

# Why Chronic Absenteeism Matters and What Can Be Done About It

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**Alabama Absenteeism and Truancy Summit: What Works in Alabama**

**Everyone Graduates Center**

**School of Education**

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# Lets Begin by Learning by Doing

- **Pick a partner, ideally someone you know.**
- **Flip a coin to determine who is the chronically absent student and who is the mentor/coach/advocate.**

# Chronically Absent Students

- **You are hesitant to reveal the real reasons you miss school.**
- **Pick one of the following reasons and make the mentor/coach/advocate work to find it out.**
  - a) Taking care of siblings.**
  - b) Being teased or bullied at school.**
  - c) Do not see the point of attending everyday, think you can miss a day here and there and be fine.**
  - d) Wild Card-make up your own reason.**

# Mentor/Coach/Advocate

- **Use your positive relationship with the student to make him or her feel welcome and wanted in school and missed when not there.**
- **Leverage the relationship to unearth root causes of the student's absenteeism.**
- **Once you have found the cause(s), create with the student a workable and realistic plan to increase their attendance.**

# What This Presentation Provides

- **What Chronic Absenteeism is**, why it matters, and its scale and scope.
- **What evidence and experience shows** can be done to reduce chronic absenteeism with access to tools that can help.
- **How school districts and communities can engage** in a comprehensive approach to combat chronic absenteeism and through it increase student success.

# Unpacking Attendance Terms

## Average Daily Attendance

- **How many students show up to school every day?** The % of enrolled students who attend school each day. It is used in some states for allocating funding.

## Truancy

- **Who is missing school without permission?** Typically refers only to unexcused absences and is defined by each state under No Child Left Behind. It signals the potential need for legal intervention under state compulsory education laws.

## Chronic Absence

- **Who is missing so much school they are academically at risk?** Broadly means missing too much school for any reason – excused, unexcused, etc. Researchers commonly define it as missing 10% of school.



# Evidence is Clear-Chronic Absenteeism Undercuts School Improvement Efforts for the Students Who Need Them the Most

- **Decreases impact of Pre-K and K on school readiness.**
- **Decreases third grade reading performance.**
- **Decreases eighth grade math performance.**
- **Decreases high school graduation rates.**
- **Decreases college and career readiness.**

# Chronic Early Absence Connected to 3<sup>rd</sup>-Grade Reading

Chronic absence in kindergarten

Lower levels of literacy in first grade

Lower achievement as far out as fifth grade

A Rhode Island Data Hub analysis found that compared to kindergartners who attend regularly, those chronically absent:

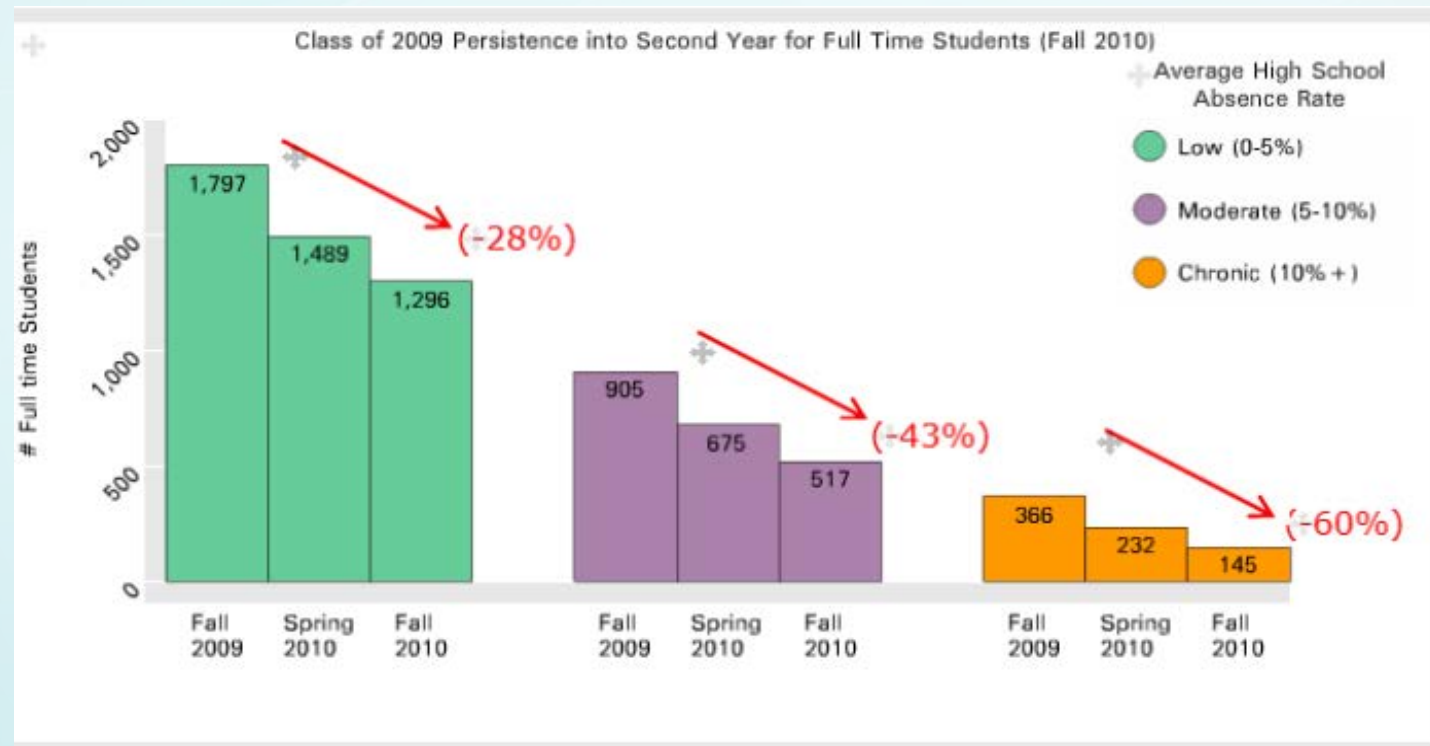
- Scored 20% lower in reading and math in later grades and gap grows
- 2x as likely to be retained in grade.
- 2x likely to be suspended by the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Likely to continue being chronically absent

<http://ridatahub.org/datastories/chronic-absenteeism-in-kindergarten/1/>



# Chronic Absence in High School Predicts Lower College Participation

*In Rhode Island, only 11% of chronically absent high school students persisted into a 2<sup>nd</sup> year of college vs. 51% of those with low absences.*



*Rhode Island Data Hub: May 2014*

# Chronic Absenteeism Is Also an Entry Point for the School-to-Prison Pipeline



**Good News is Chronic Absenteeism is Reducible  
and its Impacts Reversible**

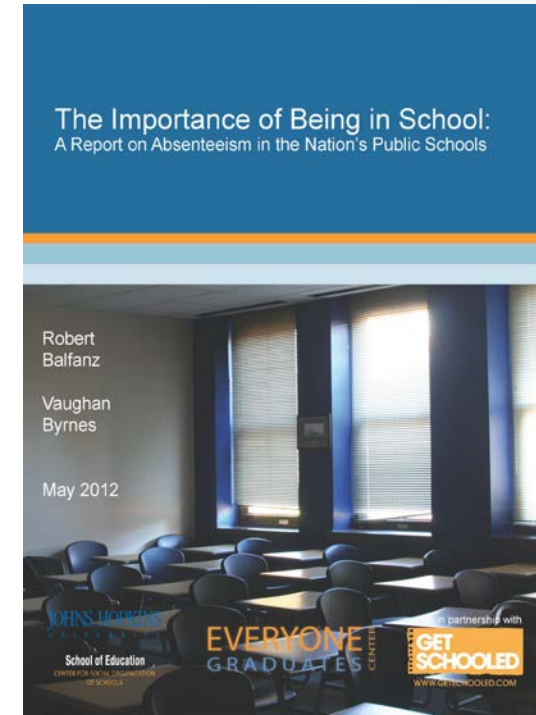
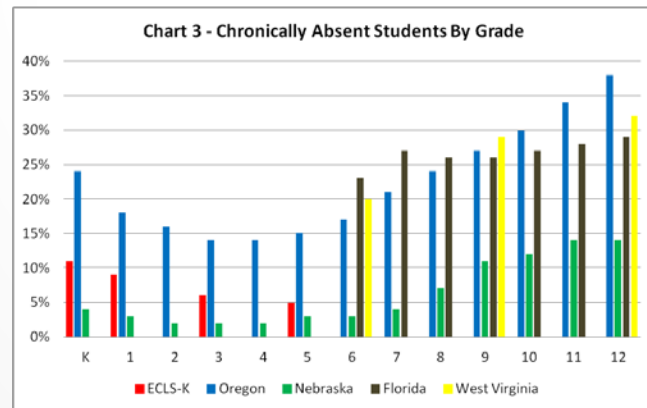
**Modest Investments Can Bring Large Returns**

**This Makes Reducing Chronic Absenteeism  
a Powerful and Untapped Lever of  
School Improvement and Student Advancement**

# The First Step is to Understand the Scale and Scope of the Chronic Absenteeism Challenge in Your Community

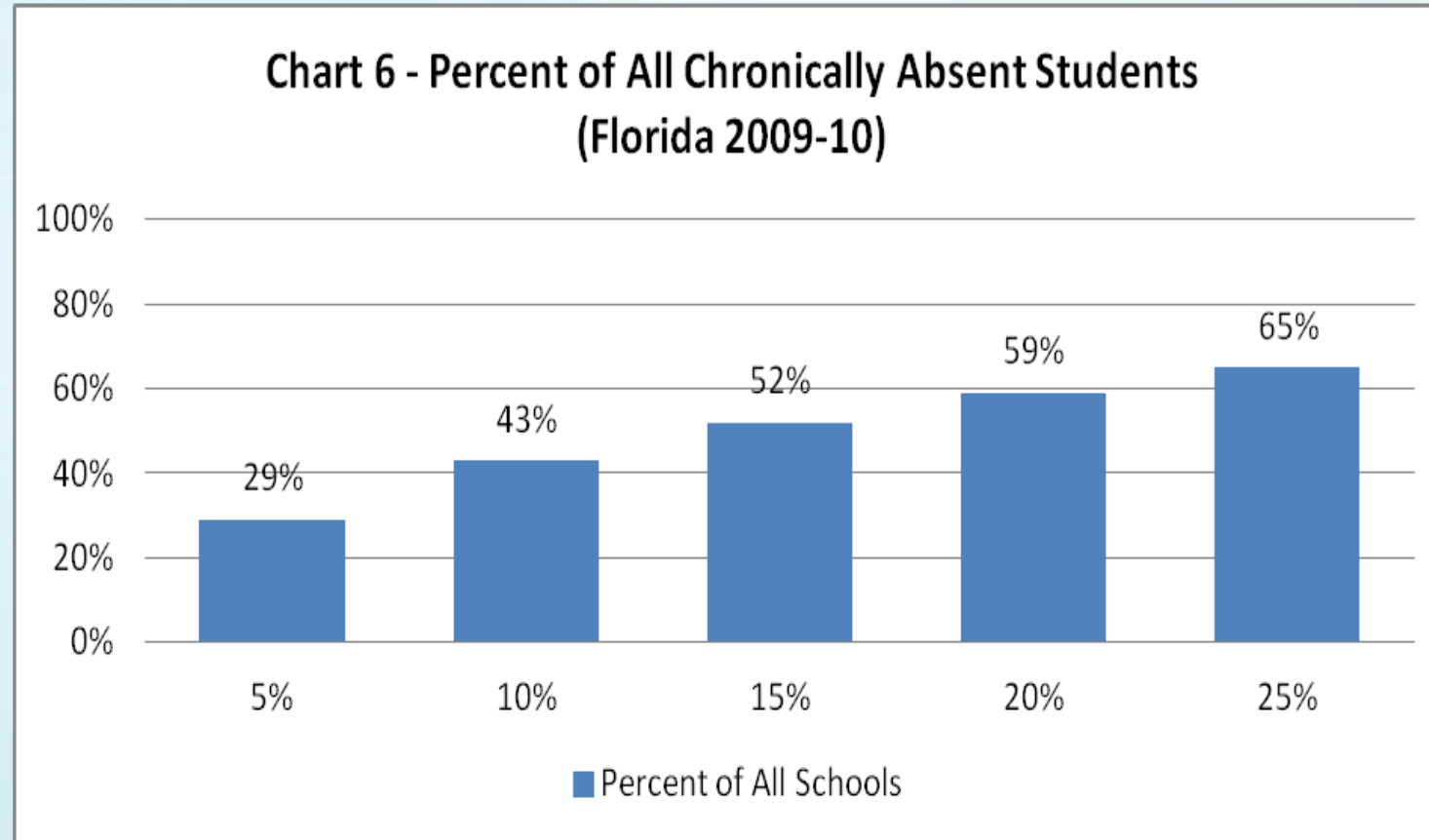
# How Big of a Problem is Chronic Absence?

- Affects approximately 1 out of 10, or 7.5 million students nationwide.
- It is higher than 1 out of 3 students in some communities.
- It affects our youngest students as well as those in middle and high school.



<http://new.every1graduates.org/the-importance-of-being-in-school/>

# High Rates of Chronic Absenteeism are Concentrated in Subsets of Schools





# In the Most Impacted Middle and High Schools Hundreds of Students Are Chronically Absent

Maryland 2010-2011

Number of Schools with Large Numbers of Students Chronically Absent

Chronically Absent Students	50 or more	100 or more	500 or more	Greatest Number
Elementary	58	3	NA	137
Middle School		26	NA	152

Chronically Absent Students	100 or more	250 or more	500 or more	Greatest Number
High School	161	61	12	807

# Significant Numbers of Students Can Miss Enormous Amounts of Schooling Over Time

## Florida 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Cohort Cumulative Days Absent Over Seven Years of Middle and High School by Quintile

	Mean Number of Days Absent	Mean Days Absent Per Year
Top 20%	13	3
Upper Middle 20%	35	6
Middle 20%	58	9
Lower Middle 20%	90	15
Bottom 20%	171	28

# What Contributes to Chronic Absence?

## Myths

Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused

OK to miss a day here or there

Attendance only matters in later grades

PreK and K is seen as day care not learning

## Barriers

Chronic disease (asthma) or lack of health/dental care

Caring for siblings or other family members

Unmet basic needs: transp., housing, food clothes, etc.

Trauma

No safe path to school

High suspension rates

## Aversion

Academic struggles

Being teased or bullied

Poor school climate, disproportionate school discipline, or unsafe school

Parents had negative school experience

## Disengagement

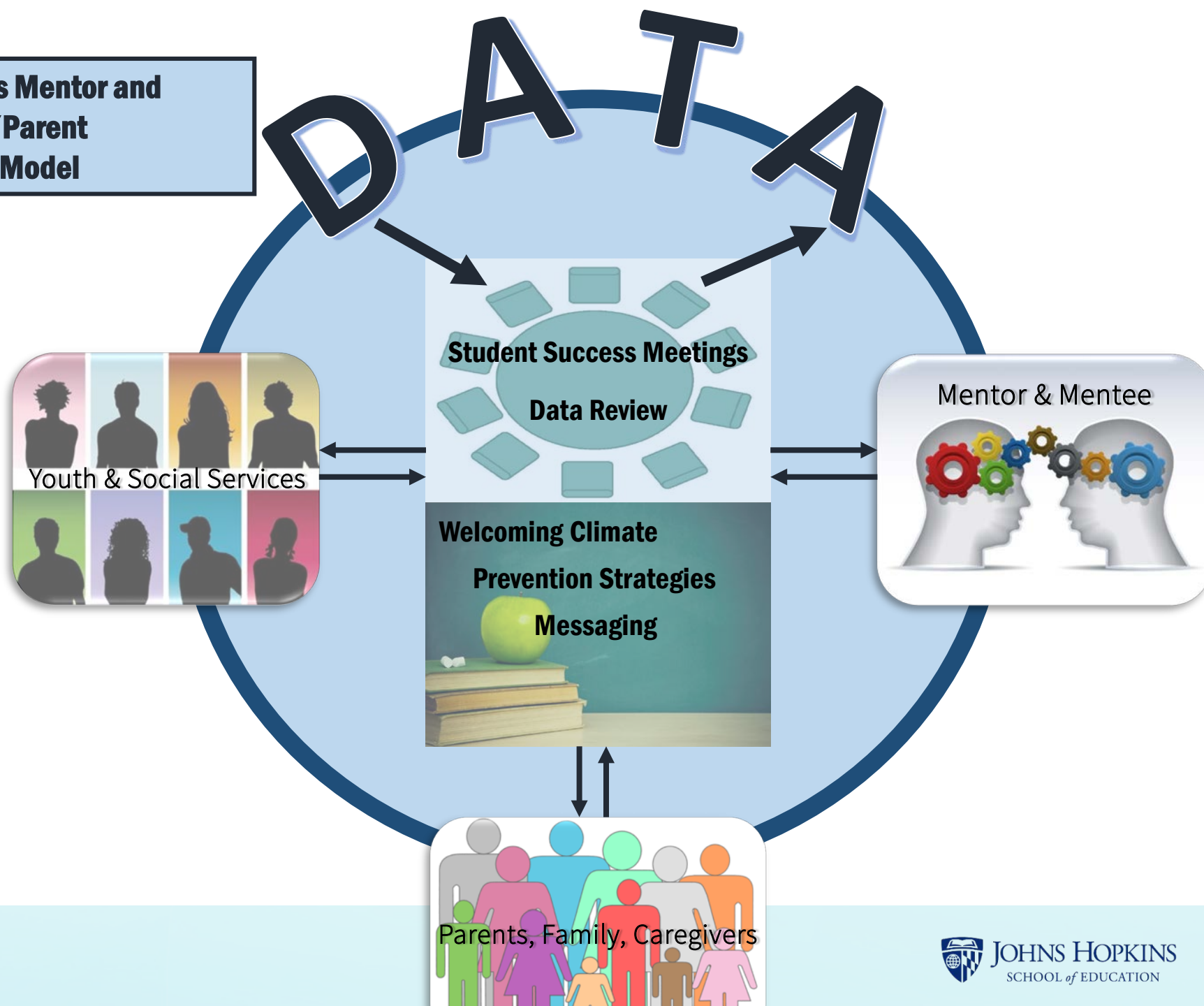
Lack of engaging and relevant instruction

No meaningful relationships with adults in school

More exciting to be with peers out of school vs. in school

# The Next Step is to Design an Evidence-Based Response that Matches the Scale and Intensity of the Chronic Absenteeism Challenge in Your Community and How it Varies Across Schools

**School Success Mentor and  
Student/Parent  
Support Model**



# Reducing Chronic Absenteeism with:

## A School Success and Student/Parent Support Model

An Evidence-Based Approach that Provides a Universal Framework  
That Can be Flexibly Adapted to Meet Different Scales,  
Circumstances, and Intensities of Student Need

A Combination Data Analytics with the New Applications of Existing  
School and Community Resources (people, time, and money)  
to Drive Impact



# Why School Success Mentors/Coaches/Advocates Are Crucial

Once a student is chronically absent or heading toward it, you either need to change a behavior or solve a problem.

In most cases, this will necessitate having a positive, supportive, and on-going relationship with the students and families.

In schools with many chronically absent students this is difficult, if not impossible for teachers and counselors to do on their own.

# Creating a Positive, Engaging School Climate that Explicitly Supports Attendance

## Attendance is higher when schools:

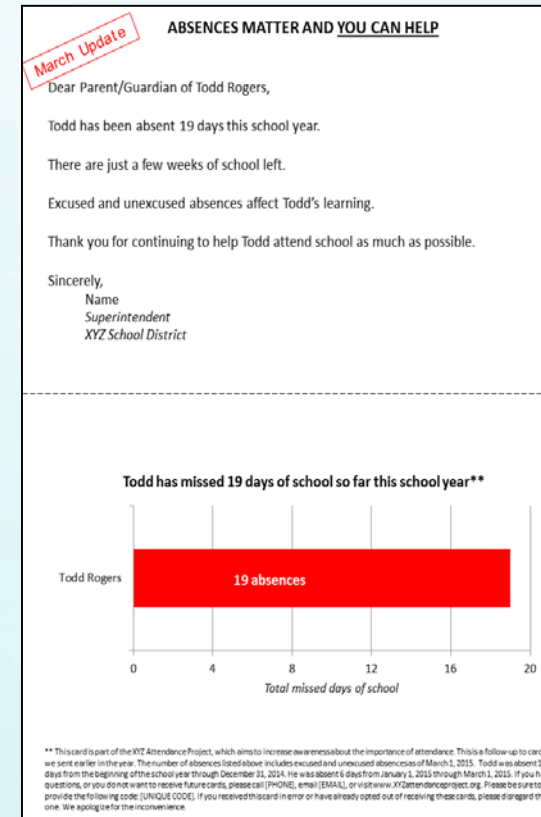
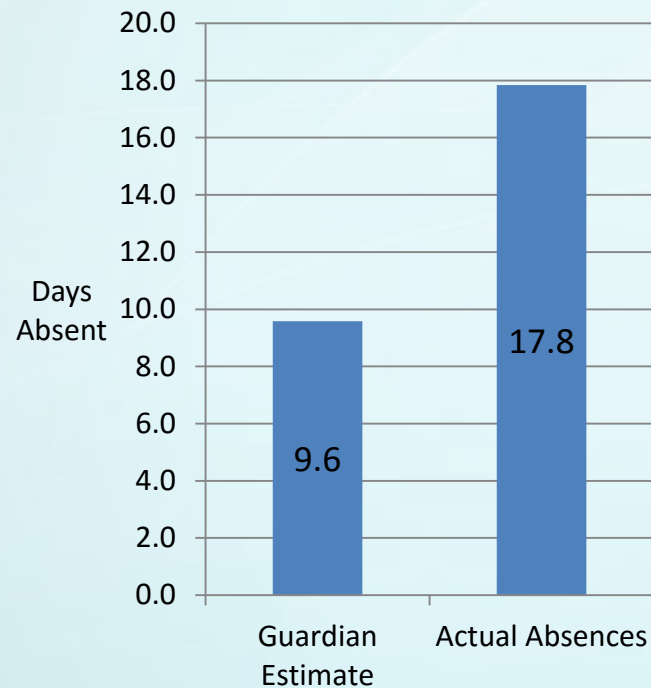
- **Promote a sense of belonging and connection** including noticing when students show up.
- **Make learning engaging** and center school discipline around restorative practice not punishment.
- **Help our most economically challenged families** and students meet their basic needs so all have the opportunity to get to school.
- **Build awareness among students and parents** about how absences can easily add up to too much time lost in the classroom.
- **Provide parents with on-going information** about their child's absences in supportive and positive manner.
- **Stop engaging in school practices** that discourage attendance.



<http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/schools/teaching-attendance-toolkit/>

# Keeping Parents and Students Informed Reduces Absences

***Parents of High Absence Students Underestimate (by a factor of 2) How Many Days Their Students Have Been Absent***



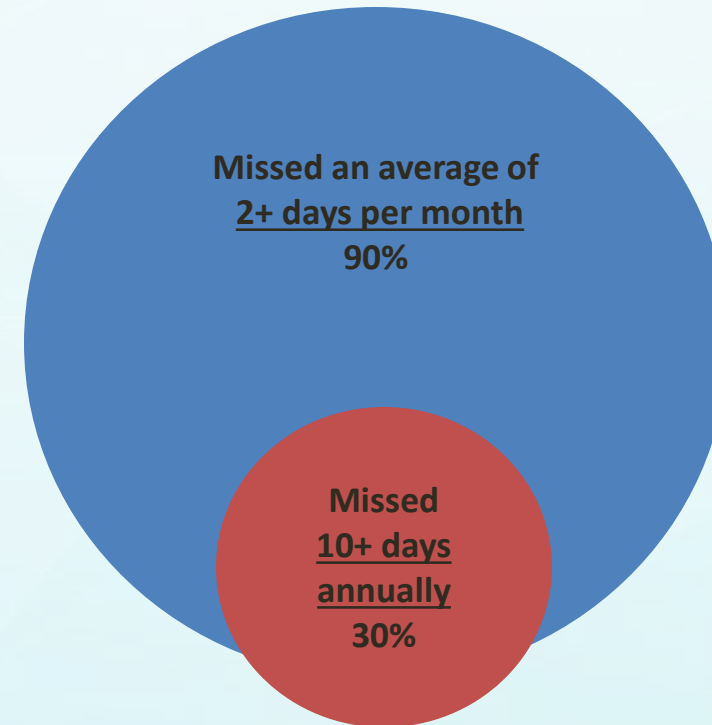
***Randomized experiment (N=34,000+, 4 conditions) reduced absences @ ~\$6 per incremental day led by Professor Todd Rogers (Harvard Kennedy School); [www.studentsocialsupport.org](http://www.studentsocialsupport.org)***

# Parents Underestimate the Number of Year-End Absences

We asked each parent about his or her child's absences in two ways:

1. Was your child absent an average of 2 or more days a month?
2. Was your child absent more than 10 days over the year?

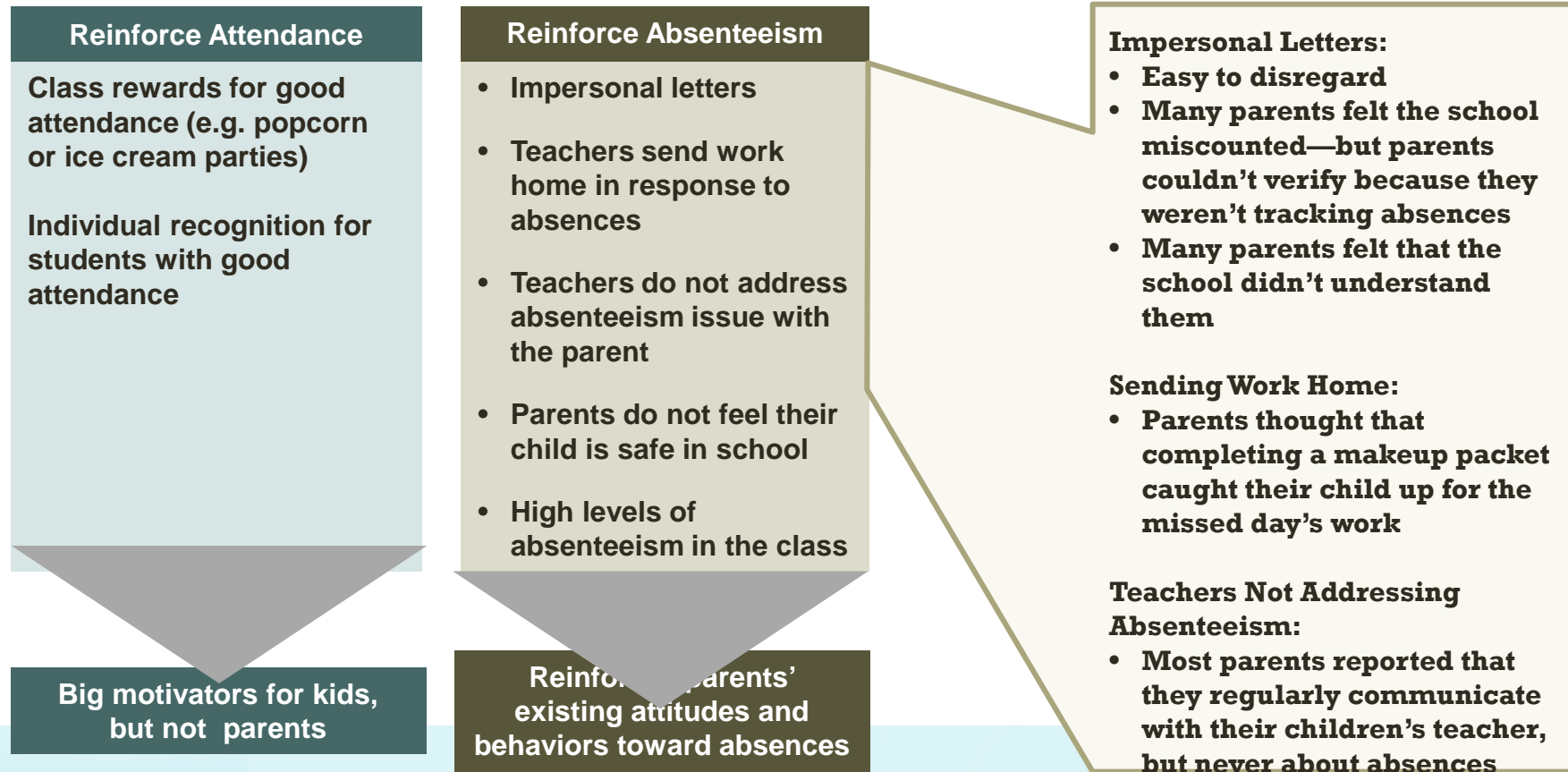
60% of parents said their child was absent an average of 2+ days a month, but not 10+ days a year



**The math: If a child is absent an average of 2+ days a month, then she is absent far more than 10+ days a year**

# Schools Inadvertently Reinforce Some Absence-Causing Beliefs

## School Behaviors that...





# Reducing Absenteeism Requires Multi-Sector Responses

## Promising examples include:

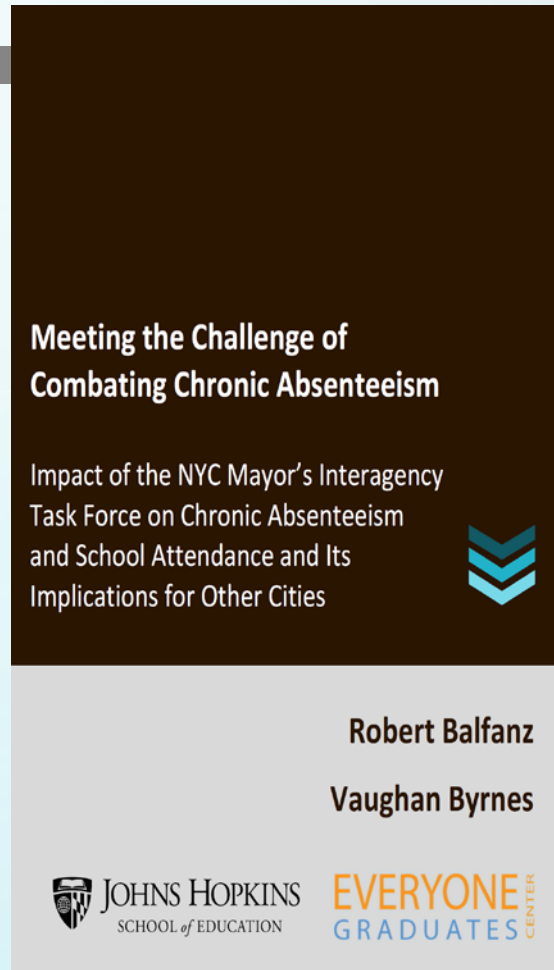
- Every Student, Every Day “**Dear Colleague**” letter from four Cabinet Secretaries sent to Chief State School Officers.
- **Schools and health providers work together** to address chronic illness and un-met health needs that keep kids from attending schools through data-sharing, co-location, school-based health clinics, mobile health and dentistry vans etc. (Models throughout the USA).
- **Courts adopt a prevention/problem-solving** vs. punitive approach to reducing truancy (i.e. San Antonio, TX and Alameda County, CA).
- Homeless shelters (NYC) and housing authorities (Sarasota, FL and San Francisco, CA) **share attendance data and work together** to offer supports for getting to school.



# Clear Evidence that This Model Works

- Students with prior histories of chronic absenteeism with a Success Mentor **gained nearly two additional weeks of school (9 days)**, which is educationally significant.
- In the top 25% of schools, students with Success Mentors **gained one additional month of school**.
- High school students with Success Mentors (including those overage for their grade) were **52% more likely to remain in school** the following year.
- Mentees reported they liked having a mentor and the mentor helped **improve their attendance, schoolwork, motivation, and confidence**.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/new-york-city/success-mentors/>





**EVERY STUDENT,  
EVERY DAY**

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**How Can States, Districts, and Communities  
Take a Comprehensive Approach?**

# Step 1: Measure and Analyze

- School District/State should **measure and publish** school-level chronic absenteeism rates.
- Schools with high rates should **track on weekly basis**.
- **Determine how many students are not attending** because of barriers, avoidance, and disengagement. Use student surveys, focus groups, and attendance census days (i.e. on a given day establish reason for every absence).

# Tailor Response to Scale and Intensity of the Challenge

- **At the District Level:** Is there a need for a community-wide response or targeted efforts in a sub-set of schools?
- **At the School Level:** How many students are chronically absent?
- **If it's 30 or less,** a student support team can lead the effort.
- **If it's closer to 50 or more,** teachers will need to play a critical role.
- **If it's over 100,** community partners will likely be needed to provide additional person power.
- **In all cases,** investments in mission building, professional development, coaching and networking are critical to success.

# Step 2: Monitor

- **Facilitate the spread of early warning systems** at state and school district level.
- Schools with high levels of chronic absenteeism should **use early warning systems and monitor weekly.**
- **Identify students with history** of chronic absenteeism for close monitoring and rapid action at start of year.
- Also **pay attention to students with no history** of chronic absenteeism who suddenly start to trend toward it.



# Step 3: Act

- **Create welcoming environment in schools** and send message to students that they are wanted in school everyday and that everyday matters.
- **Implement a multi-tiered response** that combines prevention, with additional supports targeted at groups of students, and case-managed assistance for highest needs students.
- In highly impacted schools **principals should lead weekly student success meetings** to understand attendance trends and analyze success of interventions at school and individual levels.
- **Establish success mentors/advocates/coaches** who can form supportive relationships with chronically absent students to help solve their problems or change their behavior and monitor their attendance on a weekly basis.
- **Make implementing a comprehensive plan** combating absenteeism a part of required activities in school improvement efforts.
- **Establish inter-agency efforts** at state and local levels led by governors and mayors.



# For More Information See

- **Everyone Graduates Center-** [www.every1graduates.org](http://www.every1graduates.org)
- **Attendance Works-** [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)
- **US Department of Education Every Student, Every Day-** [www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/index.html)