



Press Release

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National Analysis Shows Students Experiencing Chronic Absence Prior to Pandemic Likely to be Among the Hardest Hit by Learning Loss

More Than 8 Million Students Attend Schools with High or Extreme Levels of Chronic Absence

SAN FRANCISCO, February 2, 2021 – Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, one out of 6, or 8 million students experienced some level of chronic absenteeism in the U.S., according to an analysis of the most recent federal data. Those with the most absences are also in the groups hardest hit during the pandemic by poor health, economic hardship and unequal access to schooling.

The *Using Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss and Educational Inequity: Insights from School Year 2017-18 Data* report, released today by Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center, shows how chronic absence data reported prior to the pandemic can help guide strategies to address the learning loss that has been further exacerbated by Covid-19.

“Addressing chronic absence is more urgent than ever,” said Hedy N. Chang, executive director of Attendance Works and report co-author. “Early school year 2020-21 data released by the state of Connecticut, suggests that chronic absence could increase substantially, especially for students most impacted by the pandemic.”

While there is no national data for the current school year, Connecticut, which has been a leader in addressing chronic absence, is the first state to collect, analyze and publish data for the current school year. It has seen chronic absence jump from 17.2% to 35.2% for English-learners, and rise from 20.3% to 34.9% for students eligible for free meals.

“With this in mind, it is more important than ever examine what we know about chronic absence. Our national analysis allows a wide range of stakeholders to use already available chronic absence data to assess who is at risk due to past attendance barriers and take action to address the learning loss experienced by so many students during the pandemic,” Chang added.

“The nationwide shift to distance and blended learning has reduced the availability of comparable high-quality attendance data, and the definition of attendance has become much less clear,” said Robert Balfanz, director of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University School of Education and report co-author. “As a result, the 2017-18 school year data is one of the best, most comparable resources currently available to help inform action across states and localities,” Balfanz added.

The Using Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss and Educational Inequity report builds on the 2017-18 school year data released in October 2020 from the U.S. Department of Education’s ED*Facts* initiative. These metrics offer critical insights into which student groups, schools, and districts are likely to need additional support to recover from the effects of the pandemic. An updated interactive map, produced by the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution, makes it easy to see the districts and schools most affected by chronic absence.

Earlier national data collections defined chronic absence as missing 15 days, as opposed to missing 10% of the school year. Because of this, a comparison with the most recent data is not possible, even though the 2015-16 school year data also showed that approximately 8 million students were chronically absent nationwide.

Findings from our analysis of 2017-18 data:

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. This means that 16% of students — or 1 out of 6 students — missed 10% or more of the 2017-18 school year.

Chronic absence is pervasive in a quarter of U.S. schools. 27% of the nation's schools have either high (20% to 29%) or extreme (30% or more) levels of chronic absenteeism. Absenteeism levels that are this high negatively impact the whole school, including students who attend regularly.

The student populations being hardest hit during the pandemic by poor health, economic hardship and unequal access to schooling were already experiencing chronic absence rates exceeding the national average in 2017-18. For example, the analysis shows that chronic absence rate for students with disabilities was 23%, for Native Americans 29%, for Blacks 23% and Hispanics 17%.

Chronic absenteeism can affect students of all ages. 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. This most recent and accurate data shows that half of all high schools in the U.S. have either extreme or high rates of chronic absenteeism.

Poverty combined with residential segregation results in high chronic absenteeism rates in four out of ten schools that predominantly educate students of color. Overall, 41% of schools with 75% or more students of color have high or extreme rates of chronic absenteeism, compared with 17% of schools that have 75% or more white students.

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.

Given the significance of the problem, the authors lay out key recommendations school districts and states can take to turn around low attendance during the pandemic. State and local leaders need to know the size of their chronic absence problem to understand how to improve educational outcomes. Information about the concentration and the severity of absenteeism also sheds light on the level of support required.

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 Everyone Graduates Center (www.every1graduates.org) at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education engages in analysis, as well as supports the development of tools and models designed to help all students graduate high school on a pathway to adult success.

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.