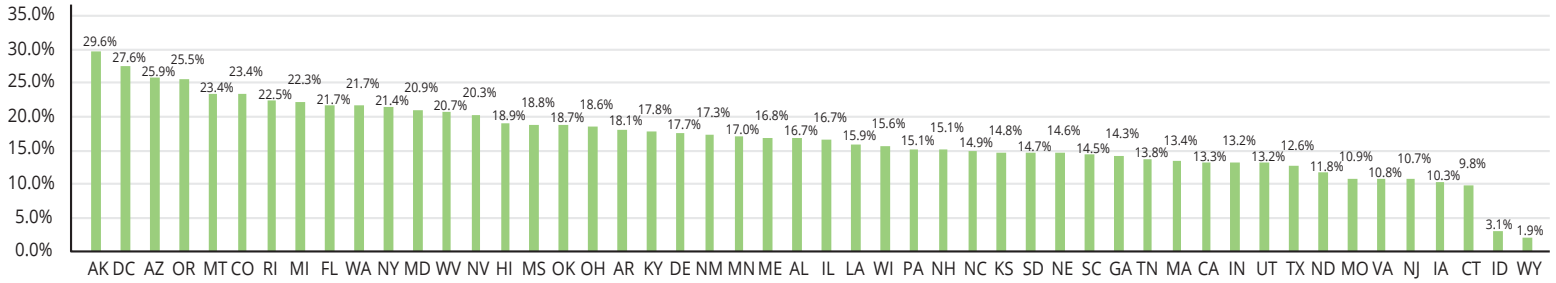
In 2015, the state approved Public Act 15-225, *An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism*, which created an official definition of chronic absence consistent with the research-based definition of 10% of school days. The law requires the creation of district and school-level attendance teams in areas where chronic absence rates are high. It also requires the development of a Chronic Absenteeism Prevention and Intervention Guide which CSDE completed in April 2017. In that same year, state law also removed "truancy" and "defiance of school rules" as reasons that students could be referred to juvenile court.

To build capacity to implement these concepts, Connecticut has integrated data-informed support for addressing chronic absence into its technical assistance to districts and made easy to use chronic absence data publicly available for all stakeholders through its EdSight interactive data portal.

See the CSDE website for additional information about the department's action to address chronic absence including how it has adapted to Covid-19. For example, the state clearly defined a day of attendance as receiving at least 4 hours of instruction for distance and in-person learning. It has also taken the unusual step of collecting attendance data monthly, and regularly releasing reports to the public.

FIGURE 6

Chronic Absence Levels Ranked by State, 2017-18



* Vermont did not provide chronic absence data for this school year.

Recommendations for Action

These findings illustrate the continued importance of using chronic absence data to identify interrupted schooling, instructional loss, and educational inequity and to guide the investment of additional outreach and resources that help remove barriers to getting to school. This data presents a call to action at the local, state and federal level.

A. Build awareness of what chronic absence is and why addressing it matters for ensuring an equal opportunity to learn.

Help key stakeholders understand that chronic absence occurs when students miss too much school for any reason — including excused as well as unexcused absences and suspensions — and results in students falling behind academically. Prior to Covid-19, chronic absenteeism was a major problem affecting millions of children in this country. The number of students missing too much school is likely even more alarming as a result of the pandemic, and it will continue to be a challenge once the pandemic ends. The good news is that chronic absence can be substantially reduced by continually using data to activate and sustain outreach and engagement.

B. Promote collection of accurate and consistent attendance data that is taken daily.

This data from 2017-18 school year reveals the value of having access to accurate data taken in a similar manner across all states and localities. As discussed, however, the shift to distance and blended learning has had a detrimental impact on attendance data. Unfortunately, during School Year 2020-21, attendance is not necessarily being taken on a daily basis and what constitutes attendance varies significantly across and within states. In preparation for the next school year, we urge states to require taking attendance daily across all modes of instruction and to establish a robust and consistent measure of attendance. States could return to the definition that they established as part of their ESSA plans. States could also consider adopting the ED*Facts* definition of attendance which requires students to be in attendance for .5 day of instruction in order to be considered present. The .5-day definition is similar to what is being used this school year in Connecticut.

C. Publish chronic absence data.

Making data publicly available is essential to ensuring that key stakeholders can take informed action to help students, families and schools address barriers to getting to school. When data is transparent and accessible in a timely manner, key stakeholders are able to focus on understanding the implications of the data and consider how to take action instead of spending time and energy on producing the information. Under ESSA, states are required to include chronic absence in their annual state report cards. Ideally such data would also be available to districts and schools, on a more frequent basis, so it can inform timely problem solving. While such reporting on a local level is not required, it is possible as exemplified by this data published by the Oakland Unified School District in California.

D. Review data to identify trends, bright spots and unmet needs that require an investment of additional resources.

Once data is available, educators, students, families and community partners can use this information to examine who is most affected by chronic absence and determine if particular policies or practices are helping to improve attendance. Such a process starts with examining data accuracy. Once that is confirmed, qualitative data such as interviews, surveys and focus groups — can be used to assess how student attendance is being increased. Improvements could result from improved practices, revamped policies or a strategic investment of resources to expand strategies that work.

The number of students missing too much school is likely even more alarming as a result of the pandemic, and it will continue to be a challenge once the pandemic ends.

E. Engage students, families, and communities in developing effective approaches to addressing pre-pandemic and current barriers to attendance through planning and implementation of learning loss recovery effort.

Re-engaging students and enabling them to attend on a consistent basis should address the immediate impacts of the pandemic as well as the challenges to regular attendance that preceded it. This dual approach should inform efforts to stem learning loss during the current school year as well as support planning for 2021-22. Fully understanding the nature of these barriers, and what is necessary to overcome them, requires forging strong relationships and partnerships with the students, families and communities that are disproportionately affected by chronic absence.

F. Expand investments in research and professional development to ensure the effective use of absenteeism data as a leading indicator of educational inequity and lost learning opportunity.

As discussed in Attendance Works' brief summarizing state attendance policies, *Are Students Present and Accounted For? An Examination of State Attendance Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic*, the shift to distance learning has dramatically affected the ability to secure and use high-quality attendance data. The brief shows that the definition of attendance now varies significantly across and within states. Additional effort is needed to determine what are the most effective metrics for identifying when a student is missing out on instruction and disengaging from school, and what predicts worse academic, social or behavioral outcomes.

At the same time, it is important to help schools, districts and partners use the data they are currently collecting in order to notice, as soon as possible, when students are starting to miss school. Attendance and absenteeism data can be used to activate outreach to students and families, so that everyone can discuss how best to address lost learning opportunities — and create belonging and connection — which is so crucial to motivating continued attendance during these difficult times. Use of current data is important because it can also identify new populations of students, for example, young English-learners, who may not have been as affected by chronic absence in the past but are now facing new barriers to getting to class as a result of Covid-19.

English-learners Face New Challenges from Distance Learning

Prior to the pandemic, data typically showed relatively low levels of chronic absence among young students who were English language learners. With distance learning, young English- learners appear to be experiencing significant attendance challenges, including a lack of devices, internet access or family digital literacy. Even if class is offered in person, families may be reluctant to send their children to school if it would create health risks for older family members.

For older students who are English-learners, absences both before and during the pandemic are often higher in middle and high school. A number of particular challenges can affect attendance for secondary English-learners. Immigrant parents may experience a loss of authority if they depend upon their English-speaking children to navigate schools. As a result, they may not be able to monitor their children's attendance. By middle school, English-learners can become disillusioned with going to class if their education has not helped them to read and write as well as speak in English. Secondary students may also find they need to miss class so they can work or take care of siblings.

G. Address inequities in attendance based on race, disability status and poverty.

Chronic absence data consistently demonstrates that certain student populations are more likely to be chronically absent than the national average.[5] Students who have historically and currently experience racial oppression, disability bias, and lack of access to investment and opportunity are the same students who are disproportionately more likely to miss school. Now more than ever it is time to change old patterns of behavior and policies and practices that treat student absence through a punitive framework. States, districts, and schools must move away from court-based interventions aimed at absenteeism and instead invest in students, their schools and communities. They can invest in strategies like community schools, expand opportunities that provide engaging and enriching programming, and provide professional development to improve staff capacity to deliver racially conscious and culturally relevant pedagogy. Investing in strategies that reduce barriers, and changing practices to problem-solving positive approaches, are necessary to transform existing and ongoing patterns of absenteeism.

H. Create shared accountability for responding to chronic absenteeism.

What gets monitored is what gets addressed. When patterns of absenteeism reach high levels, schools and districts should be required to put in place comprehensive plans for addressing student absence, including developing district and school teams with the responsibility for implementation.

I. Promote interagency collaboration and coordination.

Support and build the capacity for interagency collaboration and coordination across departments at the local, state and federal level, including those agencies that focus at least in part on the education, health, rights and workforce readiness of young people and their families. This type of collaboration and coordination can lead to the catalytic, systemic policy solutions that will be necessary in this extraordinary moment.

Collaboration and coordination can lead to the catalytic, systemic policy solutions that will be necessary in this extraordinary moment.

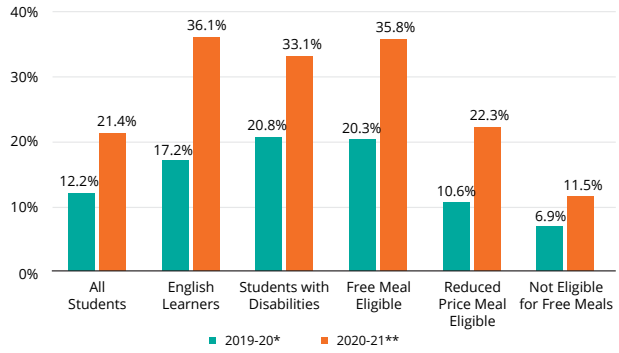
Appendix A: Estimating Chronic Absence for 2020-21 School Year

Preliminary data from the state of Connecticut and a cross-section of school districts in California suggests that chronic absence rates during the 2020-21 school year will be alarmingly high, especially for the most vulnerable populations. Typically, states collect chronic absence data at the end of the school year and release it publicly in the fall or the winter of the subsequent year. As a result of challenges brought on by Covid-19, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) took the unusual step of collecting monthly attendance data, and regularly releasing it to the public. It is, as far as we know, the first publicly available state data on chronic absence for 2020-21 school year.

Connecticut's chronic absence data, released for the first time in January, showed troubling increases, especially for English-learners, Students with Disabilities, and Students in Poverty. See Figure 7.

FIGURE 7.

Percent of Students Chronically Absent in Connecticut, Year-to-Date as of December 2020, compared to the 2019-20 School Year



*Calculations are based only on in-person school days until mid-March 2020.
**Calculations include both in-person and remote days.

Connecticut's data offers important insights for the rest of the nation for several reasons. First, Connecticut has paid significant attention to data quality including ensuring the adoption of a robust and comparable definition of attendance (4 hours of instruction) across all modes of instruction. This definition is relatively similar to the .5 day of instruction adopted by ED*Facts* prior to the pandemic. Second, Connecticut students have relatively similar ethnic demographics to their peers across the nation. Connecticut's students are 51.1% white (versus 46.1% nationally), 26.9% Latino (27.6 % nationally), 12.7% African American (15% nationally), 5.1% Asian (5.5% nationally), 3.8% multi-racial (4.5% nationally), .25% Native American (1% nationally) and .1% Pacific Islander (.4% nationally).[6] Third, Connecticut has substantial numbers of children living in poverty (14% of its population) even though that level is less than the 18% of children living in poverty nationwide. [7]

Data could become even more dire by the end of the year. Attendance in a non-pandemic school year is typically better in the fall and attendance dips occur during winter and spring. [8] Sustaining attendance could be especially tough in the 2020-21 school year given the impact of the economic and health challenges created by the coronavirus pandemic and the difficulties of maintaining student engagement during distance learning.

It is also important to keep in mind that data being collected in other states may not be as revealing as these statistics from Connecticut. Unfortunately, as described in *Are Students Present and Accounted For? An Examination of State Attendance Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic*, what constitutes attendance has become much less clear when learning is offered remotely. The majority of states have not yet adopted robust definitions for what is a day of attendance in distance learning. Many allow for students to be considered present as long as they have a text, phone or email interaction with the student or family, or if the student has logged on for any period of time. While such strategies are useful for ensuring some level of connection to a student or family, they do not capture exposure to instruction, and as a result, may cause states to undercount the number of students who are missing out on learning due to absenteeism.

Appendix B: Data Source

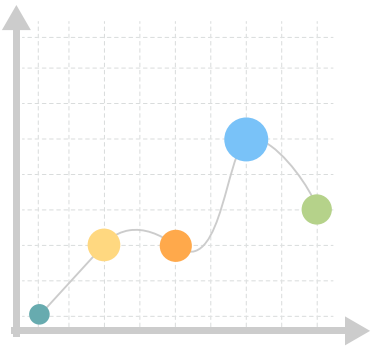
This analysis draws upon chronic absence data released in October 2020 by the U.S. Department of Education. For this most recent release of national data on chronic absence, from the 2017-18 school year, collection shifted to the U.S. Department of Education's ED*Facts* initiative.

This data set is different from prior releases from the 2013-14 and 2015-16 school years which had been collected through the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). Under the CRDC, chronic absence was defined as any student who missed 15 or more days over the course of the school year. The ED*Facts* collection defines chronic absence as missing 10% or more of school days, which over a standard 180 day school calendar equates to roughly 18 or more days absent. The ED*Facts* collection also includes data for any student who was enrolled for as few as 10 days, and thus could include students who missed 10% of their school days, but were enrolled for only a short time. The use of 10% represents a more stringent definition that would likely decrease the number of students counted as chronically absent, while the expansion of which students are included would lead to an increase.

While the changing definition and operational measurement of chronic absence limits comparison between the two waves of chronic absence data, *there is no question that the latter set collected via EDFacts provides us with much more reliable and valid data from which to estimate the true level of chronic absence among the nation's public schools and student population.*

The CRDC was collected biannually through a survey sent directly to each individual school. Conversely, states are mandated by the U.S. Department of Education to report demographic, program participation and performance data annually through ED*Facts*. The data is reported through existing channels and staff from the local district to the state, and then from the state to ED*Facts*, using standardized definitions and data from each district's administrative records and student information systems.

The improvement of the data quality through the ED*Facts* collection system is illustrated easily through one simple data point: In the CRDC's collection of 2015-16 data, 7,647 schools reported "0" students as having been chronically absent, whereas in the ED*Facts* reporting of 2017-18 data, the number of schools reporting zero chronically absent students was 178. Clearly the large number of zeroes reported under the CRDC collections were not representative of true data points, but rather blanks reported by school administrators who either lacked the chronic absence data or did not know they were compelled to gather and report the information requested.



Appendix C

Table 3. States Ranked by Percent of Schools with High and Extreme Chronic Absence, 2017-18
(Vermont did not submit data for this school year).

State	Rank	Percent of Schools with Extreme Chronic Absence	Percent of Schools with High Chronic Absence	Percent of Schools with High and Extreme Chronic Absence Combined
AK	1	48.5%	27.8%	76.3%
AZ	2	35.7%	26.8%	62.5%
OR	3	24.5%	34.9%	59.3%
DC	4	26.4%	25.9%	52.3%
MT	5	20.9%	27.4%	48.3%
FL	6	25.1%	23.2%	48.3%
WA	7	20.4%	25.0%	45.4%
CO	8	23.9%	20.6%	44.6%
NY	9	26.1%	17.1%	43.2%
MI	10	27.4%	15.4%	42.8%
WV	11	12.4%	26.8%	39.3%
NV	12	15.2%	23.9%	39.2%
MD	13	19.7%	18.1%	37.8%
RI	14	21.9%	14.8%	36.8%
HI	15	13.5%	21.6%	35.1%
AR	16	12.7%	22.2%	34.9%
NM	17	16.6%	18.2%	34.8%
OH	18	19.4%	14.2%	33.5%
MN	19	24.0%	9.6%	33.5%
KY	20	15.4%	18.1%	33.5%
DE	21	14.8%	18.1%	32.9%
MS	22	10.2%	22.4%	32.6%
OK	23	9.6%	21.9%	31.5%
AL	24	8.5%	20.8%	29.4%
ME	25	8.9%	18.6%	27.5%
LA	26	9.3%	16.6%	25.9%
IL	27	11.4%	12.2%	23.6%
UT	28	9.1%	14.0%	23.0%
NH	29	8.8%	13.8%	22.5%
PA	30	10.2%	12.0%	22.2%
CA	31	13.6%	8.4%	21.9%
WI	32	11.4%	10.0%	21.4%
NC	33	7.1%	14.0%	21.1%
SC	34	3.9%	16.1%	20.0%
KS	35	7.3%	12.0%	19.3%
GA	36	6.3%	12.6%	18.9%
SD	37	10.5%	7.4%	17.9%
TN	38	6.1%	11.4%	17.4%
MA	39	7.5%	9.9%	17.4%
TX	40	8.5%	6.5%	15.1%
NE	41	4.9%	9.8%	14.7%
IN	42	6.2%	8.3%	14.5%
ND	43	5.9%	7.5%	13.4%
MO	44	3.4%	5.7%	9.2%
NJ	45	3.6%	5.6%	9.1%
VA	46	1.8%	6.8%	8.6%
CT	47	3.5%	5.0%	8.5%
IA	48	2.1%	5.3%	7.4%
WY	49	1.5%	1.8%	3.2%
ID	50	0.9%	0.8%	1.7%

Table 4. States ranked by Percent of Chronically Absent Students, with number of Schools with High and Extreme Chronic Absence, 2017-18

(Vermont did not submit data for this school year).

State	Rank	Percent of Students Chronically Absent	Number of Schools with Extreme Chronic Absence	Number of Schools with High Chronic Absence
AK	1	29.6%	225	129
DC	2	27.6%	57	56
AZ	3	25.9%	678	508
OR	4	25.5%	300	427
MT	5	23.4%	144	189
CO	6	23.4%	450	388
RI	7	22.5%	68	46
MI	8	22.3%	911	513
FL	9	21.7%	943	870
WA	10	21.7%	424	518
NY	11	21.4%	1189	777
MD	12	20.9%	274	251
WV	13	20.7%	83	179
NV	14	20.3%	101	159
HI	15	18.9%	38	61
MS	16	18.8%	91	199
OK	17	18.7%	171	390
OH	18	18.6%	663	484
AR	19	18.1%	133	233
KY	20	17.8%	199	234
DE	21	17.7%	32	39
NM	22	17.3%	140	153
MN	23	17.0%	497	198
ME	24	16.8%	50	105
AL	25	16.7%	114	278
IL	26	16.7%	459	490
LA	27	15.9%	125	223
WI	28	15.6%	236	208
PA	29	15.1%	297	348
NH	30	15.1%	42	66
NC	31	14.9%	184	366
KS	32	14.8%	93	152
SD	33	14.7%	60	42
NE	34	14.6%	45	90
SC	35	14.5%	46	188
GA	36	14.3%	142	285
TN	37	13.8%	106	199
MA	38	13.4%	134	176
CA	39	13.3%	1338	822
IN	40	13.2%	114	152
UT	41	13.2%	87	134
TX	42	12.6%	724	557
ND	43	11.8%	26	33
MO	44	10.9%	70	116
VA	45	10.8%	32	125
NJ	46	10.7%	85	133
IA	47	10.3%	27	68
CT	48	9.8%	35	51
ID	49	3.1%	6	5
WY	50	1.9%	5	6

ENDNOTES

1. Attendance Works, "Key Research: Why Attendance Matters for Achievement and How Interventions Can Help" (2016), https://awareness.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/Research2016.pdf.

2. Z. Parolin and E. Lee, "Large Socio-Economic, Geographic, and Demographic Disparities Exist in Exposure to School Closures and Distance Learning," (OSF Preprints, Nov. 15, 2020), doi:10.31219/osf.io/cr6gq.

   Padilla, Christina and Dana Thompson, More than One in Four Latino and Black Households with Children Are Experiencing Three or More Hardships during COVID-19 Child Trends, January 2021. https://www.childtrends.org/publications/more-than-one-in-four-latino-and-black-households-with-children-are-experiencing-three-or-more-hardships-during-covid-19

3. An alternative school is an educational setting designed to accommodate the educational, behavioral and/or medical needs of children and adolescents that cannot be adequately addressed in a traditional school environment. (Source: Encyclopedia of Children's Health)

4. We use "approximately 11,000 schools" rather than 12,493 because data for free and reduced-price lunches exists for 10,988 schools with extreme levels of chronic absence.

5. H.N. Chang, L. Bauer and V. Byrnes, "Data Matters: Using Chronic Absence to Accelerate Action for Student Success," (Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center, September 2018), https://www.attendanceworks.org/data-matters/.

6. Connecticut Data is for the 2109-20 school year from Edsight.ct.gov; National data is from 2017-2018 from NCES.ed.gov

7. See https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cce.asp

8. K. Nauer, N. Mader, G. Robinson and T. Jacobs, "A Better Picture of Poverty: What Chronic Absenteeism and Risk Load Reveal About NYC's Lowest-Income Elementary Schools," (Center for New York City Affairs at the New School, November 2014, page 32), https://www.attendanceworks.org/a-better-picture-of-poverty/