Reducing Chronic Absence: What Will It Take?

An overview of why it matters and key ingredients for improving student attendance

Director: Hedy Chang

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Unpacking Attendance Terms

**Average Daily Attendance**
- The % of enrolled students who attend school each day. It is used in some states for allocating funding.

**Truancy**
- Typically refers only to unexcused absences and is defined by each state under No Child Left Behind. It signals the potential need for legal intervention under state compulsory education laws.

**Chronic Absence**
- Missing 10% or more of school for any reason — excuse, unexcused, etc. It is an indication that a student is academically at risk due to missing too much school starting in Kindergarten.
Moving into Action Requires Knowing if Chronic Absence is a Problem

Most Schools Only Track Average Daily Attendance and Truancy. Both Can Mask Chronic Absence.

Chronic Absence For 6 Elementary Schools in Oakland, CA with @ 95% ADA in 2012

98% ADA = little chronic absence
95% ADA = don’t know
93% ADA = significant chronic absence
Chronic Absence Versus Truancy

San Francisco Unified School District

(Note: SFUSD identified chronic truants as 10 unexcused absences)
Sporadic – Not Just Consecutive – Absences Matter

New York City Schools (2008)

- A 407 alert is issued when a student misses 10 consecutive days or 20 days over a 40 day period. It misses more sporadic absence.
- 1 out of 5 elementary school children were chronically absent.

Chronic Absence – A Hidden National Crisis

- Nationwide, as many as 10-15% of students (7.5 million) miss nearly a month of school every year. That’s 135 million days of lost time in the classroom.

- In some cities, as many as one in four students are missing that much school.

- Chronic absenteeism is a red alert that students are headed for academic trouble and eventually for dropping out of high school.

- Poor attendance isn’t just a problem in high school. It can start as early as kindergarten and pre-kindergarten.
The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is focusing on three challenges to reading success that are amenable to community solutions:

- **The Readiness Gap**: Too many children from low-income families begin school already far behind.

- **The Attendance Gap (Chronic Absence)**: Too many children from low-income families miss too many days of school.

- **The Summer Slide (Summer Learning Loss)**: Too many children lose ground over the summer months.
Students Chronically Absent in Kindergarten and 1st Grade are Much Less Likely to Read Proficiently in 3rd Grade

Percent Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on 3rd Grade ELA Based on Attendance in Kindergarten and in 1st Grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance Risk</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No risk</td>
<td>Missed less than 5% of school in K &amp; 1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small risk</td>
<td>Missed 5-9% of days in both K &amp; 1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate risk</td>
<td>Missed 5-9% of days in 1 year &amp; 10% in 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High risk</td>
<td>Missed 10% or more in K &amp; 1st</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Applied Survey Research & Attendance Works (April 2011)
Chronic Absence in PreK + K = Significantly Worse Outcomes

For children chronically absent in PreK & K, the Baltimore Education Research Consortium found:

- Greater likelihood of continued poor attendance. 50% were chronically absent again in G1, 45% in G2.
- Lower outcomes in G1, G2 in reading and math, and math in G3
- More often retained (26% compared with 9% of students with no chronic absence)
- More likely to be identified as needing special education

By contrast, children who participated in Head Start had better attendance and higher 3rd grade test scores.
The Long-Term Impact of Chronic Kindergarten Absence is Most Troubling for Poor Children

5th Grade Math and Reading Performance By K Attendance for Children Living In Poverty. Academic performance was lower even if attendance had improved in 3rd grade.

Source: ECLS-K data analyzed by National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP)
Note: Average academic performance reflects results of direct cognitive assessments conducted for ECLS-K.
There Is a Clear and Consistent Relationship Between Early Attendance and Later Achievement

Average reading RIT scores for two cohorts of Oregon students, by absence rates in kindergarten and 5th grade

(Note: 23% of students statewide in Oregon were chronically absent)

Source: ECONorthwest analysis of Oregon Department of Education data, 2009-10.
The Effects of Chronic Absence on Dropout Rates Are Cumulative

Proportion of Students Dropping Out by Number of Years the Student Was Chronically Absent from 8th-12th Grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Years Chronically Absent</th>
<th>Percent Who Dropped Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Not Reported (&lt;1% )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With every year of chronic absenteeism, a higher percentage of students dropped out of school

Solutions Only Work if Grounded in Understanding of What Leads to Chronic Absence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discretion</th>
<th>Aversion</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents or students don’t know attendance matters</td>
<td>Child is struggling academically</td>
<td>Lack of access to health care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School lacks a strong culture of attendance</td>
<td>Lack of engaging instruction</td>
<td>No safe path to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child is being bullied</td>
<td>Poor transportation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Special thanks to Dr. Robert Balfanz, Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD for providing this framework.
Universal Strategies for School Communities

- Recognize Good and Improved Attendance
- Engage Students and Parents
- Provide Personalized Early Outreach
- Monitor Attendance Data and Practice
- Develop Programmatic Responses to Barriers
Increased Attendance Involves a 3-Tiered Approach that Fits with Most Reform Efforts

- **High Cost**
  - Recovery Programs
    - Students who were chronically absent in prior year or starting to miss 20% or more of school
  
- **Intervention Programs**
  - Students at risk for chronic absence

- **Universal/Preventive Programs**
  - All students in the school

- **Low Cost**
  - A small fraction of a school’s students
  
  - Some of a school’s students
  
  - All of a school’s students
Variation Across Schools Helps Identify Good Practice and Need for Intervention

Chronic Absence Levels Among Oakland Public Schools (2009-10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># Schools with 0%-5% Chronic Absence</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Schools with 5.1%-10% Chronic Absence</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Schools with 10.1%-20% Chronic Absence</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Schools with &gt;20.1% Chronic Absence</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. Schools</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest % of Chronic Absence</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest % of Chronic Absence</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Examples of Successful Efforts

**Baltimore:** Fewer unnecessary suspensions, reduced middle school transitions, expanded monitoring of attendance data, and a citywide campaign have helped cut middle school chronic absence in half. Baltimore is now turning its attention to preschool and elementary school.

**New York City:** Schoolwide incentives, celebrity wakeup calls, data dashboards, and success mentors for at-risk students have reduced chronic absence in pilot elementary, middle and high schools. Students with success mentors gained 11,800 additional days of school.

For additional examples: [http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/](http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/)
Ingredients for Success & Sustainability in a District

Positive Messaging
- Conveys importance of building a habit of attendance & explains what is chronic absence

Capacity Building
- Expands ability to interpret data and adopt best practices

Actionable Data
- Is accurate, regularly reported and easily obtained

Shared Account-ability
- Strengthens Family/School Relationship
- Ensures monitoring & incentives to reduce chronic absence
The Superintendents Call to Action

Own the Issue

Mobilize the Community

Drive With Data

To sign-up for the Call to Action, or to learn more, please visit: www.attendanceworks.org/superintendents-call-to-action
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