The Power of a Student Being Present:

A Comprehensive Summary of Student Absenteeism Research

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EveryDay Labs™

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Executive Summary

This review of research seeks to identify the scale and scope of the chronic absence crisis across the United States, showcase research that highlights the critical consequences to students after missing a significant number of school days, and spotlight best practices and interventions that have been proven successful to overcoming barriers to chronic absenteeism.

> **"Poor attendance is among our first and best warning signs** that a student has missed the on-ramp to success."
>
> **— Attendance Works and Healthy Schools Campaign**[1]

Introduction: Why Does Student Absenteeism Matter?

Horace Mann famously called public schools the "great equalizer." Though history has yet to see this ideal realized, research suggests that consistent attendance is critical to helping schools fulfill this promise. That's because public schools remain the primary institution through which many communities channel opportunities and resources—access to professional educators, access to knowledge and experiences, access to health and nutritional services—that all require consistent student attendance to ensure the safety and well-being of young people and to cultivate learning. In this way, schools are the most common point of intersection between children, families, and community resources.

In order to work toward Mann's vision, educators and administrators have carefully and thoughtfully organized and designed public school systems with the goals of fostering healthy student growth and development, promoting academic success, and ultimately preparing students to productively engage in post-secondary life. They strive to build achievement from the diverse backgrounds of experiences and interactions of their students. Policies and practices have been implemented to find ways to more equitably distribute funding to mitigate the impact of poverty, provide accommodations for disabilities, and offer language supports. Educators continuously examine their practice through the lenses of student achievement and growth, undertake professional development to improve, and then integrate their efforts in the subsequent school year.

[1] Attendance Works, Healthy Schools Campaign, (2015), "Mapping the Early Attendance Gap."

Attendance begets discovery, exploration, learning, and achievement: it is the keystone of student growth and well-being.

All of these efforts, programs, and systems presume one thing: that students are present to participate. Attendance begets discovery, exploration, learning, and achievement: it is the keystone of student growth and well-being. In other words, the impact of any school or district initiative and the quality of the insights about students—whether they're curricular enhancements, supplemental materials, academic interventions, comprehensive wellness, or teacher professional development—all hinge on students being present.

When a student is absent from school, it is challenging for educators to ensure that they remain connected to important services and maintain their academic progress and social-emotional development. In the majority of schools, when a student is absent, they receive makeup work and might have the opportunity to stay after or arrive early at school to engage with the most critical information. This approach, at best, serves students who have infrequent short-term absences.

But data has shown that there are many students who are frequently absent or absent for extended periods of time. These students end up missing a much higher proportion of school minutes and days. They are deprived of interactions with teachers, peers, support staff, and curricular content on an ongoing and cumulative basis. For these students, the consequences of this missed school time can be dire, for they lose regular access to a developmentally appropriate environment to learn and grow cognitively, emotionally, and socially.

Chapter One

Understanding and Defining Chronic Absence

Key Findings

- ✔ **The best practice definition of chronic absence is missing more than 10% of enrolled days or enrolled periods for any reason—excused or unexcused.**
- ✔ **For decades, researchers and practitioners were constrained by a lack of data to understand the breadth and depth of chronic absence rates and the impact it has on academic, social, emotional, and post-secondary outcomes.**
- ✔ **A majority of states (36) and the District of Columbia chose to include chronic absence for their nonacademic measure in their ESSA implementation plans.[2]**
- ✔ **A national effort to collect chronic absence data indicated both a collective recognition that chronic absence is a key measure for how schools are reaching students and that chronic absence is a significant barrier to student success.**
- ✔ **"Chronic absence is easily masked by school attendance statistics."[3] A school could have an average daily attendance rate of 95%, with 30% of the student population being chronically absent.[4]**

[2] Phyllis W. Jordan and Raegan Miller, "Chronic Absenteeism Under the Every Student Succeeds Act" (Washington, DC: Future Ed, 2017). [4] Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For" (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2008).

How Is Attendance Defined, Tracked, and Reported?

Most schools and districts differentiate absences between excused and unexcused. Excused absences are generally defined as absences that are caused by a valid reason stipulated by a school district (e.g., illness, family emergency, medical appointment) that is communicated to the school. Unexcused absences are absences whose cause has not been reported to the school even if they met the threshold for an excused absence or absences that do not have a cause deemed legitimate by the school district such as oversleeping or skipping school. Some researchers have noted that how an excused absence is defined often disproportionately penalizes students of color and students living in poverty.[5] Historically, many states and districts have been required by state law to monitor and report data on truancy–missing school for unexcused reasons–rather than chronic absence. Truancy refers to the accumulation of unexcused absences. For many decades, federal law required states to track truancy, though each state had the autonomy to determine how they defined truancy, tracked students who were truant, and the consequences for being truant.[6]

The best practice definition of chronic absence is missing more than 10% of enrolled days or enrolled periods for any reason—excused, unexcused, or suspensions. Defining chronic absence as a percentage is important for multiple reasons. First, research has shown that almost half of students who missed 10% of school days (two days) and nearly 90% of students who missed 20% or more (at least 4 days) school days during September went on to be chronically absent.[7] Tracking attendance as a percentage from the very start of the school year allows schools and community partners to notice, engage and address the needs of students who are trending toward chronic absence before they miss so much school that they require more intensive intervention. Second, it allows for comparisons across districts or states even if the length of their academic school year varies (e.g., 177 days versus 180 days).

Because of variations in attendance policies and the lack of a common reporting metric, it has been challenging to track chronic absence trends across time, different locales, and sub-populations. Thus, for decades, researchers and practitioners were constrained by a lack of data to understand the breadth and depth of chronic absence rates and the impact it has on academic, social, emotional, and post-secondary outcomes.

[5] Clea A. McNeely et al., "Exploring an UNEXAMINED Source of Racial Disparities," *AERA Open 7* (2021): p. 233285842110031. [6] Attendance Works, "What's the Difference between Chronic Absence and Truancy?," Attendance Works, October 29, 2018. [7] Linda S. Olson, "Why September Matters: Improving Student Attendance" (Baltimore Education Research Consortiumhttp (July 2014).

A National Effort to Understand Chronic Absence

The passage of the federal education Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 marked an important milestone in the effort to track chronic absence and understand its impact on student success. The law, which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act and governs U.S. federal education policy, included a provision that requires states to document chronic absence data in their school report cards.[8] This was the first time that states were required to report chronic absence numbers. The law also called on states to choose five indicators to measure performance–four academic measures and one nonacademic measure. A majority of states (36) and the District of Columbia chose to include chronic absence for their nonacademic measure in their ESSA implementation plans.[9]

Just after the passage of this legislation, in 2016, the United States Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) division released the first major national report on chronic absence data. The report reflected data collected from all public schools and school districts within the U.S. during the 2013–14 school year and provided evidence that high absenteeism rates correlate with negative outcomes for students.[10] The data showed that a staggering 14% of all students were chronically absent (defined in this study as missing 15 days or more) during that school year.[11]

The publication of this national data marked an attempt to understand chronic absence at a national level and gave researchers a valuable resource to try to analyze trends and insights. The inclusion of chronic absence as a metric in federal education law and a national effort to collect chronic absence data indicated both a collective recognition that chronic absence is a key measure for how schools are reaching students and that chronic absence is a significant barrier to student success.

> "Most school districts and states don't look at all the right data to improve school attendance. They track how many students show up every day and how many are skipping school without an excuse, but not how many are missing so many days in excused and unexcused absence that they are headed off track academically."
>
> **— Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero[12]**

[8] Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). [9] Phyllis W. Jordan and Raegan Miller, "Who's In: Chronic Absenteeism Under ESSA." [10] "Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for the 2013-14 School Year," Home, March 24, 2021. [11] Ibid. [12] Anne Discher, et al. "Chronic Elementary Absenteeism" Attendance Works, October 9, 2017.

A Hidden Crisis Brought to Light

The release of this national data shows that chronic absence is a substantial problem throughout the United States. However, it also revealed that common practices for tracking attendance in schools and districts hide the scale and scope of the issue in many ways. As Anne Discher, Charles Bruner, and Hedy Chang explain in *Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: Hidden in Plain Sight*, "Most school districts and states don't look at all the right data to improve school attendance. They track how many students show up every day and how many are skipping school without an excuse, but not how many are missing so many days in excused and unexcused absence that they are headed off track academically."[13] Chang and Romero further note in their 2008 report, *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, that "Chronic absence is easily masked by school attendance statistics."[14] They explain that a school could seem to be doing quite well in terms of attendance yet still have a significant number of students missing large portions of school days. They highlight an example from a school that has 200 students and a 95% average daily attendance rate:

> **At this rate, 10 students are absent on any given day while 190 are present. The same 10 students, however, are not absent for all 180 days or they would be dis-enrolled. Rather, it is quite possible that the 10 students missing each day occurs because the school is serving 60 students who are taking turns being absent but when their absences are added together, miss a month or more of school over the course of the school year. In summary, even in a school with 95% daily attendance, 30% of the student population could be chronically absent.15**

In other words, from a reporting perspective, the school seems to be doing quite well in terms of attendance, but a third of their students could still be missing substantial instructional time.

[13] Ibid. [14] Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For." [15]Ibid.

Chapter Two

An Issue of Equity: Chronic Absence and Its Causes

Key Findings

- **With data that has emerged in recent years, many researchers and educators "have begun to realize the scope of the chronic absence problem and how many students are at risk academically … due to absenteeism or how quickly absences can add up to too much lost instructional time."[16]**
- **The release of the 2013–14 CRDC data and subsequent reports illuminated troubling disparities and inequities in chronic absence rates across racial groups and specific subpopulations.**
- **Children living in poverty are 25% more likely to be chronically absent than their peers from more affluent families, and their achievement suffers more acutely than their more affluent peers.[17]**
- **Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes have grouped most causes of chronic absenteeism into three general categories: "students who cannot attend school" due to poverty or related circumstances; "students who will not attend school" due to fears of safety, exclusion, or negative relationships at school; and "students who do not attend school" because they are not aware of the importance of being in attendance.[18]**
- **"Policies and practices that push students out of school settings, such as biased disciplinary policies, unequal access to quality instruction, or a lack of teachers who reflect cultures, ethnicities, and languages of the student population" create barriers for students and families to fully engage with a school community.[19]**
- **Many students and families do not realize that missing a significant number of days of school is outside of the norm. In a survey of more than 5,700 secondary students who were chronically absent, 55% of respondents reported that they believed their rate of attendance was similar to their peers. [20]**

[16] Attendance Works, "Attendance in the Early Grades: Why It Matters for Reading (Research Brief)," 2014. [17] Douglas D. Ready, "Socioeconomic Disadvantage," Sociology of Education 83, no. 4 (2010): pp. 271-286, Applied Survey Research, Attendance Works, October 9, 2017, [18] Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, "Chronic Absenteeism" (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, 2012). [19] The Everyone Graduates Center and Attendance Works, "Using Chronic Absence to Map," (Everyone Graduates Center and Attendance Works, February 2021). [20] Amber Humm Brundage, et al. "Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism Among Secondary Students" (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 2017).

Causes and Impacts of Chronic Absence

It seems like common sense that attendance at school is necessary for students' academic, cognitive, social, and emotional development. However, research directly analyzing the ties between attendance and these areas of development has only really been possible in the past two decades because of a lack of nationally representative data sets available prior to that point.[21] With the data that has emerged in recent years, many researchers and educators "have begun to realize the scope of the chronic absence problem and how many students are at risk academically … due to absenteeism or how quickly absences can add up to too much lost instructional time."[22]

The research has also confirmed that being chronically absent puts students' overall learning trajectory at substantial risk. These students are less likely to reach early learning milestones, achieve reading and math proficiency, and graduate from high school on time. In short, when students are not in school or engaged in learning, they fall behind. And these learning gaps compound–they both deepen and broaden over time. In other words, absences strongly correlate with student outcomes and there are developmental and lifelong negative harms caused by the accumulation of missed learning experiences.

Who Is Chronically Absent?

The release of the 2013–14 CRDC data and subsequent reports illuminated troubling disparities and inequities in chronic absence rates across racial groups and specific subpopulations.

Chronic Absence Rates by Race and Ethnicity from SY 2018–19[23]

Race/Ethnicity	Chronic Absence Rate
White	13.4%
Black	23.1%
Hispanic	17.4%
Asian	7.1%
Native American	29%
Pacific Islander	24%
Multiracial	18.2%

[21] Douglas D. Ready, "Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance." [22] Attendance Works, "Attendance in the Early Grades." [23] The Everyone Graduates Center and Attendance Works, "Chronic Absence" US Department of Education, "Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools" (January 2019)

> "**Early attendance gaps** turn into achievement gaps that create graduation gaps." [24]

- ✔ Specific to race, nearly one-fourth of Pacific Islander students and almost one-third of Native American students were chronically absent during the 2018–19 school year compared to 7.1% of Asian students and 13.4% of white students.
- ✔ Students with disabilities have some of the highest rates of chronic absence across the K–12 spectrum.[25] Data from the 2015–16 CRDC show that students with disabilities have an astounding 22.5% chronic absence rate; students with disabilities are 50% more likely to be chronically absent than students without disabilities.[26] This is especially concerning given that, as Attendance Works notes, "these students are also the ones who most need the supports and resources that schools provide."[27]
- ✔ Children living in poverty are also much more likely to be chronically absent than their peers. A 2018 analysis from the Economic Policy Institute found that 23.2% of students who were eligible for free lunch and 17.9% of students eligible for reduced-price lunch were chronically absent compared to 15.4% of other students.[28] Families living with low income often lack the resources to overcome missed learning time, and therefore it is especially detrimental to student growth and development.

Common Barriers to School Attendance

There are an array of reasons families struggle to get their students to school regularly and consistently. Johns Hopkins University researchers Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes have grouped most causes of chronic absenteeism into three general categories:

Students who cannot attend school due to poverty or related circumstances, including a lack of resources

Students who will not attend school due to fears of safety, exclusion, or negative relationships at school

Students who do not attend school because they are not aware of the importance of being in attendance[30]

> "When chronic absence affects large numbers of students, it often indicates the existence of **systemic challenges** that prevent students from getting to school."[31]

[25] Attendance Works, "ESSA Implementation: Keeping Students with Disabilities in School," Attendance Works, April 4, 2018. [26] US Department of Education, "Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools: A Hidden Educational Crisis." (January 2019). [27] Attendance Works, "ESSA Implementation." [28] Emma Garcia and Elaine Weiss, "Student Absenteeism Who Misses School" (Economic Policy Institute, September 25, 2018). [29] US Department of Education, "Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools."[30] Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, "Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know." [31] The Everyone Graduates Center and Attendance Works, "Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling."

Poverty and Access to Transportation, Healthcare, and a Stable Home

Children living in poverty are 25% more likely to be chronically absent than their peers from more affluent families.[32] This is because families living with low-income often lack the resources to consistently ensure that their children are in attendance.[33] Many economically marginalized families do not have reliable transportation to get their children to and from school, and often do not have access to affordable healthcare to manage acute or chronic medical needs that keep children at home. They might not have sufficient clothing, supplies, and other materials needed to participate fully at school.[34] For some families living in poverty, older siblings serve as childcare for younger siblings when parents go to work.[35] Many families living with low-income also have high rates of housing mobility and instability, causing them to frequently move in and out of different school zones or districts, disrupting regular attendance patterns.[36]

School Climate

A school climate includes the rituals, relationships, and supports that students and staff presume, anticipate, or expect when they enter the school environment. Many researchers include safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the overall external environment in their conception of school climate.[37] School climate is best understood by asking community members, "How are people treated at your school?" and "How does school make you feel?" Research has found that student perceptions of a negative school climate correspond to higher rates of chronic absence.[38] A 2021 report from Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center explains that "policies and practices that push students out of school settings, such as biased disciplinary policies, unequal access to quality instruction, or a lack of teachers who reflect cultures, ethnicities and languages of the student population" create barriers for students and families to fully engage with a school community.[39] When students or families do not feel safe, included, or welcome at school, they are less likely to attend regularly.

Family Understanding and Education

Some families or students do not recognize the impact of irregular school attendance—they do not equate missed school days with missed learning opportunities that harm children's long-term growth and development. This is often especially true in the early grades, with kindergarten being viewed as optional rather than covering foundational and requisite lessons and content. As Attendance Works succinctly explains, "Parents are often unaware of the corrosive effects of absenteeism and how quickly absences add up to academic trouble in the early grades."[41] Even schools that do seek to communicate these messages often do not have multilingual communication mechanisms to reach the full diversity of families in their school community.[42] Further, many students and families do not realize that missing a significant number of days of school is outside of the norm. In a survey of more than 5,700 secondary students who were chronically absent, 55% of respondents reported that they believed their rate of attendance was similar to their peers.[43] A simple lack of understanding and parent education translates to major hurdles for healthy student attendance patterns and the resulting learning and growth.

[32] Douglas D. Ready, "Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance." [33] Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For." [34] Douglas D. Ready, "Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance." [35] Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, "Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know." [36] Douglas D. Ready, "Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance." [37] Kathryn Van Eck et al., "How School Climate Relates to Chronic Absence," Journal of School Psychology 61 (2017): pp. 89-102" [38] Ibid. [39] The Everyone Graduates Center and Attendance Works, "Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling." [40] Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For." [41] Attendance Works, "Attendance in the Early Grades." [42] Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For." [43] Amber Humm Brundage, Jose M. Castillo, and George M. Batsche, "Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism."

Chapter Three

Impacts in the Elementary Grades

Key Findings

- **An estimated 10% of children in kindergarten and first grade are chronically absent.[44]**
- **Being chronically absent in the early primary grades has especially negative effects on a student's short- and long-term literacy development.[45]**
- **Students with no attendance risks scored higher than other students, including those with minimal attendance issues.[46]**
- **Students who enter kindergarten with strong school readiness skills "may lose any benefits of that preparedness if they are chronically absent in their first two years of school."[47]**
- **Chronic absence harms all students regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background, but disproportionately affects students from low-income families.[48]**

[44] Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For." [45] Attendance Works, "Key Research: Why Attendance Matters for Achievement and How Interventions Can Help," accessed July 7, 2021. [46] Applied Survey Research, "Attendance in Early Elementary Grades." [47] Ibid. [48] Ibid.

> "The early grades are a critical time for children to build the habits that allow them to thrive as young learners—attendance is paramount to this critical period of growth and development."
>
> **— Emily Bailard, CEO, EveryDay Labs**

If a student is absent for just two days per month, they end up missing nearly a month of the school year, or 10% of instructional days. This represents a significant amount of learning time. Nationwide, a surprising and substantial number of young children in early elementary school meet this threshold. An analysis by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) found that "over 11% of children in kindergarten and almost nine percent in first grade are chronically absent."[49] Researchers explained that these numbers are likely under-counting chronically absent students, as schools serving low-income and minority students often have incomplete attendance data.[50]

The early elementary grades are critical for a student's academic, social, and emotional development. These are the years when children learn how to collaborate with others, how to work in a group setting, how to productively question the world around them, and how to think critically about academic subject matter. And the substantial amount of time spent learning foundational academic concepts and skills sets the stage for students' overall learning path. Further, long-term attendance habits are formed very early in a student's academic career. Research has shown that students who are frequently absent in the early elementary years continue to have high rates of chronic absence throughout their educational experience.[51]

[49] Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For." [50] Ibid. [51] Seth Gershenson et al. "Are Student Absences Worth the Worry in U.S. Primary Schools?," Education Finance and Policy 12, no. 2 (2017): pp. 137-165.

Literacy Development

The development of early literacy skills has particularly been shown to have a significant correlation to long-term student outcomes. Strong early literacy skills are fundamental for students beyond early elementary grades, when students are no longer learning to read, but are reading to learn. Without sufficient literacy skills, students struggle academically, socially, and emotionally well into middle and high school. A study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that students who did not read on grade-level by third grade were four times more likely not to graduate from high school.[52] The researchers found that 88% of students who dropped out of high school struggled to read proficiently in third grade.[53] Therefore, sufficiently mastering the content taught during these early years is critical for long-term student success.[54]

Being chronically absent in the early primary grades has particularly negative effects on a student's short- and long-term literacy development.[55] A 2011 study out of California found that "only 17 percent of students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade were reading proficiently in third grade, compared to 64 percent of those with good attendance."[56] A 2010 study by sociologist Douglas Ready found that kindergarten students who were chronically absent gained "14 percent fewer literacy skills" compared to students who attended school regularly.[57] Put another way, frequently missing instructional time during the early years has deep and profound consequences for students.[58]

Math Achievement

Similar correlations are found between attendance and math understanding and achievement in the elementary grades. A 2011 report prepared for Attendance Works by Applied Survey Research found that when looking at third-grade math scores, "there is a consistent trend showing that as absences in kindergarten and first-grade increase, the likelihood of a student performing at grade level decreases."[59] Students who had no attendance risks scored an average of 76 points higher on third-grade math tests than students who were chronically absent in their first two years.[60] Further, students with no attendance risks scored higher than other students, including those with minimal attendance issues.[61] Missed learning time during the early elementary years has significant impacts on student mastery of foundational math concepts and skills.

[52] "Early Warning: Why Reading By the End of Third Grade Matters" (The Annie E. Casey Foundation), accessed July 14, 2021. [53] Ibid. [54] Ibid. [55] Attendance Works, "Key Research: Why Attendance Matters for Achievement." [56] Attendance Works, "Attendance in the Early Grades." [57] Ibid. [58] Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For." [59] Applied Survey Research, "Attendance in Early Elementary Grades." [60] Ibid. [61] Ibid.

Far-Reaching Negative Impacts

The negative effects of chronic absence on academic learning and achievement are seen across demographic backgrounds and income levels. In their 2008 report for the National Center for Children in Poverty, Chang and Romero note that "Research shows that children, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status or ethnicity, lose out when they are chronically absent."[62] All kindergarteners, when chronically absent, "show lower levels of achievement in math, reading and general knowledge during first grade."[63]

Further, the research has shown that even students who enter kindergarten with strong school readiness skills are susceptible to major impacts from chronic absence in the first two years of school. The 2011 Attendance Works Report "Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Associations with Student Characteristics, School Readiness, and Third Grade Outcomes," found that not only did chronic absence halt growth and development for these students, it actually degraded the readiness skills the students had at the start of kindergarten.[64] The report explains that the "trends among these students suggest that students who come into school with a strong set of skills may lose any benefits of that preparedness if they are chronically absent in their first two years of school."[65]

Despite harming all students regardless of racial or socioeconomic background, students from low-income families are much more likely to be chronically absent.[66] And the effects of chronic absence are disproportionately pronounced for these students since they often require "more time in the classroom to master reading and are less likely to have access to resources outside of school to help them catch up."[67] The negative consequences of time away from formal schooling, especially for students from families living with low income, have been long-acknowledged by practitioners and researchers focusing on the "summer slide," the missed instructional time during the summer break. Decades of studies have shown that this time away from school can stop forward academic momentum or even result in a regression in overall learning.[68] Similar trends are seen when young elementary students from families living with low income miss a significant number of school days; their academic development halts or even deteriorates.

[62] Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For." [63] Ibid. [64] Applied Survey Research, "Attendance in Early Elementary Grades." [65] Ibid. [66] Ibid. [67] Attendance Works, "Attendance in the Early Grades." [68] Cooper H., et al. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on test scores. Review of Educational Research, 66(3), 227–268.

Chapter Four

Impacts in the Secondary Grades

"If educators consider creating environments that support student attendance through different programs and interventions, they can move the needle on other short- and long-run student outcomes, especially among student groups who are in greatest need of our support."

— Dr. Monica Lee

Key Findings

- ✔ **Studies have found that middle school attendance is one of the best predictors for high school course performance and high school graduation—more so than test scores or demographic data.[69]**
- ✔ **A student with a consistently low level of attendance in elementary school whose attendance rates drop even further throughout middle school "has only a 25 percent chance of going on to graduate."[70]**
- ✔ **Several studies have found that even students who were moderately absent, missing one to two weeks per semester, were still at significant risk to drop out of high school.[71]**
- ✔ **Missing 10 English language arts (ELA) classes resulted in a reduction of 3–4% of a standard deviation for ELA standardized test scores, and 17–18% of a standard deviation in end of course grades. Missing math classes had a similar effect on math test scores and course grades.[72]**

[69] Elaine Allensworth et al., "5 Key Findings for Middle Grades" (University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, November 2014). [70] Michael J. Keiffer and William H. Marinell, "Navigating the Middle Grades" (The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, April 2012). [71] Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton, "What Matters for Staying On-Track" (Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at The University of Chicago, 2007). [72] Jing Liu, Monica Lee, and Seth Gershenson, "The Short- and Long-Run Impacts of Secondary School Absences," Journal of Public Economics 199 (2021): p. 104441.

Most elementary schools are structured with students assigned to one main teacher throughout the day with an occasional elective or class providing specialized instruction. The organizational design of the educational system intentionally provides a strong, primary relationship for each student with consistent expectations, accountability, and support.

The transitional grades—whether sixth or seventh grade to middle or junior high school or ninth grade to high school—dramatically alter the organizational structure, available supports, and the types of relationships with adults and peers. As students enter middle and high school, academic disciplines become more specialized, specific time allocations for instruction in each discipline are established, and certifications in the specific subject area—rather than a specific grade level—are required to teach students. These constraints structure the interactions each student has with educators and the content learned throughout the day. This organizational shift in the placement and pairing of students and teachers for smaller increments of time dramatically increases both the impact of absences for students at the secondary level as well as the likelihood that the full picture of a student's absences will not be noticed by their teachers.

A Red Flag in Middle School

Whether a student is chronically absent in the middle grades has major implications for how well they will master the course material and how they will fare in their high school coursework. Studies have found that middle school attendance is one of the best predictors for how students will perform in high school classes—more so than test scores or demographic data.[73] In the study *Looking Forward to High School and College: Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools*, researchers found that "Students who are chronically absent or receiving Fs in the middle grades are at very high risk of being off-track for graduation in ninth grade, and eventually dropping out of school."[74] These chronically absent students fail to master content that is important for subsequent course work in high school. An analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that "only 21 percent of eighth graders who missed more than three days of school per month scored at or above basic levels, compared to 45 percent of children who missed no days of school."[75]

Beyond learning content, the completion of middle and high school course requirements provides students with vital credentials for life beyond the K–12 educational system. A high school diploma is a requisite for many opportunities for employment, higher wages, job-related benefits, and post-secondary education. High rates of absences in middle school show some of the strongest correlates with those who drop out in high school. Researchers have found that attendance in middle school is an even better indicator for high school completion and post-secondary success than test scores.[76]

[73] Elaine Allensworth et al., "5 Key Findings for Middle Grades." [74] Ibid. [75] Douglas D. Ready, "Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance." [76] Elaine Allensworth et al., "5 Key Findings for Middle Grades."

A 2011 study from Baltimore City Schools that sought to identify early warning indicators for students at risk for dropping out of school found that "the probability of graduation drops from 70 percent for students with ten or fewer days absent in sixth grade to 28.6 percent for students who were chronically absent in sixth grade. In other words, the probability of graduation is nearly two and a half times better for a student with ten or fewer absences compared to a chronically absent student."[77] And of the four early warning indicators researchers identified (chronic absence, failing courses, overage for grade, and disciplinary issues), chronic absence in sixth grade was the most prevalent among non-graduates.[78] Thus the consequences of absences extend far beyond the days after the absences occur; they ripple and compound through a student's educational career.

This impact of chronic absence in middle school can cause dramatic disruptions on the trajectories of students who were previously on-track academically, with healthy attendance patterns, in late elementary school. A study looking to identify factors that affected high school graduation success in New York City found that a student whose attendance rates were average in late elementary school but dropped in the middle grades "has only a 57 percent chance of going on to graduate, compared to the 75 percent chance for a student who maintains an average level of attendance.[79] Further, a student with a consistently low level of attendance [in elementary school] whose attendance rates drop even further throughout middle school "has only a 25 percent chance of going on to graduate."[80] In summary, "Students who are chronically absent during the middle grade years are at very high risk for not earning a high school diploma."[81] And these at-risk students' attendance is likely to decline further once they reach high school, making negative outcomes even more likely.[82]

Researchers Jing Liu, Monica Lee, and Seth Gershenson were able to further prove the deleterious effects of absences during the secondary years on immediate and long-term student outcomes.[83] The researchers used a rich data set from a large urban district in California that included 10 years of data on student absences including the data and class period of each absence. Their analysis confirmed what previous researchers have shown–that there is an inverse relationship between absences and achievement outcomes. Their research concluded that missing english language arts (ELA) classes resulted in a reduction of 3-4% of a standard deviation for ELA standardized test scores, and 17–18% of a standard deviation in end of course grades. Missing math classes had a similar effect on math test scores and course grades.[84]

[77] Baltimore Education Research Consortium, "Destination Graduation: Sixth Grade" February 2011. [78] Ibid. [79] Michael J. Keiffer and William H. Marinell, "Navigating the Middle Grades." [80] Ibid. [81] Elaine Allensworth et al., "5 Key Findings for Middle Grades." [82] Ibid [83] Jing Liu, Monica Lee, and Seth Gershenson, "The Short- and Long-Run Impacts." [84] Ibid.

A Major Roadblock to High School Graduation

Freshman year is another critical juncture for students in their paths to graduation and beyond. Several studies have found that students who pass their ninth-grade courses are very likely to complete high school, with those who earn As and Bs almost certain to graduate.[85] However, with the transition to high school, just like the transition to middle school, students are once again susceptible to increasing rates of absenteeism with a shift in school, teachers, coursework, and routines, and additional layers of independence and responsibility. Research shows that during this important year, attendance rates, motivation, and course grades decline.[86] The consequences of missed learning time and experiences during this year can be catastrophic to student outcomes.

School attendance plays a large role in how students perform in their ninth-grade classes. The 2007 report from the University of Chicago, *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools*, found that attendance, along with efforts to study, were vital factors in determining whether students passed their freshman year courses.[87] The study found that students who were severely absent—missing a month or more of classes per semester—had less than a 10% chance of graduating high school on time. Liu, Lee, and Gershenson confirmed these findings in their study, especially for students who were already at risk. They found that "Having 10 absences reduces the probability of high school graduation by 0.06 (8%) and of enrolling in college by 0.05 (7%)."[88]

The data from the University of Chicago study showed that even students who have moderate numbers of absences are still at a significant risk for negative impacts on graduation and post-secondary opportunities. In the study, students who missed one to two weeks per semester were "associated with a substantially reduced probability of graduating … only 63 percent of students who missed about one week (five to nine days) graduated in four years, compared to 87 percent of those who missed less than one week."[89] Though these students were not severely absent, they still missed a substantial amount of the learning time, relationship-building with teachers and peers, time to interact with and benefit from the curriculum, accurate monitoring of their understanding, and supports to fill any gaps in learning, thus leaving them without a solid foundation for moving forward.

[85] Todd Rosenkranz et al., "Free to Fail or On-Track to College" (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014). [86] Ibid.
[87] Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton, "What Matters for Staying On-Track." [88] Jing Liu, Monica Lee, and Seth Gershenson, "The Short- and Long-Run Impacts." [89] Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton, "What Matters for Staying On-Track."

Chapter Five

The COVID Pandemic: A Generational Impact Event

"[Prior to the pandemic,] one out of six kids was chronically absent. Now, we might be closer to one out of three. We're probably underestimating the amount of learning loss, but certainly the pandemic is exacerbating inequities."

—Hedy Chang, Executive Director of Attendance Works

In March 2020, all of society was roiled by the COVID pandemic and its subsequent public health measures and broader economic consequences. The entire enterprise of education, most in-person social interaction, and a significant proportion of economic activity was paused. And as schools developed remote instruction options, a great deal of instructional time was lost. Many schools and districts lacked the ability to provide students with adequate instruction and other supports. There was—and still is—great uncertainty in whether digital interaction with students meant actual attendance and engagement.

During this time, most students missed some portion of learning time compared to a typical year. Many schools and districts decreased the overall time that they expected students to be learning online or in-person due to technological limitations for students at home and space constraints for in-person learners following social distancing requirements. Because of this, even students who were never technically "absent" missed large swaths of learning time. And research from Bellwether Education Partners has shown that during this time, the families of many students–nearly 8.7 million nationally–moved their children to a different school or to a homeschool option because they were unhappy with the offerings from their schools.[90]

For many schools and districts, there was a large increase in the number of students who missed some or much of what was offered. Many students did not have the tools to access their distance learning materials. Older students had to care for younger siblings with schools and daycares shut down. Families suffered incredibly challenging economic hardships with lost jobs and whole industries shuttered. Families faced housing insecurity, resulting in subsequent mobility. High school students took jobs to help supplement their family's lost income. Many students simply disconnected from schools and learning with the fracture of in-person, regular relationships with educators and peers.

Schools and districts struggled with how to even define attendance, let alone track it, over the course of the 2020–21 school year. But limited data has shown that a dramatic number of students were chronically absent. Data out of Connecticut showed stark increases in chronic absence rates among students from groups hardest hit by the pandemic: English language learners saw a jump in their chronic absence rate from 17.2% to 35.2% and low-income students' chronic absence rates rose from 20.3% to 34.9%.[91] Across the country, many school districts saw substantial enrollment drops, with students completely disengaging from the system. Nationally, K–12 enrollment declined by 3% during the 2020–21 school year compared to the previous year, losing more than 1.4 million students.[92] Many educators fear that this "will likely have academic, financial and staffing repercussions for years to come."[93]

[90] Alex Spurrier, Juliet Squire, and Andrew Rotherham, "The Overlooked" (Sudbury, MA: Bellwether Education Partners, 2021). [91] "National Analysis Shows Students Experiencing Chronic Absence" San Francisco, CA, 2021. Attendance Works, Everyone Graduates Center, & The Hamilton Project. [92] Eesha Pendharkar, "More than 1 Million Students Didn't Enroll during The Pandemic," Education Week (Education Week, July 22, 2021). [93] Ibid.

The Connecticut data also confirmed previous research showing that those students who had low attendance rates at the beginning of the year often continue to have poor attendance throughout the year. Specifically, a high number of absences during remote and hybrid learning during the first two months of school predicted chronic absence later in the school year. This was especially pronounced for students of color: the data showed that "predominantly remote Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students who were chronically absent in the fall were even more likely than white students (27% vs. 22%), to be chronically absent in the winter."[94] These trends held across in-person and hybrid learning models as well.[95]

Moving forward will be uniquely challenging for school districts. As Hedy Chang explained, reviewing the Connecticut data, "addressing chronic absence is more urgent than ever."[96] Districts and schools will need to recover the enrollment of students who were projected to be present based on 2019–20 enrollment. Additionally, educational leaders must come to understand and determine what district needs have emerged and whether new groups of students and families require additional supports because of the pandemic impacts.

Given all of these challenges, districts need concrete next steps to begin recovering and supporting students. Data quality will be a major determinant of whether districts can reconnect with families and whether subsequent actions to move learning forward are effective. Proactive outreach to and partnership with families is more critical than ever and needs to begin earlier than it would have in a pre-pandemic time period. As the school days return to a more normal cadence, ensuring healthy attendance will be critical for all students.

[94] Hedy N. Chang et al., "Chronic Absence Patterns and Prediction" (San Francisco, CA: Attendance Works & The Connecticut Department of Education, 2021).
[95] Ibid. [96] "National Analysis Shows Students Experiencing Chronic Absence."

Chapter Six

Overcoming the Crisis

"The solution is not one that the school alone can try to remediate. It will take broader approaches and cross-sector collaboration to ensure our families can thrive and our kids, in turn, can focus on learning."

— Charlene Russell-Tucker, Commissioner of Education for the Connecticut State Department of Education

Key Findings

- **Many students are missing a substantial amount of learning time. These trends disproportionately affect the most vulnerable students who benefit most significantly from the instruction, supports, services, and positive relationships at school.**
- **When chronically absent students' attendance improves, they can get back on track academically. Elementary and middle school years are an optimal time for educators to intervene.[97]**
- **Chronically absent middle school students who improve their attendance have better high school outcomes and improved chances of graduating.**
- **Researchers and practitioners are now equipped to flag which students need support, and to develop effective tools and strategies to intervene and get them on a path toward success.**
- **Strategies and interventions that improve attendance also affect the overall educational experience for students and families at every stage of growth and development.**

[97] Attendance Works, "Attendance in the Early Grades."

The data on chronic absence is startling. Far too many of the nation's students are missing a substantial amount of learning time, with detrimental effects on long-term outcomes far beyond their time in school. There is hope, however. Research has also shown that when chronically absent students' attendance improves, they can get back on track academically. Chronically absent middle school students who improve their attendance have substantially better high school outcomes and improved chances for graduating.[98] In fact, improving attendance in middle school "would likely have a large pay-off for high school and college graduation, even more so than efforts aimed at improving test scores."[99] These positive impacts can be seen in high school outcomes with even subtle improvements to student attendance in middle school.[100] In summary, as Faith Connolly and Linda Olson explained in their 2012 study for the Baltimore Education Research Consortium, "it's never too late to improve attendance."[101]

The increased emphasis on attendance along with the availability of data to identify students who are off track have equipped researchers and practitioners to develop effective tools and strategies to productively intervene to get students in need of support on a path toward long-term success. As a recent FutureEd report written in cooperation with Attendance Works described, "Ultimately, the best strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism are steps that improve the educational experience of all students."[102]

Evidence-Based Solutions

Addressing chronic absenteeism requires an understanding of and respect for the importance of attendance and the foundational role it plays in student success and well-being. In order to improve attendance patterns and increase the amount of instructional time when students are present and engaged, it is vital that educators utilize a multitiered, multifaceted approach for identifying students in need of support, communicating with students and their families, and connecting them to relevant resources.

Because many students who are chronically absent face numerous barriers to attending school and engaging in learning, it can be challenging to untangle the root causes and identify the appropriate practices to support them. Taking a systemic approach to ensure that districts are tracking the amount of missed learning time among all students, engaging families with actionable, supportive messaging, and providing resources to families to help them overcome their specific barriers to attendance and engagement can improve attendance for students and promote positive short-term and long-term outcomes for student development and growth.

[98] Melissa Roderick et al., "Preventable Failure" (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014). [99] Elaine Allensworth et al., "5 Key Findings for Middle Grades." [100] Ibid. [101] Faith Connolly and Linda S. Olson, "Early Elementary Performance and Attendance" (Baltimore, MD: Baltimore Education Research Consortium, 2012). [102] Phyllis Jordan, "Attendance Playbook: Smart Solutions for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the Covid Era" (Washington, DC: FutureEd, 2020).

Using Data to Bring Chronic Absence Out of the Shadows

Measuring Missed Learning Time

All accumulated missed learning time—regardless of cause or allowance—-is detrimental for students. In order to understand which students are at risk, it is critical that districts deeply consider how an absence is defined. When absences are defined as any and all missed learning time, rather than only focusing on unexcused absences, educators have a fuller picture of where to channel resources and supports.

Real-Time Indicator of Student Well-Being

Most metrics school districts use to measure student achievement, success, or need (e.g., course grades, GPA, achievement tests, or high school graduation) are available after a student completes a course or school year. Attendance, on the other hand, is a real-time measure of how engaged a student is in school and is strongly correlated to outcomes. Therefore, educational researchers have noted that "Information on absences … might be the most practical indicator for flagging students for early interventions."[103] By tracking student attendance, districts and schools can provide support in time to prevent course failure, learning loss, or disengagement.

Building a Shared Understanding and Commitment

In order to create a collective prioritization on attendance, it is important to broaden the understanding of absences as missed learning and instructional time rather than a compliance issue. Across a district and throughout a school, reinforcing the connection between being present and learning outcomes creates a culture of healthy attendance.

[103] Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton, "What Matters for Staying On-Track."

Promoting Family-School Partnerships, Not Compliance

> "Not just grades and test scores, but social-emotional [well-being], attendance, and students' attitudes about school. When you look at all the benchmarks that schools are trying to achieve, school personnel realize that to hit the mark, they need to form strong partnerships with families."
>
> **— Dr. Karen Mapp**

Using "Nudges" to Educate and Engage Families

Research shows that many parents or caregivers of chronically absent students often underestimate the number of missed learning days, and are unaware of the implications of that missed learning time on learning and growth.[104] Because of this, regularly sharing personalized information about student absences with families, including total absences for a given timeframe, is an important piece of reducing chronic absenteeism. Studies out of the behavioral sciences have shown that "nudges"–unobtrusive, positive interventions designed to promote a desired behavior–can be very effective in promoting long-term behavioral change. Researchers Todd Rogers and Avi Feller applied this approach to attendance behaviors and found that mailing attendance nudge letters home that illustrated how the student's attendance compared to their classmates, resulted in a 10% reduction in absences for chronically absent students across the K–12 spectrum.[105]

Easy and Ongoing

Habits and routines established at the beginning of a school year for learning, attendance, and engagement matter. Absenteeism early in the year predicts poor attendance behaviors for the rest of the year. Research has shown that an astonishing 50% of students who miss just two to four days of school in September go on to miss nearly 30 days of learning throughout the school year.[106] Conversely, forming positive attendance habits early in the school year sets a student and family up for healthy attendance patterns throughout the year. Because of this, efforts to improve attendance should begin early in the school year with a coordinated effort to ensure that families get their students to school rather than waiting until attendance patterns have become problematic. By establishing attendance as a priority with families early in the year and continuing to remind and engage with them if absences begin to spike, schools and districts can keep families connected to the school community and students engaged in learning.

[104] Attendance Works, "Attendance in the Early Grades." [105] Todd Rogers and Avi Feller, "Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents' Misbeliefs," Nature Human Behaviour 2, no. 5 (2018): pp. 335-342. [106] Linda S. Olson, "Why September Matters."

Proactively Ensuring that You Can Reach All Families

For outreach and communication to be successful, schools and districts must be able to reach families. Asking families for up-to-date contact information on a regular and ongoing basis and ensuring that accurate information in a school's student information system (SIS) is essential. Following up with families using alternate forms of contact when any communication is blocked or returned ensures that educators can always reach their students and families about attendance or other issues.

Utilizing Multiple Channels of Communication

Multichannel communication is equitable communication since not all families can consistently access information in the same way. Utilizing print-based mailing, text messaging, and phone calls broadens the reach and impact of district and school communication. Further, research suggests that print communication is more effective for getting families to take action in the medium to long term. Mailed letters go on fridges and are discussed with students and spouses—they are social artifacts that stay in the home over time. Research has shown that mail is a reliable way to reach than 90% of families. By leveraging technology, districts can use text messages to add an additional layer of engagement and support to address more immediate needs of students and families.

Providing Channels to Access Resources

Regular communication with families about attendance opens up channels to help districts understand the barriers that families are facing and connect them with resources that will allow them to get their students to school. For instance, schools and districts can help direct families to clothing drives, food distribution sites, mental health services, opportunities for medical care, technology services, and other resources. Connecting students and families with these additional supports will help improve attendance rates and active learning when students are present at school. When the root causes of absenteeism are identified, and systems are put in place to support students and families in overcoming those barriers, meaningful and sustained improvement is possible.

A Shift from Compliance to Supportive Engagement

Historically, many districts around the country have had a reactive approach to attendance for those students with substantial absences. A common practice is to provide limited communication to alert families to a threshold count of unexcused absences being exceeded, which triggers the formal labeling of the student as having problematic attendance. These notifications come after the fact and their focus tends to be on superficial compliance with state requirements. Some states and districts have gone farther and added a punitive component to their attendance policies for students who qualify as truant. These policies and protocols often put consequences in place for parents whose children exceeded a set amount of unexcused absences. The guiding principle of these policies is to generate fear of consequences in parents to motivate attendance.

Recent research has shown that these kinds of approaches to chronic absence do not work to improve attendance.[107] Because chronic absence is often the result of a complex web of overlapping variables and circumstances, providing supportive outreach to families to partner in overcoming barriers is a much more productive way to build sustained healthy attendance patterns. As Attendance Works clearly states, "effective approaches are those that treat student absenteeism as a problem to be solved, not a behavior to be punished."[108]

To accomplish this, research based in the behavioral sciences has shown that an outreach plan based on a "positive problem-solving approach is more effective."[109] In a study conducted in a large urban public school district, researchers Jessica Lasky-Fink, Carly Robinson, Hedy Chang, and Todd Rogers found that rewriting standard truancy notifications so that the letters included easy-to-understand data about student absences, information about the potential effect of this missed learning time, and actionable steps that parents could take to help get their children to school could improve the efficacy of the letters by an estimated 40%.[110] Empowering parents and caregivers with information and support rather than threatening them with consequences can have substantial benefits on student attendance and their long-term learning trajectory.

[107] Attendance Works, "The Urgent Need to Avoid Punitive Responses to Poor Attendance." September 24, 2020. [108] Attendance Works, "Reducing Chronic Absence Requires Problem Solving and Support, Not Blame and Punishment," May 30, 2018. [109] Attendance Works, "The Urgent Need to Avoid Punitive Responses." [110] Jessica Lasky-Fink et al., "Using Behavioral Insights to Improve Truancy Notifications," SSRN Electronic Journal, 2019.

A Systemic Approach to Attendance

At its most profound and fundamental level, chronic absence creates gaps in opportunity, equity, and achievement. Even the best curriculum, instructional materials, and professional development efforts will fail if students are not present to learn.

With a brighter spotlight on the issue and efforts to collect key data, it is clear that large numbers of students struggle academically, socially, and emotionally because of this missed learning time. Going forward, superintendents, school boards, and administrators must consider a systemic approach to addressing chronic absence. They must identify students and student populations in need of support, create open communication channels with families to provide information and resources, and intervene as students approach problematic attendance.

A focus on attendance is a focus on learning. It is an intention to support student health and well-being. It is a commitment to reach and engage families and partner with them to support students. It is an effort to ensure that students can read by third grade, have positive relationships and connections in middle school, graduate from high school on time, and have opportunities for success, choice, contribution, and joy in their post-secondary lives.

Additional Resources:

- The Attendance Playbook
- The Covid Relief Playbook
- Attendance Works

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