Abstract

In order to succeed in school, children must be present every day. Yet, each year, an estimated 10% of U.S. students, or 5-7.5 million students miss nearly a month of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012), with serious detrimental effects. There is initial evidence that chronic absenteeism persists in U.S. schools and that it exists even among our youngest students. There are a range of negative individual-level and peer ramifications of this behavior. Additional research in chronic absenteeism is needed to support these policy conversations, and at the most fundamental level, to better document and monitor those students in particular who might be at a greater risk of educational failure from missing excessive amounts of school.
Introduction

Part I: Attendance Matters; Absenteeism & Chronic Absenteeism

Attendance Matters
In order to succeed in school, children must be present every day. Yet, each year, an estimated 10% of U.S. students, or 7.5 million students, miss nearly a month of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012), with serious detrimental effects. This lost instructional time leads to high school dropout and achievement gaps, undermines the benefits of early education, and interrupts efforts for reading proficiency by the end of third grade (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014). Thus, one of the main threats to academic success is poor attendance. Poor attendance is negatively associated with school success, including academic achievement, promotion, high school completion, and future employment opportunities (Dreyfoos, 1990; Finn, 1993; Gottfried, 2009; Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003; Steward, Steward, Blair, Jo, & Hill, 2008). Students with higher rates of absenteeism have, on average, lower scores on national standardized tests (e.g., Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014; Gottfried, 2009). Moreover, the educational ramifications of missing school are exacerbated for urban students (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001).

Taken together, this growing body of research confirms the association between school attendance and subsequent student achievement and graduation outcomes and underscores the importance of intervening as soon as absences begin to add up. This is true whether the student is in elementary, middle, or high school. The good news is that attendance is actionable: poor attendance can be turned around when states, districts, and schools enact policies and practices that encourage schools and communities to partner with families to monitor attendance patterns and intervene as necessary. Yet, despite being a problem that can be solved, states and school districts overlook this problem simply because they do not review the appropriate data.

Absenteeism & Chronic Absenteeism
Students are absent from school for various reasons. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) have outlined three categories into which reasons for absences generally fall:

- Students cannot attend school due to illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, the need to work, or involvement with the juvenile justice system.
- Students will not attend school to avoid bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment and embarrassment.
- Students do not attend school because they, or their parents, do not see the value in being there, they have something else they would rather do, or there is nothing to stop them from skipping school.

Chronic absenteeism is serious because it is an extreme form of missing school. Chronic absenteeism is a measure of how many students miss a certain percentage of days per school year, including absences for any reason (e.g., illness, suspension, the need to care for a family member), regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused. Including all types of absences is important because the evidence indicates that it is the number (or more specifically, the percent) of days a student misses that matters, not the reason the student is absent. In other words, as long as a student is not present at school, the detrimental impacts of missing school occur. Chronic
Abseneesm is often defined by researchers as missing 10 percent or more of school days (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012), which is the definition that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) uses, but there is no common definition among states. Descriptive research indicates that between 10% and 15% of U.S. students are considered chronically absent under this definition. A 2016 US DOE report estimates that 13% of U.S. students, or 6.5 million students, are chronically absent (US DOE, 2016) based on a definition of 15 or more school days absent during the school year. In large urban school districts, the rate of chronic absenteeism is even higher (Nauer, Mader, Robinson, & Jacobs, 2014).

Poor attendance by the end of September predicts chronic absence for the entire school year. A study by the Baltimore Education Research Consortium (Olsen, 2014) found that half the students who missed up to four days in September were ultimately chronically absent for the year, missing an average of 25 days. Nine out of 10 students who missed at least 5 days in September were chronically absent, with an average of 70 absences.

To demonstrate its insidiousness, Ginsburg and colleagues (2014) liken chronic absenteeism to bacteria in a hospital and describe it as “an unseen force that wreaks havoc on efforts to improve life outcomes”. They further state that if chronic absenteeism is not ameliorated, it will explain why the school reform efforts of the last 25 years have not been as effective as intended and will continue to negatively impact school improvement efforts.

**Definitions**

**Chronic absenteeism:** A measure of how many students miss a certain percentage of days, including excused and unexcused absences and suspensions. Chronic absenteeism is often defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days, which is the definition that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools uses, but there is no common definition among states. A recent US DOE report used 15 days as their definition of chronic absenteeism. In CMS, using a percentage, rather than a number, of days enrolled is important because many students have high rates of mobility and only stay in a school for part of the year. Using a number of days to define chronic absenteeism would not capture these students and would underestimate the rate of chronic absenteeism.

**Truancy:** A measure of how many students miss school without an excuse. Thus, chronic absenteeism is not the same as truancy. Truancy is typically defined as the number or percentage of unexcused absences. Truancy numbers typically underestimate total absenteeism.

**Average Daily Attendance:** The percentage of a school’s student body that attends on a typical day.

**Data**

For schools and communities, chronic absenteeism can be difficult to track (Chang, 2014). Schools often know how many students show up for school every day and how many are truant, but they do not always add up all excused and unexcused absences to determine chronic absenteeism. Organizations such as Attendance Works, founded in 2010, are working to educate state and national stakeholders on the best ways to collect data and strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism. Furthermore, under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Congress required that states and districts now include data about chronic absenteeism (among various other things) in their annual report cards. Access to this important data is a critical step forward in ensuring that school communities are able to have meaningful conversations about equity in their communities and may help states and districts identify schools and students for supports to improve student outcomes.
The Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absence is sometimes a consequence of students dealing with physical and mental health issues or challenging family circumstances. Students with asthma or other chronic conditions, anxiety or other mental health problems, substance abuse, and those who are exposed to domestic violence, have a parent with a mental illness, have high rates of mobility, lack of parental involvement, or live in poverty are more likely to be chronically absent (Balfanz & Byrnes 2012; Bernstein et al. 1999; Egger, Costello, and Angold 2003; Gorodzinsky, Hainsworth, and Weisman 2011; Meng, Babey, and Wolstein 2012; Zhang et al. 2010). For instance, a study of more than 23,000 missed days in several central Texas school districts found that 48% of absences were caused by acute illness and 4 percent by chronic illness. Common health conditions resulting in missed school include asthma, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), influenza, diabetes, obesity, seizure disorders, mental health and anxiety, and dental and vision problems (Balfanz & Byrne, 2012).

School instability is also an important factor related to chronic absenteeism. Researchers found that for students in Pinellas County, FL from kindergarten through eighth grade, physical health, mental health, and substance abuse played the largest roles in how often a student was absent. Having a physical or mental health disorder or having a parent with severe mental illness was associated with higher absences. Yet, the best predictor of chronic absenteeism across grades was whether a student had changed schools in their district in the past school year. (Derien, 2016).

Student Attendance Matters for Academic Performance

Chronic absenteeism is associated with negative achievement outcomes for students. The education literature consistently demonstrates that missing school is associated with academic problems (e.g., Gottfried, 2014, 2015). Greater numbers of school absences are linked to a range of negative schooling outcomes (Dryfoos, 1990; Finn, 1993; Gottfried, 2009; Lehr et al., 2004a; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Rumberger, 1995; Silverman, 2012; Steward, Steward, Blair, Jo, & Hill, 2008; Stouthamer-Loeber & Loeber, 1988; Tobin, 2014).

For example, a recent analysis of national testing data demonstrates that students who miss more school than their peers have lower scores and proficiency rates on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). This is true for students in both 4th and 8th grade and from every racial/ethnic group; this pattern emerged in every state and city examined.

In fact, the students with more absences may have skill levels one to two years below their peers. As part of the assessment, students are asked to report the number of days they were absent from school in the prior month. Those reporting missing three or more days of school in the previous month had lower average NAEP scores in reading and math than students with fewer absences. In fourth grade, students with three or more absences scored an average 12 points lower on the reading assessment than those with no absences, which equates to more than a full grade level difference on the NAEP achievement scale. In eighth grade, absentee students scored an average 18 points lower on the math assessment.

Behaviorally, chronically absent students feel a greater sense of isolation from their peers, teachers, and school and may be more likely to have negative social interactions or be disengaged upon their return to school (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Finn, 1989; Gottfried, 2014b; Johnson, 2005; Newmann, 1981).

The problems of chronic absenteeism begin in early education. Chronic absenteeism in kindergarten negatively affects the development of social-emotional skills, such as grit and perseverance, necessary for success in school (Ginsburg, 2014). The effects are particularly marked among students who miss four or more weeks of school. Furthermore, chronic absenteeism in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade, based on nationally representative data, and this negative effect is doubled for students from low-income families.
Finally, absenteeism in the early grades (K-2) has been linked to a child’s ability to master reading (Attendance Works, 2014), which in turn can influence whether a child will be retained in third grade, since many states now link third grade promotion to reading performance. This means that chronic absenteeism could undermine the efforts to improve literacy.

In middle and high school, students who are chronically absent receive lower grades and have more trouble graduating (Chang & Romero 2008; Gottfried 2010). Indeed, a Baltimore study found a strong connection between attendance in sixth grade and the percentage of students graduating within a year of their expected high school graduation (Belfanz & Byrne, 2012). Of the students in the CMS 2015-16 graduation cohort of students who did not graduate, the percentage of students identified as chronically absent doubled from 5th to 6th grade (10.7% to 20.6%, respectively).

**Figure 1: Percent days attended over time for 2015-16 Cohort Graduates and Non-graduates**

Not only do chronically absent students have more difficulty graduating on time, they are also more likely to drop out of high school completely. As early as elementary school, absenteeism becomes an indicator that a student will drop out of high school and it is possible to identify high school dropouts by their previous absence patterns in elementary and middle school and early high school. (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989). For example, the results of longitudinal studies indicate that early elementary school absences predict high school drop-out rates several years later (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Hess, Lyons, Corsino, & Wells, 1989; Rumberger, 1995; Belfanz & Byrne, 2012).

Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) focused on identifying risk factors that were highly predictive of dropping out of high school and found several indicators that predicted whether sixth graders at the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) would eventually graduate from high school. Using longitudinal data analysis to follow 13,000 students from 1996 to 2004, these researchers identified four risk factors that collectively flagged 60% of sixth graders who did not graduate from high school within one year of on-time graduation. One of these was attendance below 80% for the year. In fact, a minimum of 75% of the students who were flagged for attendance problems (and each of the other three predictors) did not graduate. In a separate analysis, Nield, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) found that similar risk factors were predictive of whether eighth and ninth graders at SDP would eventually graduate. Eighth graders who were flagged on at least one of three risk factors, including attendance below 80% for the year, had at least a 50% chance of dropping out. Hess and colleagues (Hess, Lyons, Corsino, & Wells, 1989) found that 90% of high school dropouts in Chicago Public Schools could be identified by their absence patterns in the second, third, and fourth grades. A study in Utah found that students who are chronically
absent at any point between 8th and 12th grade are 7.4 times more likely to drop out (University of Utah, 2012). In CMS, of students who did not graduate, 36.2% were identified as chronically absent in 8th grade. Even more, for students who dropped out, 88.9% were identified as chronically absent in 3rd grade and 93.4% were identified as chronically absent in 4th grade.

**Figure 2: Chronically absent over time for 2015-16 Cohort Graduates and Non-graduates**

In addition to lower test scores and risk of not graduating on time or dropping out, absenteeism influences the chances of completing college, making chronic absenteeism a problem that continues beyond high school. Fortunately, there is a silver lining. Despite these discouraging findings, when students reduce absences, they are able to make academic gains. For example, when Chicago and New York City focused on attendance and created intervention programs, more students remained in school and graduation rates rose. The literature suggests that the students who began school with the fewest skills but attended school regularly realized vital gains in achievement (Attendance Works, 2014). Indeed, Ready (2010) found that although socioeconomically disadvantaged children achieve at lower absolute levels compared to their peers, those with good attendance rates gained more literacy skills than their peers during kindergarten and first grade.

Research identifies effective strategies for improving attendance. Early warning systems and programs that offer preventative supports early in the school year, such as New York City’s Success Mentors, are evidence-based methods to reduce chronic absenteeism. These types of effective strategies use data to incite action, engage students and their families to improve attendance, and use additional resources (e.g., health, social, transportation) to support students struggling with chronic absenteeism.

Many school districts have implemented Early Warning Indicator (EWI) systems in an effort to ensure that students graduate from high school. EWI systems use indicators that are predictive of dropping out of high school to identify students who have fallen off the graduation path. These indicators are generally related to the following three domains: (1) academic achievement; (2) attendance; and (3) behavior (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007).
In an effort to monitor students along the graduation path, The Department of Research, Evaluation, and Analytics (REA) at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) analyzed student-level, longitudinal data to develop an Early Warning Indicators (EWI) system to be used to monitor the progress of CMS students beginning in middle school. The primary purpose of the analysis was to identify risk factors to be used to flag CMS students who are at the greatest risk of not graduating from high school on time (i.e., in four years). This project was informed by prior research in large urban school districts, including CMS. The finalized EWI system consists of: (1) an electronic database located in the CMS data warehouse that updates daily, and (2) customized school and student-level reports that provide stakeholders with current, actionable information that can be used to support students along the graduation path. One of the predictors of on-time graduation used in the EWI system is attendance (calculated as the number of days attended divided by the number of days enrolled). In addition, CMS generates other daily reports to monitor attendance and chronic absenteeism.

Part II: Differences by Sub-group

State and national data shows that students from low-income families are more likely to be chronically absent than their peers. Indeed, children living in poverty are 25% more likely to miss three or more days of school per month (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2006). This is because these students often face other challenges associated with getting to school, such as a lack of access to health care, exposure to community violence, unreliable transportation, and unstable housing. Paradoxically, low-income students benefit the most from being in school every day and lose out more when they are absent, perhaps because their families lack resources to make up for what was missed (Ready, 2010). However, while low-income students are more likely to be chronically absent, the negative effects of being chronically absent exist for all socio-economic groups. Children of color also have disproportionately higher rates of chronic absenteeism. Twenty percent or more of American Indian or Alaska Native (26%), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (25%), black /African American (22%), multiracial (21%), and Latino (20%) high school students are chronically absent. (US DOE, 2016). Research indicates that chronic absence occurs much earlier for some groups, including African American students, than others.

Chronic absenteeism affects students with disabilities and English Language Learners at disproportionately higher rates. High school students with disabilities served by IDEA are 1.3 times as likely to be chronically absent as high school students without disabilities. Twenty percent of all English learner high school students are chronically absent. (US DOE, 2016).

Improving attendance is an essential strategy for reducing achievement gaps. Thus, it is essential to intervene early to ensure an equal opportunity to learn.

Finally, it is not only the students who are chronically absent; teachers have attendance problems also. The US DOE (2016) reported that Black students represent 15% of all students, but 21% of chronically absent students who attend schools where more than 50% of teachers were absent for more than 10 days.

Part III: Neighborhoods and Peers

Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods are linked to educational and developmental outcomes; students living in poorer neighborhoods generally have more trouble in school (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993), particularly for students in urban areas (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Harding et al., 2010; Leventhal & Brooks Gunn, 2004; Lloyd et al., 2010; Sampson et al., 2002; Sanbonmatsu, Kling, Duncan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Research suggests that early youth environments not only influence current development but also continue to influence future outcomes throughout childhood and adolescence (Bouchard, 1997; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Duncan, Boisjoly, & Harris, 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), particularly in terms of educational achievement (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1993).
In fact, students who move frequently, often a proxy for family economic insecurity, have higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Derien, 2016).

A student’s neighborhood has an effect on school attendance. A few points about neighborhood characteristics are worth noting. In urban neighborhoods, as poverty levels increase, achievement and schooling success tend to decrease (Burkam, Lee, & Dwyer, 2009). Specifically, neighborhood crime and perceptions of danger have been linked to a lack of homeownership (e.g., Glaeser & Sacerdote, 1999; Rephann, 1999, 2009). Homeowners, compared to renters, are less mobile (Dietz & Haurin, 2003) and have more longstanding neighbor social networks (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1999; Rohe & Stewart, 1996; Rohe, VanZandt, & McCarthy, 2002). Thus, homeowners have greater residential stability and larger neighbor social networks and are more likely to diminish crime, improve security, and maintain property (Dietz & Haurin, 2003; Rohe & Stewart, 1996), which are linked to improved child outcomes (Dietz & Haurin, 2003; Harkness & Newman, 2002; Rohe et al., 2002).

Research suggests that due to lower levels of crime in neighborhoods with high homeownership, children may be more likely to engage in out-of-home activities, such as attending school, due to less worry of danger, which arises more often in high-crime areas when children must interact with their neighborhoods when they leave their own home (Molnar, Gortmaker, Bull, & Buka, 2004; Sharkey, 2010). Hence, increased homeownership may, in turn, lead to improved academic outcomes (Sharkey, 2010).

Gottfried (2014) examined how the neighborhood context directly relates to student absenteeism using a longitudinal data set of elementary and middle school student cohorts over eight years from the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). School district administrative data was merged with U.S. Census data, enabling Gottfried to use students’ neighbors’ characteristics based on the student’s home address to predict school absences. This research examined the direct link between neighbor attributes and missing school. Assessing the impact of neighbors on absenteeism is a new dimension of what predicts student absences, which had not been explored previously. Gottfried’s study had four main findings. The results indicate significant relationships between school absences and multiple categories of neighbor attributes. First, Gottfried found that there is a significant relationship between neighbor poverty and income levels and school absences. Higher neighbor poverty levels predict higher student absences, thereby supporting the notion that students may begin to question the value of attending school as a greater proportion of neighbors are at or below the poverty threshold. Second, the results indicate that as average neighbor age increases, student absences decrease, and student absences increase when average neighbor household size increases. This supports the idea that with an increase in household size or decrease in adult age, there may be fewer adult resources or networks in that immediate community devoted to monitor children to ensure that they are attending school or to coordinate neighborhood transportation efforts to ensure students make it to school. Third, the results demonstrated that an inverse relationship between school absences and the percent of a student’s neighbors who own their residences. As expected, homeownership is linked to greater residential stability, less crime, and larger neighbor social networks (Dietz & Haurin, 2003; Harkness & Newman, 2002; Rohe et al., 2002), thereby improving child outcomes. Fourth, the results indicate that as a student’s residential block is composed of a greater percent of Black neighbors, student absences increase. This finding is supported by prior research that urban, Black neighborhoods are associated with a decline in social capital, social services, and community resources (Bayer & McMillian, 2005; Massey & Denton, 1993).

The Juvenile Welfare Board in Pinellas County, Florida examined how neighborhood characteristics, such as crime, housing availability, and home prices, affected chronic absenteeism for students attending Pittsburgh public schools. The researchers’ model showed that higher rates of violent crime, low median home sale prices, and coming from a renter household or neighborhood with more tax-delinquent properties were predictors of chronic absence (Derien, 2016).
Chronic absenteeism does not occur for students in a vacuum; chronic absenteeism not only has a damaging effect on the individuals missing excessive school days but also has the potential to negatively affect the outcomes of chronically absent students’ classmates. Gottfried (2011; 2014a) has conducted studies to assess the classroom contextual effects of absences on student achievement for urban elementary school youth. His findings suggest that the results indicate a negative peer effect of absences. Specifically, the results show that students suffer academically on both reading and math tests from having chronically absent classmates. The effect seems to be driven by the rate of unexcused absences rather than the rates of total absences.

Chronically absent students receive fewer hours of instruction and are therefore more likely to require assistance when they return to school (Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Finn, 1993). The literature also demonstrates that chronically absent students feel a greater sense of isolation from their classmates, teachers, and schools and may have negative interactions and social disengagement when they return to school (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Finn, 1989; Gottfried, 2014b; Johnson, 2005; Newmann, 1981). Taken together, these individual-level academic and behavioral consequences have the potential to influence the outcomes of chronically absent students’ classmates.

Gottfried posits that chronically absent students’ classmates may be negatively impacted as the pace of instruction slows to assist chronically absent students. While this likely occurs with minimal absenteeism, at higher rates of absenteeism the pace might impede regular instruction and inhibit the academic progress of all students even further. As absences increase, school disengagement, behavioral problems, and resulting social complications may exacerbate problems in school (Finn, 1989; Gottfried, 2014a, Reid, 1984). Similar to academic disruptions or slowing of pace, behavioral disruptions may slow the learning process for non-absent peers, since teachers must spend time managing the classroom rather than on instruction. While this may occur for any degree of absenteeism, chronically absent students may invoke even greater academic and behavioral disruptions. Lazear (2001) suggests a negative spillover effect: that teacher time, resources, and instruction can be thought of as a public good, something that is “consumed” by all students in the classroom. Therefore, when students are chronically absent, a teacher is hampered from serving all students because chronically absent students’ academic or behavioral needs consume the resources. In short, chronically absent students produce two risk effects: (1) an individual effect by decreasing their own learning and increasing social disengagement as a result of missing extreme amounts of school, and (2) a negative spillover effect that diminishes the teacher’s resources by regularly slowing instruction, thereby reducing the educational outcomes for others in the class when the chronically absent student is, in fact, present. Gottfried (2015) found slight differences that arise that place non-chronically absent students at a further risk when faced with a greater rate of classmate chronic absenteeism. Further, classmates facing additional challenges (e.g., receipt of free lunch, behavioral problems) may be placed at even greater risk for academic decline when classmates are chronically absent. In sum, Gottfried’s (2015) findings indicate that all students, not solely those who are chronically absent themselves, are negatively affected by chronic absenteeism.
**Part III: Recommendations**

The extent of chronic absenteeism that various studies and reports document from kindergarten through high school, along with its direct connection to student achievement, demands that school districts and state education agencies take action to minimize the loss of valuable instructional time. As a nation, we are more likely to meet goals and raise the bar if more students attend school regularly.

Because low-income students benefit the most from being in school, one of the most effective strategies for providing pathways out of poverty is to do what it takes to get these students in school every day. This alone, even without improvements in the American education system, will increase achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates (Belfanz & Byrne, 2012).

Education policymakers at the local, state and federal level can take several key steps to support this work, including (1-11 taken from Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014):

1. **Standard definition.** Promote a standard definition in order to calculate chronic absenteeism across districts and states. The definition should clarify that chronic absence includes excused and unexcused absences (truancy), as well as days missed to suspensions or children switching schools. At a minimum, a standard definition should exist for each state so they can compare rates across all of their schools and districts. [CMS already uses this definition.]

   Attendance Works recommends using the proportion of students missing 10 percent of the school year as the definition of chronic absence. This definition allows for state-by-state comparison and can be applied to districts regardless of the length of school year and allows for earlier intervention.

2. **Attendance Tracking:** Invest in tracking individual attendance and absences with longitudinal student databases. Most school district data systems include this information, but this Data Quality Campaign brief shows six states do not include it in statewide systems. Support accurate and consistent entry of attendance data. [CMS already tracks attendance and it is accessible for school and district staff in the Navigator Portal. CMS has made efforts to improve consistency of data entry procedures across district and reduce data integrity issues caused when teachers or school staff incorrectly report class attendance. CMS has also formed a data monitoring committee to regularly monitor attendance and chronic absenteeism.]

3. **Chronic Absence Data:** Ensure that reports providing chronic absence data for every district, school, grade and student subgroup are produced and made publicly available through school and district report cards. School districts can also send the data — broken down by grade, school and other indicators — to principals and teachers regularly so that they can address barriers to attendance or reach out to students with high rates of absenteeism. [CMS creates a Chronic Absenteeism report that is accessible in the Navigator Portal.]

   **Parent Engagement:** Provide parents with actionable, real-time data on their children’s attendance, as well as an alert if their children are accruing so many absences — excused and unexcused — that they are academically at risk. Ensure opportunities exist for school staff or community partners to meet with parents to review the data on absenteeism for their children and identify how to work together to improve attendance.

4. **Public awareness:** Convey why absenteeism matters for doing well in school, graduating from high school and eventually succeeding in the workplace. Encourage schools to promote good attendance for all students with incentives, contests and positive messaging. [Mecklenburg County took part in the United Way Attendance Awareness public campaign, which recognizes September as the month of Attendance Awareness: https://uwcentralcarolinas.org/attendance-works.]

5. **Strategies for intervening:** Help schools and community partners to intervene with chronically absent students through community-wide approaches to health and transportation challenges, as well as personalized outreach. These interventions can use data from the first month of school and from the past year, along with other factors,
to identify which students are at risk of chronic absence. The students and their families should be a priority for linking to positive supports that motivate good attendance. For additional insights into effective strategies, see The Power of Positive Connections: Reducing Chronic Absence Through PEOPLE: Priority Early Outreach for Positive Linkages and Engagement. [As a first step, CMS is using an EWI system and the Research, Evaluation, and Analytics department has created an Action Guide that includes evidence-based practices to improve on-time graduation rates, including interventions for attendance issues.]

7. Early Warning for Third-Grade Retention: Address poor attendance as a red flag that students need extra support to read well by the end of third grade. This is especially important in states with retention policies that hold back struggling third grade readers. As early as kindergarten, schools should look at absenteeism, along with reading assessments, to identify which students need support.

Despite the momentum around “truant” students of an older age, it is also necessary to prevent chronic absenteeism in the early grades, as it affects achievement and development (Gottfried, 2014b). Thus, reducing school-missing behaviors early is essential as is decision-making and policy regarding absenteeism in the early grades. [The CMS Elementary Risk Indicator (ERI) system includes flags for elementary students who are not proficient in reading in third grade].

8. Early Warning for High School Dropout: Adopt early warning indicator systems that track attendance and other warning signs that students may drop out of high school. As early as middle school, school districts should track absenteeism, as well as course failure and disciplinary action, to determine which students are off track for graduation. [CMS is using an EWI system to improve on-time graduation rates.]

9. Accountability: Build chronic absence into accountability systems so that district and school improvement plans include strategies for nurturing a culture of attendance, partnering with students and families to identify and address causes of absences, and intervening effectively with chronically absent students.

10. Resource Allocation: Use chronic absence rates to determine allocation of community resources, such as where to place health services, early education and afterschool programs and volunteer tutors. These resources have proven successful in reducing absenteeism.

11. Research: Invest in qualitative and quantitative research to identify effective solutions for different racial and ethnic populations and age groups, as well as in different settings such as inner-city neighborhoods and rural communities. While the research shows that absenteeism affects outcomes for students of all backgrounds, it is important to recognize that solutions must be grounded in an understanding of the particular barriers to attendance faced by students and families of different linguistic, cultural, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as the assets different types of families and communities bring to the table.

12. Focus on Urban Districts: Chronic absenteeism is particularly salient in large urban districts. Students in these districts may not have the necessary supports and resources to attend school on a regular basis; thus, policy must address the specific factors that are inhibiting urban students from attending school in the first place. Local practitioners should identify the root causes of chronic absenteeism to establish the specific supports and services are required.

13. Focus on Neighborhood Characteristics: Chronic absenteeism is linked to specific neighborhood characteristics, such as social and economic opportunity, violent crime rates, and home prices (Derien, 2016). Combining information from the individual and neighborhood levels will also allow service providers to know more about where a student lives and help them better reach at-risk students.

School administrators can promote educational practices to target negative neighborhoods effects as they relate to absences, such as offering school–community support partnerships, promoting stronger parent–teacher alliances. Such alliances can help school-based staff better understand the context in which student absenteeism is
occurring. As chronic absenteeism is often a symptom of other immediate concerns for the family or student, strong two-way communication can allow schools to more appropriately and perhaps more quickly target social service and other resources to the root causes. Schools may focus on parent education programs to promote the importance of school attendance, may focus on school–community social services and amenities that may be lacking in the neighborhood, or schools may promote policies that strengthen parent and neighbor ties with the school, such as a parent–teacher association or school–community groups, as a way to improve social networks in regards to ensuring students show up to school (Gottfried, 2014; Jensen, 2010).

14. **Focus on Peers**: Because spillover effects exist that affect the classmates of chronically absent students, Gottfried (2015) recommends developing policy that not only addresses how to identify and reduce chronic absenteeism for the individual student but also provides supports and services for classmates who may face other risks of educational decline.

A framework to ensure that students are in school and ready to learn. Source: Attendance Works, Mapping the Attendance Gap, 2015.
References


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