

Chronic Absenteeism and Its Impact on Achievement

OVERVIEW

An overwhelming body of research demonstrates the negative short- and long-term consequences of chronic absenteeism on academic achievement. Students who are chronically absent are missing critical instruction time and are at the greatest risk of falling behind and dropping out of school. Chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects low-income students and students with disabilities, as well as students of color and English language learners. Across the country, millions of students are reported chronically absent each school year.

Chronic absenteeism is most commonly defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason, excused or unexcused. As districts and states begin to examine and track chronic absenteeism, comprehensive policy solutions and interventions should be locally determined and characterized by: universal prevention for all students, early intervention strategies for at-risk students, and targeted intensive support for students with the highest need. Punitive interventions should be avoided.

THE CHALLENGE

Consistent student attendance and participation in school is critical to learning and educational attainment, however, chronic absenteeism¹ is on the rise nationwide. The United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights found that **more than 7 million students across the country were reported chronically absent** during the 2015-2016 school year, an increase of nearly one million students from the previously reported data (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

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One in 10 schools experience extreme chronic absenteeism—where more than 30% of the student body is chronically absent—and, as a result, are less likely to achieve or improve upon measures of academic achievement (Bauer et al., 2018; Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates Center, 2017).

¹ The U.S. Department of Education defines chronic absenteeism as missing 15 or more school days (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Chronically absent students are not only missing out on school days and opportunities to learn, but they are at the greatest risk of falling behind. Chronic absenteeism has been linked to reduced student achievement, social disengagement, and feelings of alienation (Gottfried, 2014; Gottfried, 2015; Johnson, 2005). Over the long term, it is correlated to increased rates of high school dropout, adverse health outcomes and poverty in adulthood, and an increased likelihood of interacting with the criminal justice system (Schoeneberger, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

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Though widespread throughout the country, chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates Center, 2017). Low-income students are the most vulnerable. They often lack the resources

and supports needed to make up lost classroom time and are two to three times more likely to be chronically absent (Chang & Romero, 2008; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Absences among low-income students, especially those in elementary grades, are often considered excused and are the result of learning disabilities, asthma and other health issues, food insecurity, lack of reliable transportation, and the fallout of trauma, homelessness, bullying, and/or community violence (Attendance Works & Healthy Schools Campaign, 2015; Healthy Schools Campaign & Trust for America's Health, n.d.).



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WHAT IS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

While definitions of chronic absenteeism vary, chronically absent students could be missing more than 2 weeks of the school year, 1 month of the school year, or 10% of the school year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2015). Attendance Works, a national initiative working to advance student success by reducing chronic absence, recommends chronic absence be defined as missing 10% or more of the school year² (Attendance Works, 2014).

Unlike attendance or truancy, tracking chronic absenteeism creates a more complete picture by including all excused and unexcused absences (i.e., truancy) and those that are the result of disciplinary actions (Jordan & Miller, 2017; Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates Center, 2017). The practice of tracking chronic student absences over the course of the school year also offers real-time insight into trends in student attendance, which can lead to early detection and intervention (Attendance Works, 2014).

A NEW EDUCATION LAW: EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—the legislative successor to the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act passed in 2002—requires states to report on specific indicators that measure academic achievement, school quality,

and student success (Jordan & Miller, 2017). Drawing upon lessons learned from NCLB, policy experts and stakeholders have recommended state leaders adopt chronic absenteeism as the ESSA measure of school quality or student success (SQSS) (Schanzenbach, Bauer, & Mumford, 2016). According to analysis by FutureEd, a Georgetown University affiliated think tank, 36 states, including Delaware, and the District of Columbia have adopted some form of student absenteeism as the fifth SQSS ESSA indicator (Jordan & Miller, 2017).

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN DELAWARE

Similar to the rest of the country, chronic absenteeism is a challenge in Delaware. Along with 26 other states, Delaware defines chronic absence as missing 10% or more of the school year in its approved ESSA plan (Delaware Department of Education, 2017). During the 2013-2014 school year, the state reported 22,897 students—**about 1 in 6 students**—as being chronically absent (Jordan & Miller, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights Data Collection, 2016). Additionally, about 58% of Delaware's schools reported at least 10% of their student population as chronically absent, while 10% of schools reported extreme chronic absenteeism³ (Jordan & Miller, 2017).

Approximately 1 in 6 Delaware students were identified as being chronically absent during the 2013-14 school year.

In 2017, Delaware's ESSA plan was the first state plan submitted and approved by the Secretary of Education for the 2017-18 school year (U.S. Department of Education,

² In other words, 10% of days in the school year equates to 18 missed days in a 180-day school year or two days every month.

³ This figure is slightly higher than the national average of 54%.

2017). With input from community members, education stakeholders, and a statewide ESSA Advisory Committee, the state identified chronic absenteeism as an indicator of SQSS and also a replacement to tracking attendance (Delaware Department of Education, 2017).

EFFECTS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

A comprehensive body of research on chronic absenteeism among students unpacks the negative short-term impacts and long-term outcomes, as well as the importance of early intervention. Chronic absence, especially in the elementary years, sets the stage for academic achievement, future absences, and, ultimately, graduation rates (Attendance Works & Healthy Schools Campaign, 2015). Longitudinal research has found that achievement in reading and mathematics is hindered for students who are chronically absent as early as kindergarten, and chronic absence in elementary school is linked to an increased likelihood of dropout even if attendance improves over time (Romero & Lee, 2007; Schoeneberger, 2012). Low-income students are the most vulnerable, with research indicating that the negative consequences of chronic absenteeism in kindergarteners is 75% larger than the impact of absenteeism on higher-income classmates (Ready, 2010).

In middle and high school, the effects of chronic absenteeism compounds. By the sixth grade, along with GPA, it is a top predictor of dropout (University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014). In high school, chronic absenteeism is observed at its highest—25% of the nation's 9-12 schools experience extreme chronic absence, where more than 30% of the student body is missing more than 10% of school days throughout the year (Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates Center, 2017).

Chronic absenteeism has also been found to have negative impacts on the achievement of classmates.

Chronic absence impacts not just students missing school, but their peers as well. A longitudinal study of over 20,000 students in the School District of Philadelphia found that student chronic absence in elementary school had negative impacts on the achievement of classmates (Gottfried, 2015).

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS

Tracking chronic absenteeism is a critical step for states to bring awareness to a silent crisis impacting students, families, and communities, especially the most vulnerable. A comprehensive review of the research by the Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific found that the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism can be thematically categorized by individual student characteristics, family dynamics, school aspects, and the larger community (Black, Seder, & Kekahio, 2014). With such wide-ranging determinants, there is no silver bullet or any one intervention—rather, the research is beginning to show that chronic absenteeism is most effectively

addressed not by punitive measures, but when schools, stakeholders, community members, and families collaborate to identify locally determined solutions to the underlying challenges.

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According to Attendance Works, the potential of chronic absence data is unlocked when it is used to identify when prevention and early intervention are needed and, as such, they advocate a **three-tiered approach**:

- **Universal prevention strategies for all students,**
- **Early intervention strategies for at-risk students, and**
- **Targeted intensive support for students with the highest need with punitive interventions being a last resort (n.d.).**

While the research and evaluation of interventions aimed at chronic absenteeism is nascent, promising pilots have emerged. The impact of low-cost interventions, such as postcards mailed to students' homes or text messages to guardians and parents, are promising. An experiment that sent automated text messages to parents and guardians about their student's absences, low grades, and missed assignments, was found to reduce course failures by 38% and increase class attendance by 17% (Bergman & Chan, 2017).

Working to increase attendance to merely improve a data point will likely not result in the overall desired outcomes of greater student success and academic achievement (Bauer et al., 2018). Addressing chronic absenteeism must be done alongside and in coordination with efforts to improve the quality of instructional time.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The value and urgency of tracking chronic absenteeism is clear in the peer reviewed and lay research, and consensus continues to build among constituents including community members, educators, public servants, and policymakers. In addition to coalescing around a universal definition of chronic absenteeism and promoting the full adoption of chronic absenteeism in all state ESSA plans, there are additional opportunities for policy to support local, community-based efforts to address chronic absence. Opportunities include: **shaping budget policy to identify local and state resources** to support the development and piloting of locally determined interventions; the **ongoing convening and collaboration** of educators, public servants, community based organizations, and elected officials to share data and information across agencies and organizations in order to target efforts; and **leadership in awareness building** such as statewide participation and engagement in efforts like *National Attendance Awareness Month*. ■

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