

BEYOND THE ROLL CALL: Reducing Chronic Absence Through State Action

Sixth Annual Review of State Policy and Practice
June 2026



Introduction

Elevated levels of chronic absence are undermining student achievement, students' well-being and the nation's ability to prepare a healthy, skilled next generation. Today, nearly one in four students nationwide is chronically absent, a figure that is still dramatically elevated from the one in six prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, 46% of schools report high (20-29%) or extreme (30%+) levels of chronic absence, conditions that affect the learning environment for all students.

As states assume increasing autonomy in education, they are well positioned to drive reductions in chronic absence (defined as missing 10% of school days for any reason) through data, policy, guidance, funding and support across agencies and programs. While districts are the cornerstone for sustainable change in schools and communities, states — especially state departments of education — are essential to ensuring that effective practices for improving attendance are implemented throughout the state.

This policy brief highlights the critical role that state education agencies (SEAs) and state policymakers can and should play in reversing the current unacceptably high levels of chronic absence. It is our sixth annual review of state policy and practice, written especially for state policymakers, administrators and advocates. The findings are based on our review of websites for all 50 states and Washington, D.C., as well as a survey completed by 49 states and Washington, D.C. An in-depth description of our findings and our methods can be found in the accompanying technical report. [This table](#) shares the state-by-state results. All state-related numbers in this brief include Washington, D.C., unless where indicated.

Our findings indicate a growing consensus among states that reducing chronic absence requires driving with a data-informed, prevention-oriented plan. This includes publishing chronic absence data in a more timely manner. Our review shows that 25 states had published chronic absence data for the previous year, compared to only 18 in 2024. Twenty-two states are going a step further and investing in a strategy that provides data at consistent intervals throughout the year to all districts. In three states, Rhode Island, Ohio and Connecticut, the data reporting is publicly available to everyone, including districts.

We also found that promoting early and preventative action is underway in the majority of states: Thirty-one states are publishing prevention-oriented guidance for districts and schools on their websites, up from 21 last year. In general, the guidance from states reveals an emphasis on using courts as a last resort. Attendance Works recommends [prevention and early intervention strategies](#) that are tailored to local realities as the key to improving attendance.

Priority actions for states

The most effective route states can take to improve student attendance, engagement and achievement is ensuring that attendance data is not just collected but also used to support early intervention and prevention-oriented strategies and actions. When timely, consistent and actionable data is publicly shared, it serves as an early warning system that enables districts and schools to intervene before student disengagement becomes entrenched.

To accelerate progress, SEAs and policymakers should focus on four priority areas that strengthen data, enable districts and schools to intervene earlier, and align policies with a prevention-oriented approach.

A. Building a comparable attendance data foundation

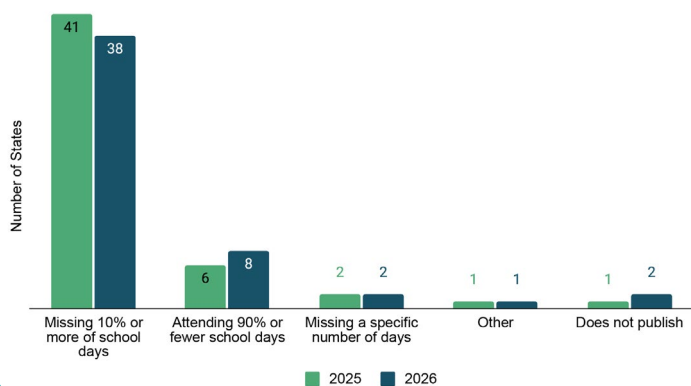
Consistency in data collection and comparability of data are extremely important for ensuring that publicly reported data is usable. When data is comparable, it can be used to identify which schools or districts need support and which are “bright spots” getting comparatively better results. It also can help assess the impact of different policies and practices across states, districts and schools. Without consistent and complete data, states risk undercounting chronic absence and overlooking the students and families most in need of support. The lack of quality data can obscure where intervention is most needed.

The good news is that most states define chronic absence as missing 10% or more of the school year or report on “regular attendance” – attending 90% of the time as a positive equivalent (see figure 1). Attendance Works recommends using 10% of days enrolled to define chronic absence because this supports viewing absenteeism as an early warning indicator of school disengagement, academic risk and high school dropout. This definition encourages noticing when students are already on track for chronic absence in the first months of a school year (such as having missed two or three days in September), so early and preventive action can be taken. This approach is supported by [EDFacts](#), which requires submitting data on the number of students who missed 10% or more of school for any reason and have been enrolled for at least 10 days. EDFacts is a U.S. Department of Education initiative to collect, analyze and promote the use of high-quality data from prekindergarten through 12th grade.

States are uniquely positioned to scale attendance improvement by:

- Building a comparable attendance data foundation
- Publishing timely and disaggregated chronic absence data
- Promoting attendance data that drives prevention and action
- Aligning policy, guidance and accountability to advance prevention-oriented strategy and action

Figure 1. State definitions of chronic absence

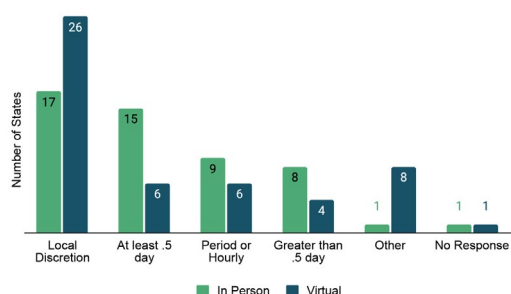


Most states (40) include all absences (excused, unexcused and suspensions) in their chronic absence reporting, while seven exclude some absences for a variety of reasons. Attendance Works advises against exclusions for any reason to ensure that the data fully reflects the lost opportunities to learn and develop in the classroom.

A persistent challenge to interpreting and comparing data from districts within and across states is the lack of a common definition of a day of attendance. Variations in this definition can obscure the true extent of chronic absence. Districts may appear to have lower rates of chronic absence simply because of how attendance is defined. For example, if a student is considered present after attending only one class period, that district will likely report lower levels of chronic absence than a district that

requires attendance across multiple periods. Seventeen states leave this definition to local discretion for in-person school, and an even larger number do so for virtual schooling (see figure 2).

Figure 2: State definitions of day of attendance



In some states, enrollment policies with longer thresholds may exclude highly mobile students, who could move to a new district before meeting the minimum requirement, from attendance reporting. The largest number of states (25) use the federal guidance suggesting a minimum of 10 days, but half have a different policy. These policies can

result in undercounting chronic absence rates among, for example, students experiencing homelessness, which then masks the true extent of disengagement and limits the ability of states and districts to respond with appropriate supports. States can require conducting and documenting more extensive outreach and intervention before a student can be dropped from the rolls.

Priority actions

- Define chronic absence as missing 10% of school days and include all absences (excused, unexcused and suspensions).
- Establish and communicate a clear, statewide definition of what constitutes a full day of attendance, including expectations for partial-day attendance and virtual learning. This definition should be consistently applied across districts and embedded in state guidance and data systems.
- Review and revise enrollment thresholds to ensure that all students, especially those experiencing homelessness or frequent mobility, are included in attendance reporting.

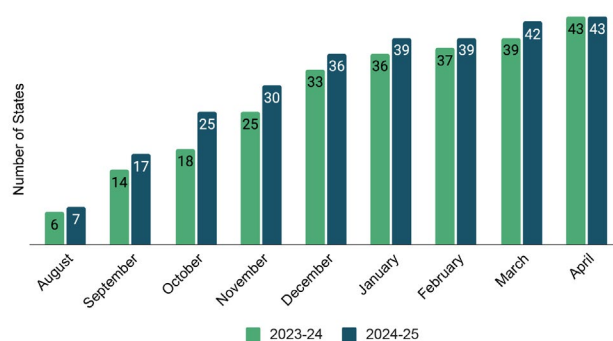
B. Publishing timely and disaggregated chronic absence data

Knowing whether chronic absence is improving or worsening — and for how many and which schools, districts, grades and student groups — is critical to informing timely local, regional and state action and resource allocation. Disaggregated reporting also strengthens accountability, helps identify persistent gaps across schools and student groups, and surfaces promising practices that can be replicated across districts and states. States should find ways to share chronic absence data as quickly as possible, even if that requires releasing the data early, before a full set of education metrics is ready to be shared. States are making progress in improving the timeliness and usability of publicly released attendance data, but significant gaps remain in how quickly and effectively this data is shared.

Nearly all states (49) publish chronic absence data on their websites. Most states are publishing chronic absence data earlier in the school year. As of October 2025, 25 states had published chronic absence data for the prior school year, compared with 18 in October 2024 (see figure 3).

This is a marked improvement in making end-of-the-year data available in a timelier manner.

Figure 3: State publication of chronic absence data by month



At the same time, access to meaningful, disaggregated attendance data remains uneven. While nearly all states publish chronic absence data, far fewer provide data disaggregated by grade, geography and trends over time. Our survey found that just 19 states offer data by

grade level. Many more states could easily publish this information.

Surprisingly, not all states publish data about the student populations who typically experience the highest levels of absenteeism. For example, only 32 states publicly report chronic absence data for students experiencing homelessness.

C. Promoting attendance data that drives prevention and action

Data is actionable when it is available frequently throughout the year and in formats that are easy to understand and analyze. Actionable data is essential to improving attendance when it:

- Prompts educators and community partners to notice as early as possible that a student or a group of students is missing too many days
- Identifies where chronic absence is being reduced more quickly since these places are likely to have practices worth emulating
- Promotes realistic short- and long-term goal setting
- Supports understanding and addressing the underlying reasons why students miss school

Attendance data should function as an early warning system and not simply a compliance requirement. Too often, attendance data is collected primarily for accountability or reporting purposes rather than to guide timely, supportive intervention. States play a critical role in ensuring that districts have access to actionable and meaningful real-time data.

An exciting development is the number of states investing in real-time data reporting that supports taking action earlier in the year. Twenty-two states now invest in a strategy that provides more timely data to all districts. How this data is reported varies in the level of public accessibility and functionality, ranging from public-facing data visualization tools to internal spreadsheets. In three states, Rhode Island, Connecticut and Ohio, the data is publicly available to everyone. Rhode Island's [student attendance leaderboard](#) is refreshed daily, and

Priority actions

- SEAs should publish chronic absence data that is easy to access and understand on their websites.
- States should publish chronic absence data as early as possible in the school year.
- States should provide disaggregated data that gives districts timely and actionable attendance data throughout the school year. This can be done using dashboards or reporting tools that allow users to analyze trends by grade level, student group, geography and attendance patterns.

Connecticut's [EdSight dashboard](#) is updated monthly, with visualizations that show patterns over time. Ohio has recently launched a public facing dashboard featuring data from the districts that elect to participate and upload information at least three times during the year.

In the remaining 19 states, timely reporting exists as non-public-facing interfaces that local educational agencies (LEAs) can directly access. Although these interfaces vary in sophistication and functionality, an increasing number of states are creating innovative data systems that layer in interactivity and visualization tools. Noteworthy examples of these nonpublic dashboards are in place in Kentucky, South Carolina, New York and Iowa.

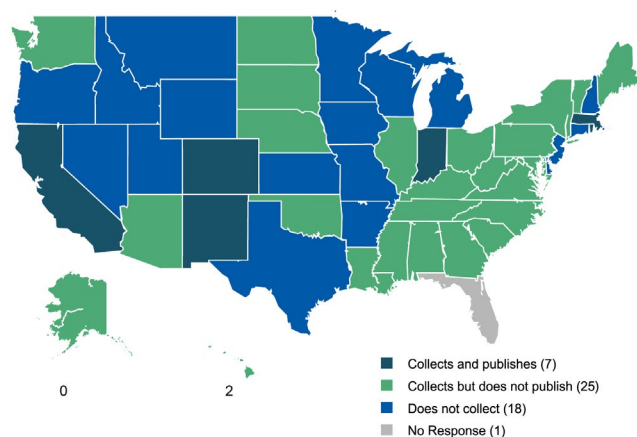
States can also make data more actionable by ensuring that attendance data is shared, along with records on academics and behavior, when students move to a new district. Making districts aware of prior attendance helps them provide early intervention and additional support to students with a history of chronic absence. States can also help districts collect and use data on types of absences to improve early intervention and prevention and to assess the effectiveness of interventions.

For example, when states examine patterns in excused versus unexcused absences across schools, districts, grades and student groups, that can help states and districts assess the effectiveness of current truancy-related policies. The findings can also offer a better understanding of whether current responses are improving attendance and engagement or unintentionally pushing students further away from school. Two recent

studies, “[Disparities in Unexcused Absences Across California Schools](#)” and “[Unpacking Unexcused Absences in Maryland](#),” show the value of analyzing patterns in unexcused versus excused absences.

Our survey finds that most states are not examining data on excused versus unexcused absences to ensure that responses begin with early intervention and prevention. Currently, 32 states collect data on whether absences are excused or unexcused, but only 7 states publish that information (see figure 4).

Figure 4: SEAs collecting and publishing data by absence type (excused or unexcused)



States are just beginning to go beyond the broad categories of excused and unexcused absences to secure more detailed and standardized data on student absences. Greater standardization of detailed data on absence codes could increase capacity for identifying the root causes of absences and support the adoption of appropriate interventions tailored to local realities. Our survey found that 16 states currently have a common set of specific absence codes — beyond excused and unexcused — that all LEAs are required or encouraged to use. Of these 16 states, 9 require districts to submit this information to the state.

Priority actions

- Invest in developing real-time data reports that are easy to understand and accessible to school and district staff as well as community partners. Require attendance data to be shared when students move districts.
- Invest in professional development to train district staff in how to access and use real-time data dashboards.
- Collect, publish and analyze data on excused versus unexcused absences across schools, districts, grades and student populations.
- Establish a common set of absence codes beyond excused and unexcused, require consistent reporting across districts, and invest in systems that allow for analysis of absence patterns.

D. Aligning policy, guidance and accountability to advance prevention

Lasting improvement requires agreement between policy, accountability and practice. When states align accountability systems, guidance and attendance policies around prevention and early intervention, districts and schools are better positioned to respond proactively to attendance challenges rather than relying on reactive or punitive approaches. States play a critical role in signaling priorities, setting expectations and supporting implementation across the state. Strong alignment across policies, agencies and programs helps ensure that efforts to improve attendance are coherent, sustainable and centered on engagement and support for all students.

Including chronic absence as a metric for school accountability can ensure that schools and districts examine this proven measure in their needs assessments and school-improvement processes. In 2026, 37 states and Washington, D.C., included chronic absence as a metric in their accountability systems under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. States are also demonstrating growing commitment to long-term goals for improving attendance. Nineteen states have publicly committed to reducing chronic absence by at least 50% from pandemic highs, signaling increased momentum around statewide action and shared accountability. Eighteen of these states (AL, AR, CA, CO, CT, DC, GA, IA, IN, MD, NE, NM, NV, OH, RI, VA, WA, and WV) are participating in The 50% Challenge jointly issued by Attendance Works, EdTrust and the American Enterprise Institute.

More states are advancing prevention-oriented attendance guidance for districts and schools by publishing comprehensive, easy-to-use guidance on their websites. Thirty-one states are publishing this guidance, which is typically grounded in multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) backed by school or district teams — up from 21 states last year. This guidance can also provide information on current state attendance laws and regulations. Examples of state guidance include [Alaska](#), [California](#), [Colorado](#), [Georgia](#), [Louisiana](#), [Maryland](#), [Minnesota](#), [Nebraska](#), [New Jersey](#), [New Mexico](#), [Ohio](#), [South Carolina](#), [Utah](#), [Virginia](#) and [Washington](#). To help SEAs — as well as external partners and advocates — examine the strengths and gaps of their states' attendance guidance, Attendance Works developed [this rubric](#) in consultation with the members of its [Network to Advance State Attendance Policy and Practice](#), a forum for colleagues working at the state level.

States are also increasingly recognizing that punitive responses alone are ineffective in improving attendance. In general, the guidance from SEAs reveals that courts should be used only as a last resort after supportive interventions have been attempted. This is important for several reasons: Courts are a much more costly intervention than engaging in school- or community-based prevention; it is easy for courts to become

overwhelmed with cases; and research shows that relying on court action is ineffective and makes it even harder for students to engage in school and improve their attendance. Two states have passed legislation to deter the use of courts. Connecticut has effectively banned the use of courts entirely in response to chronic absence. Oregon has removed the option for superintendents to refer families to court for irregular attendance.

Priority actions

- Include chronic absence as a meaningful measure within accountability and school improvement systems.
- Provide clear guidance for LEAs that emphasizes prevention and early intervention.
- Establish statewide attendance improvement goals.
- Align attendance initiatives with broader student support frameworks, such as MTSS and school improvement planning.
- Build integrated, cross-agency approaches that align accountability, attendance policy, professional learning and student support systems around prevention-oriented approaches while minimizing reliance on punitive responses, including court involvement.

Conclusion

State leadership is crucial to reducing student chronic absence. While schools and districts are essential for day-to-day implementation, states — particularly SEAs as well as state policymakers and legislators — can create the conditions that make sustainable, prevention-oriented attendance improvement possible. Through policy, accountability systems, guidance and data infrastructure, states can help ensure that attendance efforts are coordinated, actionable and responsive to the needs of all students.

The findings in this brief show encouraging progress. More states are investing in timely attendance data systems, expanding prevention-oriented guidance, setting ambitious goals for improvement and recognizing the limitations of punitive responses to chronic absence. Yet significant challenges remain in ensuring that attendance data is comparable across districts and within states and is actionable — available at consistent intervals and in formats that are easy to understand and analyze — to drive early prevention and support.

The path forward is clear. Improving student attendance, engagement and achievement requires moving beyond compliance-focused reporting and toward data systems that help educators at the district and school level identify barriers early, target supports effectively and strengthen student engagement before chronic absence becomes entrenched. SEAs, state policymakers and legislators are in a powerful position to advance improvements in attendance by aligning data, policy and practice around early intervention and prevention-oriented strategies. By continuing to invest in these areas, states can help ensure that all students can consistently access the learning opportunities and support they need to thrive, achieve and reach for their dreams.

Acknowledgements

Attendance Works is pleased to present *Beyond the Roll Call: Reducing Chronic Absence Through State Action, A Sixth Annual Review of State Policy and Practice*, and the technical report of the same name. Many people contributed to these materials.

While Hedy N. Chang, president and CEO of Attendance Works, is the primary author of the technical report, Inika Williams, associate director for policy, played an essential role in helping to conceptualize the short policy brief as well as managing the development of these materials, including seeking feedback from reviewers. Both reports are a collective product of the Attendance Works state policy brief team which also includes Elizabeth Cook, director of The 50% Challenge; Catherine Cooney, director of communications; and, Nick Conner, senior fellow. We deeply appreciate the contributions of Nick Conner who assumed primary responsibility for the data collection and analysis.

These materials benefited significantly from the thoughtful and constructive feedback offered by colleagues who reviewed our initial draft. These reviewers include Katy Anthes, Bob Balfanz, LaNesha Battle, Lauren Bloomquist, Barbara Duffield, Chris Domaleski, Ben Erwin, Kevin Gee, Michael Gottfried, Patrick Hickman, Alex Javna, Lynn Jennings, Johann Liljengren, Stacy Losh, Stacey Loewe, Laura Pinsonneault, Rosalyn Rice-Harris, Jenny Scala and Shirley Vargas.

The reports also benefited from the insights offered by Attendance Works Senior Fellows Laura Downs, Lorri Hobson and Susan Lieberman, and Cecelia Leong, vice president of programs.

The reports would not have been possible without the contributions of Catherine Cooney, who led the editing, design, production and distribution. We are also grateful for the thoughtful copyediting skills of TextFormations, and the artistic abilities of our graphic designer, Rhonda Saunders.

We are grateful to the Council of Chief State School Officers for helping us share the findings of these materials with its members prior to its official release.

Finally, these materials were made possible through the generous financial support of the Overdeck Family Foundation, Heising-Simons Foundation and our individual donors. All analyses, conclusions and recommendations in the report are those of the authors.



Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org) is a national nonprofit initiative that advances success in school and beyond for all students by reducing chronic absence. Its website offers a wide array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools, districts and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.

Citation: *Beyond the Roll Call: Reducing Chronic Absence Through State Action, Sixth Annual Review of State Policy and Practice Technical Report*. Attendance Works, June 2026.