



# POLICY ANALYSIS

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## Chronic Absenteeism: A key indicator of student success

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For students to succeed academically, they must be present and engaged at school. Nationwide, approximately 6.8 million—or one in seven—students miss 15 or more days during the school year.<sup>2</sup> By most definitions, these students are considered 'chronically absent.' Research shows that

**NATIONWIDE, APPROXIMATELY ONE IN SEVEN STUDENTS MISSED 15 OR MORE DAYS OF INSTRUCTION IN 2013-14.<sup>1</sup>**

chronic absenteeism can affect academic performance in later grades and is a key early warning sign that a student is more likely to drop out of high school.<sup>3</sup> Several states enacted legislation to address this issue, and many states are currently discussing the utility of chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school quality or student success (SQSS) in their accountability systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This policy brief provides information for policymakers and state education leaders on the research, key issues and policy options available to address chronic absenteeism and improve attendance.

### Understanding Chronic Absenteeism

States use several measures to track student attendance, including average daily attendance (ADA), chronic absenteeism and truancy. ADA refers to the percentage of students who attend school each day and is widely used by states to demonstrate attendance. ADA figures do not, however, reveal whether absences are concentrated among a small group of students with many absences, or dispersed amongst a larger number of students with fewer absences. As a result, ADA may mask chronic absenteeism problems because it will not identify students with excessive absences.<sup>4</sup>

While ADA is defined very clearly, definitions of chronic absenteeism vary. For purposes of data collection and reporting in the Civil Rights Data Collection, the federal government defines chronic absenteeism as missing 15 or more days of school per year. State definitions differ; some states base

Chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among students in poverty, students with disabilities, students of color, students who are mobile and students who are involved in the juvenile justice system.

Several states are using chronic absenteeism as an indicator of SQSS in their ESSA state plans.



## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?\*

### Average Daily Attendance

A measure of the percentage of students in attendance each school day.

### Chronic Absenteeism

A measure of how much school a student misses for any reason—including excused, unexcused and discipline-related absences.

### Truancy

A measure of a student's unexcused absences only.

\*While official state definitions vary, the definitions provided reflect the common understanding of each term.

the definition on the number of days missed, while others define it in terms of percentage of time missed. For those states with percentage thresholds, chronic absenteeism is generally defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year—approximately 18 days—depending on the length of the school year.<sup>5</sup> While these varying definitions can create difficulties in data comparison and analysis, at the root of *all* definitions is the common understanding that chronic absenteeism includes all days of missed instruction, regardless of the reason.

Truancy measures a student's unexcused absences—omitting absences that are excused and/or related to disciplinary measures. Due to a growing body of research that suggests missed instructional time inhibits student success, regardless of the cause of absence, some states have started to use chronic absenteeism as a primary measure of attendance. Additionally, ESSA now requires states to collect and report data on chronic absenteeism in their annual report cards.

## Who is Chronically Absent?

High school students with **disabilities** are **1.4 times** as likely to be **chronically absent** as high school students without disabilities. Compared to their white peers in elementary school, **Native students** are **1.9 times** as likely, and **black students** are **1.4 times** as likely, to be **chronically absent**.

While chronic absenteeism affects students from all backgrounds at all grade levels, data indicate that some student groups are disproportionately affected. Chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among the youngest

and oldest students, particularly those who already face significant academic challenges, including students living in poverty, students with disabilities, students of color, students who are mobile and students who are involved in the juvenile justice system.<sup>6</sup> These student groups are often targeted with efforts to close the achievement gap, but unless such students are present and engaged, the impact of those efforts will likely be diminished.

## Why are Students Chronically Absent?

Students miss days of school for a host of reasons. Research studies indicate that students missing 10 percent or more of the school year typically struggle with various barriers to attendance. In addition to the demographic factors mentioned above, these barriers may include, but are not limited to: poor health, family and work responsibilities, limited transportation options and unsafe routes to school, bullying and other safety issues, homelessness, ineffective school discipline, undiagnosed disabilities or disengagement from the school system. It is challenging to collect data on why students miss school, which impedes efforts to determine the root cause of chronic absence. However, developing a better understanding of these potential causes could inform more effective interventions.

## The Link Between Chronic Absenteeism and Student Success

Chronic absence is a proven sign of academic risk, as students who miss school are less likely to meet key academic milestones. Further, since students who already face significant academic challenges are disproportionately affected, persistent chronic absence has the potential to exacerbate the achievement gap. There is great potential to make headway in closing that gap, improving graduation

rates and providing a higher-quality education to all students, if issues of chronic absenteeism are addressed effectively.

Evidence from several state-specific studies suggests that, even as early as preschool, chronic absenteeism is related to lower academic achievement.<sup>7</sup> Students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to achieve reading proficiency by third grade.<sup>8</sup> By the sixth grade, chronic absenteeism becomes one of the primary indicators that a student will drop out of high school;<sup>9</sup> a study in Utah showed that students who were chronically absent for any year between eighth grade and twelfth grade were more than seven times more likely to drop out.<sup>10</sup>

The consequences of chronic absenteeism can persist through higher education and adulthood. High school dropouts are more likely to experience poverty and diminished health, and have an increased risk of being involved in the criminal justice system.<sup>11</sup> Beyond high school, chronic absenteeism can predict lower levels of persistence and success in college.<sup>12</sup>

## State Action to Address Chronic Absenteeism

Research on the effects of chronic absence on student success has drawn the attention of policymakers and state education leaders throughout the nation. Many states have enacted policies to address chronic absenteeism in recent years. State action can be categorized into four general areas: attendance improvement plans, public awareness initiatives, data usage and early warning systems, and school improvement efforts.

### State Plans to Guide Attendance Improvement

To spur better attendance, some state leaders instituted requirements for the development of attendance improvement plans and attendance monitoring teams.

- In 2015, policymakers in **Connecticut** enacted legislation aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism at the local level by requiring the establishment of district and school attendance review teams where rates of chronic absenteeism are high. The legislation also required the Connecticut Department of Education to develop a Chronic Absenteeism Prevention and Intervention Plan for use by local and regional boards of education.<sup>13</sup>
- Similarly, **Indiana** enacted legislation in 2013 requiring that the Indiana Department of Education provide resources and guidance to school districts concerning evidence-based practices and effective strategies to reduce absenteeism. This guidance includes an overview of the research on the predictors and effects of student absenteeism, as well as information on effective, research-based interventions.<sup>14</sup>
- A 2016 **Oregon** law requires the Oregon Department of Education to develop a state plan to, in part, provide schools and school districts with guidance and best practices for tracking, monitoring and addressing chronic absences.<sup>15</sup>

### Public Awareness Initiatives

Another strategy states use to combat poor attendance is to increase public awareness of the problem. While several public awareness campaigns revolve around Attendance Awareness Month each September, some states institute year-long strategies to raise public awareness of poor attendance.<sup>16</sup>

- In addition to working directly with districts to reduce absenteeism, the **Arkansas** Make Every Day Count initiative, led by the Arkansas Campaign for Grade Level Reading, releases public service announcements on local radio stations and provides messaging tools—including handouts, buttons, banners and posters—to districts to reinforce the importance of attendance.<sup>17</sup>
- The Every Student Present! campaign in **New York** is a partnership between government, non-profit and educational organizations targeted toward school administrators, parents and community partners that aims to shed light on how chronic absence impacts student success. The campaign includes efforts to publish articles in education membership organization



publications, distribute informational materials, collaborate with youth advocacy organizations and develop a website to help local groups systematically address chronic absenteeism.<sup>18</sup>

- In **Utah**, Voices for Utah Children leads a public awareness campaign focused on educating stakeholders about the relationship between attendance and achievement. This campaign is centered around Attendance Awareness Month and aimed at the state's teachers' union, parent teacher association, elected officials and community leaders.<sup>19</sup>

## Data Usage and Early Warning Systems

Federal law now requires that states collect and report data on chronic absenteeism. States, schools and districts can use that data to identify problems of chronic absence and intervene as needed. The U.S. Department of Education defines an early warning system as "a system based on student data to identify students who exhibit behavior or academic performance that puts them at risk of dropping out of school."<sup>20</sup> Schools that implement early warning systems often use data to track attendance, behavior and course performance indicators. These indicators trigger interventions and provide a mechanism to identify those students who may be off track. There are several examples of states that use chronic absence data effectively and/or have incorporated measures of chronic absence into their early warning systems.

- **Hawaii** provides on demand access to chronic absenteeism data at the school level and designates school officials with access to a list of students who miss more than 5 percent of the school year. This data is incorporated into the risk measures used in the state's early warning system.
- The **Massachusetts** Early Warning Indicator System collects a wealth of data on students in first-12th grade and provides information to districts about whether their students are on track to meet their academic goals. Student attendance is included as an indicator for evaluating whether students require an intervention.<sup>21</sup>
- The **Rhode Island** Department of Education includes

information on chronic absenteeism for the state, districts and public schools as part of a publicly accessible, user friendly data resource called InfoWorks.<sup>22</sup>

- The **Virginia** Early Warning System monitors student progress by tracking several warning signs, including 10 percent absenteeism in the first 20 days of school, in the first grading period and over the entire year.<sup>23</sup>

## School Improvement

The strong link between chronic absenteeism and poor academic performance led some states to require this measure in the school improvement plans of low-performing schools. Many of the previously mentioned state guidance plans were developed with this effort in mind.

- As part of their 2013 chronic absence legislation, **Indiana** required that schools with a B grade or lower include a strategy to reduce absenteeism in their school improvement plan.<sup>24</sup>
- As part of efforts to improve third-grade literacy, **Iowa** now mandates that school districts include measures of chronic absenteeism in elementary schools in their school improvement plans.
- **New Jersey** added chronic absenteeism to its latest school performance reports, and any school with more than a 6 percent chronic absenteeism rate is advised to pay closer attention to attendance trends.
- In **Virginia**, high schools identified under the state accountability system as "in need of improvement" are required to use the Virginia Early Warning System to monitor whether students are on track to graduate.

## ESSA and Chronic Absenteeism

ESSA requires that annual state report cards include the chronic absenteeism information submitted for purposes of the Civil Rights Data Collection. ESSA also provides increased flexibility to states to incorporate chronic absenteeism directly into state accountability systems as one indicator of SQSS. Finally, ESSA provides flexibility to school districts to use their Title II professional development fund allocations



to train staff on issues “related to school conditions for student learning,” including chronic absenteeism.<sup>25</sup>

## ESSA Accountability Systems

As a part of state accountability systems, ESSA requires five indicators: four specified academic indicators and one measure, chosen by the state, of SQSS. Taken together, this accountability structure is intended to provide a more holistic measure of school performance.

The SQSS indicator must be given less than “substantial weight” in accountability calculations, with the four other measures receiving “much greater weight” in the aggregate.<sup>26</sup> Research suggests that chronic absenteeism serves as a good measure of school performance under accountability systems because it is measurable, it provides meaningful differentiation between schools and because reductions in chronic absence are linked to improvements in academic achievement. Chronic absenteeism is a measure that meets the requirements of an SQSS indicator and because ESSA requires reporting of chronic absenteeism in state report cards, states that use this measure for SQSS should have the data readily available.

Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, states could apply for waivers to customize their accountability systems, and a few states chose to use chronic absenteeism as a measure of school and student performance under those waivers.<sup>27</sup> For example, **California’s** CORE districts received a federal waiver and created the School Quality Improvement Index, including chronic absenteeism as one of the five social-emotional and culture-climate factors.<sup>28</sup>

## Policy Considerations

- **Adopt a standard state definition of chronic absence.** Varying definitions create unnecessary difficulties in data comparison and analysis. Research suggests that a definition using a specified percentage of missed

instructional days is preferable to one using a specified number of days, because a percentage threshold promotes earlier identification of students to trigger intervention.<sup>29</sup>

- **Use data effectively** by collecting longitudinal attendance data, calculating chronic absence rates, breaking the data down by sub group, and providing schools and districts with the ability to target resources and interventions based on those data. Consider incorporating chronic absenteeism data into early warning systems to provide timely interventions to at-risk students.<sup>30</sup>
- **Consider incorporating chronic absenteeism into ESSA-required state accountability plans**, as research shows that improvements in attendance boost efforts to close achievement gaps. Incorporating this measure will encourage schools to adopt and implement effective interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism. This measure meets the law’s requirements, is closely linked to student achievement and is valid and reliable.<sup>31</sup>
- **Use Title II training funds** to train school personnel in addressing issues related to school conditions for student learning, including chronic absenteeism.<sup>32</sup>
- **Use coordinated and cross-sector approaches** to understand and address the root causes of chronic absenteeism. States may consider creating an inter-agency task force or commission to determine how resources and information can best be leveraged across sectors. Key partners in addressing this issue include education departments, health departments and organizations, homelessness organizations, children’s advocacy organizations and juvenile justice departments.
- **Encourage schools and districts to institute parental engagement initiatives.** Research suggests that low cost communication with parents—including a simple mailing—can help reduce absenteeism. A Harvard study showed that a single mailing to the parents and guardians of chronically absent students in Philadelphia improved attendance in all grades K-12.<sup>33</sup>



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