Why Chronic Absenteeism Matters and What Can Be Done About It

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Alabama Absenteeism and Truancy Summit: What Works in Alabama
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School of Education
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Let's 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 3rd-Grade Reading

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 7th 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 2nd 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

- Chronic Absenteeism
- Suspension
- Low Achievement
- Course Failure
- Grade Retention
- Juvenile Justice Involvement
- Dropout
- Prison
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

Chart 6 - Percent of All Chronically Absent Students (Florida 2009-10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronically Absent Students</th>
<th>50 or more</th>
<th>100 or more</th>
<th>500 or more</th>
<th>Greatest Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronically Absent Students</th>
<th>100 or more</th>
<th>250 or more</th>
<th>500 or more</th>
<th>Greatest Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>807</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Significant Numbers of Students Can Miss Enormous Amounts of Schooling Over Time**

*Florida 6th Grade Cohort*
Cumulative Days Absent Over Seven Years of Middle and High School by Quintile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quintile</th>
<th>Mean Number of Days Absent</th>
<th>Mean Days Absent Per Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top 20%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Middle 20%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle 20%</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Middle 20%</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom 20%</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 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

#### Disengage-ment
- 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.
Student Success Meetings
Data Review
Welcoming Climate
Prevention Strategies
Messaging

Mentor & Mentee

Youth & Social Services

Parents, Family, Caregivers

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
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
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...

- **Reinforce Attendance**
  - Class rewards for good attendance (e.g. popcorn or ice cream parties)
  - Individual recognition for students with good attendance

- **Reinforce Absenteeism**
  - Impersonal letters
  - Teachers send work home in response to absences
  - Teachers do not address absenteeism issue with the parent
  - Parents do not feel their child is safe in school
  - High levels of absenteeism in the class

- **Impersonal Letters:**
  - Easy to disregard
  - Many parents felt the school miscounted—but parents couldn’t verify because they weren’t tracking absences
  - Many parents felt that the school didn’t understand them

- **Sending Work Home:**
  - Parents thought that completing a makeup packet caught their child up for the missed day’s work

- **Teachers Not Addressing Absenteeism:**
  - Most parents reported that they regularly communicate with their children’s teacher, but never about absences

Big motivators for kids, but not parents

Reinforces parents’ existing attitudes and behaviors toward absences
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/
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

- Attendance Works - www.attendanceworks.org