WRITINGTHERULES

ENSURING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM DATA WORKS FOR SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

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Attendance Works
Advancing Student Success By Reducing Chronic Absence

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About FutureEd

FutureEd is an independent, solution-oriented think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, committed to bringing fresh energy to the causes of excellence, equity, and efficiency in K-12 and higher education. Follow us on Twitter at @FutureEdGU

About Attendance Works

Attendance Works is a nonprofit initiative that aims is to advance student success and reduce equity gaps by reducing chronic absence. Follow us on Twitter at @AttendanceWorks

FOREWORD

Chronic student absenteeism is a serious, systemic problem in American education. Nearly 8 million students miss 10 percent or more of the school year, substantially reducing schools' productivity and leaving students struggling academically, especially in impoverished communities, where absenteeism is most severe.

The seriousness of the problem has led nearly three-quarters of the states to include chronic absenteeism in their plans for measuring school performance under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. But states and school districts face a host of implementation issues that will largely determine whether the increasing focus on the absenteeism problem makes a difference for students.

This report, part of FutureEd's broader body of work on non-academic contributors to student success, provides clear guidance for policymakers and practitioners on a range of these implementation challenges.

We are pleased to partner on the project with Attendance Works, a San Francisco-based nonprofit initiative that works to reduce absenteeism. Phyllis Jordan and Mary Rosende of FutureEd and Sue Fothergill of Attendance Works have produced a detailed blueprint for ensuring that the new absenteeism information emerging under ESSA is put to the best possible use.

Jackie Arthur, Catherine Cooney, Rachel Grich and Betsy Rubiner have made significant contributions to the report. And we are grateful to education officials in California, Connecticut and the District of Columbia for their insights.

Thomas Toch

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WRITING THE RULES

ENSURING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM DATA WORKS FOR SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

A decade ago, only a small circle of education researchers and policy advocates talked about chronic student absenteeism. Today, the federal government reports on the metric. School districts are increasingly providing parents and community members with school-by-school absenteeism information. And nearly three-fourths of the states include the student attendance measure in new formulas for assessing schools under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).[1]

This emphasis reflects a response to a serious problem in the nation's schools: The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights reports that nearly 8 million students nationwide were chronically absent during the 2015-16 school year.[2] Research has linked frequent absences—regardless of whether they are excused, unexcused or for disciplinary reasons—to a host of educational problems, including weak social and emotional skills in kindergarten, poor reading skills in third grade and lower high school graduation rates.[3]

Attendance information can be a powerful catalyst for school improvement. Chronic student absenteeism—commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year—often signals that students will struggle with reading or fail to graduate. It can expose a dispiriting school climate or a lack of student engagement. It can tip off officials to broader community problems, such as clusters of students with asthma due to substandard housing or transportation challenges that make getting to school difficult. And chronic absenteeism can be reduced. In the five years since Connecticut began tackling the problem, the state's chronic absenteeism rate has dropped from nearly 12 percent to less than 10 percent, resulting in 10,000 fewer students missing too much school.[4]

But launching large-scale campaigns against chronic absenteeism is not easy, as Connecticut and other states have learned. To start, it requires thoughtful decisions about how to count student absences, consistent application of such standards statewide and effective systems for collecting and auditing school and school district data.

Without sufficient attention to these and other implementation issues, states and school districts could easily misunderstand the scope of the absenteeism problem in their jurisdictions, allow struggling students to slip through the cracks or focus interventions on the wrong students, and give local educators room to manipulate absenteeism records rather than address the reasons students miss so much school.

The potential for these problems is all too real. When California began publicizing chronic absenteeism data this year, officials found that 246 schools mistakenly

reported that every student in every grade had perfect attendance. A review in Connecticut found that school districts removed students from attendance rolls when they left the country for long holiday breaks and re-enrolled them when they returned weeks later, thus reducing absenteeism rates. In Washington, D.C., one high school's staff changed attendance records 4,000 times in a single year, prompting an investigation.

This report, a collaboration between FutureEd and Attendance Works, outlines ways to introduce the new ESSA chronic absenteeism metrics effectively. Drawing on the latest research on best practices, it helps state and local policymakers address key implementation challenges, including how to:

- Define the portion of the school day that students must attend to be considered present.
- Determine the days that should be included in—and excluded from—absenteeism counts.
- Decide the number of days that students must be enrolled in a school in order to be included in absenteeism calculations.
- Establish rules for withdrawing or disenrolling students.
- Monitor the accuracy of absenteeism data.
- Provide schools and the public with timely information.

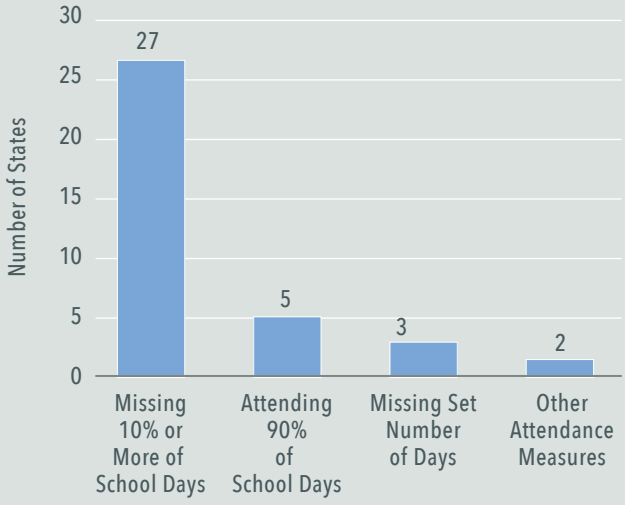
Policymakers' response to these and other basic questions will go a long way to determining whether the intensifying focus on chronic absenteeism keeps more struggling students in school.

Definitions Matter

The first step is to frame the chronic absenteeism problem the right way. When states wrote school accountability plans required under ESSA, they demonstrated remarkable consistency in defining chronic absenteeism: 27 states chose to count the percentage of students absent 10 percent of school days for any reason as chronically absent, we found in a September 2017 analysis. Another five states opted to measure the inverse—how many students show up 90 percent of the year. Two states set tougher standards. Three decided to use a less desirable strategy—tracking how many students miss a set number of days.[5]

Many of the states that chose to measure chronic absenteeism have yet to set performance targets for schools to meet. Those that have set targets have tended to aim high. In Connecticut, for instance, schools can only earn full credit on the accountability rubric if 5 percent or fewer students are chronically absent—a standard only 16 percent of the state's schools now meet. Other states, such as Indiana and Arizona, give schools credit for improving their attendance rates. This is a smart strategy because it gives schools that have serious absenteeism problems an incentive to improve attendance. It is also fairer to schools that serve many students from low-income families, who typically miss more days than their peers.[6] The best strategy is to combine the two measurements in a way that gives schools with high attendance rates credit but also recognizes those that make progress.

How States Define Chronic Absenteeism in Their ESSA Plans



SOURCE: FutureEd Analysis of State ESSA Plans

When Is a Day a Day?

In Washington, D.C., students are considered absent unless they are in school 80 percent of the school day. In California, showing up for one class period counts as a whole day of attendance. In Maryland, students must attend four hours to be considered present. Some states leave it to local school boards to set the definition. Consequently, in Florida's Pasco County students are marked absent only if they miss every period in a day, while Pinellas and Hernando Counties count students absent if they miss more than half a day. Delaware and Georgia also leave the definition to local districts, providing no way to compare chronic absenteeism across all districts.

To track chronic absenteeism effectively, states need to set a standard definition for the length of the school day that a student must attend to be marked present. The length should not be so short that it fails to capture the instruction time a student loses by missing too many classes. Nor should it be so long that it captures students who are merely tardy and do not need the interventions required for students with more severe absenteeism.

The federal government offers sound guidance. ED*Facts*—a U.S. Department of Education initiative to collect, analyze and promote the use of high-quality data from pre-kindergarten through grade 12—considers students absent after they miss half the school day. While states are not required to adopt ED*Facts* standards for their accountability system, they are required to report the half-day attendance data to the federal government. Several states—including Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts and Tennessee—already have policies that align with the federal ED*Facts* definition.

California's much more generous definition of a day reflects the fact that the state funds local districts based on the number of students who show up for school each day. California is one of seven states—the others are Idaho, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi, Texas and New York—that calculate state aid based on average daily attendance, rather than just an enrollment snapshot taken once or twice a year.[7] In these states, districts have an incentive to document every day that a student shows up so they maintain state funding.

Counting students as present when they are in school for only one period a day helps districts maximize their state funding. But it obscures potentially serious absenteeism problems and gives districts little incentive to address the problems. In one school district, researchers looked at the class periods that students missed when they were marked present. Their study showed that the share of students missing 10 percent of instructional time in a year would rise from 9 to 24 percent if all the missed class periods were counted.[8]

David Kopperud, chair of California's State Attendance Review Board, said there is no appetite to change the way attendance is measured. "It would have to be done through the legislature," he said in a recent interview. "We'd get a lot of pushback."[9]

Kentucky, another state that uses daily attendance to allot funding, adopted a more granular approach to monitoring lost instructional time: The state considers students chronically absent when they miss 10 percent of their academic year but uses a "full-time equivalent" model that tracks attendance down to the minute. Hence, showing up 30 minutes late counts toward a student's absenteeism rate but not as much as missing an entire day.[10] Such an approach provides a more precise picture of the time lost due to absences, but the level of tracking required may be overwhelming for states that are just starting to monitor chronic absenteeism.

The other side of the picture is Washington, D.C., where the 80 percent standard became policy in 2013. Last year, then-D.C. Chancellor Antwan Wilson said the "80/20" rule discourages tardy students from showing up at all and making it difficult to avoid absences for students who have transportation challenges or family responsibilities, such as taking younger siblings to school. In schools with two-hour block classes at the start of the day, students who show up late are effectively counted as absent for the whole day. "Having precise data is a better way to go, and then it allows us to tailor our support and interventions to the issues at hand,"

Wilson said at a December 2017 City Council hearing. "We are missing out on the fact that some students are missing because they are just missing, and some are just missing because they have real challenges."[11]

As the California and D.C. cases suggest, using too short a measure for what defines a day of attendance allows students to miss too much instructional time without any recognition of the time they lost. Using too long a measure classifies too many students as chronically absent, making it harder for schools to determine who needs their support.

When is an Absence an Absence?

States also need consistent policies on what is considered an absence. These should capture all lost instructional time so educators and community partners can respond when students start missing so much classroom time that they are academically at risk. Most research shows that missing 10 percent or more of the school year—as little as 18 days or two days a month—is associated with weaker academic performance.[12]

Therefore, the metric should include time missed for excused, unexcused and disciplinary absences. While schools should not be "blamed" for days missed due to illness or family events, they should record these excused absences so there is a full account of missed time.

Crucial to this effort is establishing a consistent set of codes for absences so district and state education officials can identify the underlying reasons for poor attendance. A school with many students who miss school without an excuse needs different solutions than a school dealing with a cluster of asthma or with families taking extended holidays.

This consistent set of codes is key to tracking attendance data accurately. A school and district should be able to

Defining a Day

The definition of a school day for purposes of attendance differs from state to state. Here's a sampling of policies drawn from state manuals.

Connecticut	A student is considered to be "in attendance" if present at his/her assigned school, or an activity sponsored by the school (e.g., field trip), for at least half of the regular school day. Students are absent when serving an out-of-school suspension or expulsion.
Delaware	Every district and charter school has its own attendance policies and definitions of "school day."
Florida	Students shall be checked each school day in the manner prescribed by rules of State Board of Education.
Georgia	The period of time in which K-12 students are required to be present at school as approved by the Local Board of Education.
Maryland	A student is counted present for a full day if the student is in attendance for four hours or more of the school day. A student is counted present for a half day if the student is in attendance for two hours or more, but less than four hours of the school day.
Massachusetts	A student must be at school, or at a school related activity (e.g., field trip), for at least half the school day to be counted as present.
New Jersey	A full school day, or a day in session, is four or more hours of actual class time. The four-hour rule applies to all grades except preschool and an approved half day kindergarten.
Tennessee	Students in grades pre-K–12 shall be present at least 50 percent of the scheduled school day in order to be counted present.

tell when a student misses school because of chronic or acute illness, school-related activities, disciplinary actions, religious observations, lack of available transportation and more. Connecticut provides detailed guidance for its districts, outlining how to record absences for virtual learning, school-sponsored activities, half-day kindergarten and other causes. The National Center for Education Statistics offers helpful categories that states should use, in its *Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data.*[13]

For the purposes of accountability, most states exclude absences connected to school-sanctioned events, such as field trips, holiday commemorations, or, in many cases, sports events. Typically, students are not considered absent when they are on a sports team and leave school early for a game. A common-sense solution is to allow students to be considered "present" and in class if they participate in an activity organized by the school and sanctioned by school board policy. Washington state, for instance, clarifies that the activities must be "district or school approved and regulated by an instructional/academic accountability system."

States should avoid adding too many days that do not count toward attendance numbers. New Jersey's legislature created a category of "excused absences" that are not included in absenteeism rate calculations, essentially allowing policymakers to add these sorts of days whenever they choose.[14] In Connecticut, advocates defeated legislation this year that would have allowed schools to exclude days missed by students who lack appropriate immunizations. They argued that this would reduce the incentive to ensure that all children receive the immunizations they need.[15]

Another important issue is how to count absences for students who are chronically ill or disabled, some of whom have education plans that do not require a typical five-day weekly schedule. Students with chronic disabilities have higher rates of absenteeism than those with other health issues, according to a recent analysis, and this can make the school's overall absenteeism rates appear worse than they are.[16] Kentucky has established a waiver procedure that allows districts to shorten the school week for students, in certain circumstances. Only the days the student is expected to attend are counted in the attendance totals.[17] New Jersey considers homebound students present if they receive at least 10 hours of home instruction a week on at least three separate days by an "appropriately certified teacher or teachers."[18]

When is a Student a Student?

Should a school count absences for a student who leaves the school after two months? How about for a student who leaves school for several weeks in the middle of year and then returns? ED*Facts* again sets a very explicit standard for its data collection, one states would be wise to follow: All students from kindergarten through 12th grade who are enrolled in a school for at least 10 days at any time in the school year must be included in the count. If students shift to new schools during the year, their attendance records should be included in the count at each school.

Some states, including Arkansas and Maryland, have already changed their rules to match the ED*Facts* standard. Others still set the mark at 45 or even 60

Uncounted Absences

Many states exempt certain days from their attendance counts, for example:

California
Naturalization services.

Georgia
Students serving as pages in the General Assembly.

Kentucky
One day for students attending the state fair.

New Jersey and Maryland
Take Your Child to Work Day.

Washington, D.C.
Visits to parents or legal guardians before or after a military deployment.

days of enrollment before a student is counted in a school's attendance data, which could allow highly mobile students to slip through the cracks. New Jersey's guidance on attendance tracking, for instance, acknowledges ED*Facts*' 10-day standard for federal reporting but sets the state standard at 45 days.[19]

The second step in defining who should be included in a school's enrollment when counting absences is developing statewide policies on disenrolling or withdrawing students from schools. The policies should include standard steps a school district must take before removing students from the school rolls. These should include providing proof of contact with students and families, as well as with relevant service agencies, when appropriate. There should also be a mechanism for documenting the causes of long-term absences, such as family vacations or chronic illness.

The data team at the Connecticut State Department of Education noticed that school districts were taking large numbers of students off attendance rolls just before holidays, as the students took extended vacations. The same students were added back a few weeks later.

By withdrawing students temporarily and then re-enrolling them once they return, schools are essentially placing students in a sort of limbo that prevents the students from accruing additional absences or in some cases reset their attendance records. Teachers and principals across the country have acknowledged using similar practices in their districts, sometimes despite rules against such disenrollment efforts.

In Connecticut, the missed days of these re-enrolled students did not count as absences in the schools' calculations or on the students' records. Since this was contrary to state policy, officials consulted with the schools involved and discovered confusion about how to treat such extended absences. Extensive training followed, with the state providing webinars for hundreds

Withdrawal/Disenrollment Policies

State policies prescribe different approaches to removing students from school rolls.

California	If the local education agency (LEA) has not met with student and parents, it must refer the student to the local or county School Attendance Review Board (SARB) before withdrawing a student.
Connecticut	Districts are strongly discouraged from seeking to use the unenrollment of students to favorably report aggregate school- and district-level student attendance measures (e.g., chronic absenteeism rates). Children who are absent from school because of a family vacation should not be unregistered.
Maryland	A student who has missed 10 consecutive days without an excuse can be exited from the school. Upon exiting a student, schools have 10 consecutive school days to ensure that the student is receiving educational services. The sending school is held accountable for the student until confirmation that the student is receiving an education elsewhere.
Massachusetts	A school may not remove a non-attending student from the enrollment without evidence that the student does not intend to return to school. The school district must make reasonable efforts to locate the student through contacting parents or guardians by phone, certified mail or a home visit.
New Jersey	Each student's attendance should be monitored so that a student is not absent for 10 days or more without an investigation of the reason. The school must make a good faith effort to determine the reasons for the absence or the student's school status.
New York	Schools cannot withdraw a student from school until they are enrolled in another school either within the district or outside. Principals are able to involuntarily withdraw a student if they pose a risk or if they fail to thrive at the school; however, they must be placed in a new school before they are allowed to leave original placement.

It obviously makes sense to take students off the rolls when it is clear they are no longer attending school. But without standard rules and a thorough and consistent withdrawal process, absent students can go unnoticed and miss so much school that it is hard for them to recover.

of data managers. State officials also developed a culturally responsive messaging campaign that districts now use with families, showing the academic benefits or not taking children out of school for extended vacations, said Charlene Russell-Tucker, chief operating officer for the Connecticut Department of Education.[20]

Current state policies vary widely. Schools in New York state, for instance, cannot disenroll a student until he or she has already been enrolled in a new school. When a student moves to a school outside the district, the parents must go to the student's initial school and show proof of enrollment elsewhere. Maryland schools are held responsible for a departing student for 10 days or until they can demonstrate that the student is enrolled somewhere else. Several states allow for automatic withdrawal when a student misses a certain number of days. North Carolina and Tennessee have set this at 10 straight days of unexcused absences. In Minnesota, withdrawal can happen after 15 consecutive days.[21]

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California, for example, recently amended its disenrollment procedures. Now, each case goes through three stages of a local School Attendance Review Board process: identifying a student; notifying parents; and setting up a meeting with a parent and student. If a student cannot be located after inquiries by the district or if the district or school finds that a student is enrolled at another school, the district can remove the student from the rolls. The new guidance also instructs local districts to use similar procedures for tracking "no-show" students—those who don't show up at the beginning of the school year.[22]

Kopperud, the state attendance board chief, said California officials noticed that schools were taking students off the rolls if they did not attend the first day of classes. Principals told state officials they wanted to avoid listing phantom students who would factor into decisions about how many teachers and other resources they need. But removing students from the rolls so quickly allows students to miss class without any school or district being held accountable. If the student was old enough, he or she could simply drop out.

It is important to remember that disenrollment from a school does not erase the absences under the federal rules. If students switch from one school to another, their absences should be counted in both schools, under ED*Facts* reporting requirements.[23] And disenrollment does not erase the effect of lost learning time on student achievement. But it often leaves schools unaware of why students may be struggling.

The Right Reporting

With the increased emphasis on chronic absenteeism under ESSA, states are beginning to develop the business rules and data checks necessary to ensure attendance records have integrity. But it is essential that these attendance systems integrate with other school district records and that they provide public information, so that they allow parents and community partners to understand attendance patterns.

The right data systems can catch mistakes before they become bigger problems. That is what happened in California when officials ran a check on chronic absenteeism data entered in 2017 for the first time

and found the 246 schools in the state reporting perfect attendance for every student for the entire 2016-17 academic year. The state sent notes to data managers asking them to confirm the information. "No one confirmed it," said Kopperud. It turned out to be a data glitch to districts loading information into a new reporting system.

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In Washington, D.C., though, it took news reporters months of investigating in 2017 to uncover a more troubling attendance problem: The city's schools were allowing hundreds of students to graduate despite excessive absences.

The city's school district has a policy that forbids students from passing a course if they have 30 or more unexcused absences. An analysis conducted after the story broke in the local media showed every neighborhood school operated outside of the rules. Some allowed students to make up lost time with superficial credit-recovery courses. Others altered attendance records, including the one high school that made 4,000 revisions, 1,000 of which were changed more than 15 days after the absences were first recorded.[24] Some students earning diplomas—especially those experiencing homelessness or frequent moves—had months of excused or unexcused absences.[25]

The school district's critics and supporters have suggested various reasons for what happened, but one conclusion by auditors provides a cautionary tale for other districts and states: an inability of the data system to provide schools and teachers with real-time information they needed.

Another analysis by the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE), the agency that oversees D.C.'s traditional public and charter schools, found the DCPS system tracked students who were meeting graduation requirements, but did not connect course completion information with absenteeism records.

As a result, teachers had no way to know whether student absences were excused, unexcused or due to suspensions—information that was key to knowing whether students should pass courses. Even worse, many schools customized their attendance-collection systems, making it hard for the district to monitor their records.[26]

Since the release of the OSSE report, D.C. officials have changed their data system to make it clear when students are at risk of failing academically—or failing—due to unexcused absences.[27]

The Auditing Advantage

Auditing school and school district absenteeism information is critical. In California, classroom teachers and school administrators are required to certify the data before sending it to the state. If state auditors spot mistakes, school districts have to repay state money.

California's auditors also look for sudden gains or drops in attendance rates. Any school or district that registers a 5 percent change from the previous year will receive additional attention, Kopperud said. California has just started collecting chronic absenteeism information, and the perfect-attendance glitch occurred in that first collection. The state is running further checks to ensure the information from schools is accurate, so that the 2016-17 school year can provide a baseline for future evaluation of chronic absenteeism rates.

Connecticut, which began tracking chronic absenteeism several years ago, also relies heavily on a data system to audit the information it receives from school districts.

Like California, any district that registers a 5 percent year-to-year increase or decrease in absenteeism rates gets a second look. The state's review of attendance records led to the discovery of the disenrollment issues in several districts among students leaving the country on extended vacations.

In another Connecticut district, the electronic attendance-collection system's default student status was set to "present," meaning that if a teacher failed to file an attendance report, every student would automatically be considered present, thus inflating attendance counts. State officials have worked to set clear rules on how to record absences and train school teams on what to submit. "There is excellent collaboration between data and program," Russell-Tucker said. "If not for that intentional focus, I don't believe we would have seen the chronic absence reduction we have seen in Connecticut."

Once states have collected accurate attendance information, it's important to share the information with school districts and with the public in ways that will help enhance accountability and improve attendance rates, allowing districts to determine whether their attendance challenges are confined to individual schools or broader problems affecting multiple sites. For community partners, it means using the data to determine where they might target resources. Public data can also be used to highlight schools that are positive outliers with low levels of chronic absenteeism despite high levels of poverty or other challenges.

Some states have a head start on this effort. In New Jersey, which has included chronic absenteeism in its school accountability rubric for several years, the state produces reports showing absenteeism rates at each school, as well as comparisons to state averages and annual school-by-school goals. The reports also provide a breakdown of absenteeism rates by gender, students' race or ethnicity, and family income.[28] Since students from low-income communities typically have higher rates of absenteeism than their peers from higher-income communities, it is important to provide comparisons among schools with similar populations.

In Washington state, parents can find chronic absenteeism rates and other school-level data on the Washington School Improvement Framework website.[29] In Worcester, Mass., the school district goes a step further, sending home an email to all parents with graphic depictions showing how many days their children missed and how that compares to other students in the school and district.

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Research shows that few parents realize how many days their children have missed and often don't know that absences, even when they're excused, can have negative effects on achievement.[30] Sharing attendance records with families, along with information about when absenteeism levels are problematic, has been shown to improve attendance.[31]

Connecticut provides a public database that shows chronic absenteeism rates at both the school and district level; it can also be viewed by grade level and student sub-group. It also has a secure site for educators with more extensive student-level information. This site has two years of records on chronic absenteeism, mobility and discipline incidents, and indicates what level of support students need.

California plans to include its chronic absenteeism data in its public "data dashboard" that will be part of its ESSA accountability system, conveying not only the rate of absenteeism, but also whether the rate is deemed too high for specific subgroups of students. California's

existing DataQuest system already breaks down rates of chronic absenteeism for various student populations. American Indian or Alaska Native students and foster youth have the highest rates statewide.

What's more, many California districts supplement the state data system with their own software to track attendance daily for different groups of students. Some programs can actually calculate how much money a school or district is losing with every student absence that appears on a dashboard the principal can look at every day—a powerful incentive to improve attendance.

Enlisting School Staff

Ultimately the chronic absenteeism information that school districts collect is only as good as the process for collecting it. Attendance clerks and administrators typically code the absenteeism data, then submit it to the district office. But policymakers often overlook the role of classroom teachers. Teachers who struggle with classroom-management skills, in particular, are prone to making attendance errors.

There are steps states and school districts can take to ensure the quality of their data. As a first step, all school personnel responsible for entering attendance should have a thorough understanding of district and state attendance policies, including acceptable reasons for an excused absence and tardy policies. School personnel should also understand who is allowed to make changes to attendance records and under what circumstances.

Some states and districts provide training to attendance officials. In California, state law expanded the role of attendance supervisors in January 2018 to include more effective strategies to address chronic absenteeism. District supervisors of attendance must be certified by county boards of education as having the skills to identify and respond to grade-level and student subgroup patterns of chronic absenteeism or truancy.[32] Connecticut hosts annual webinars for attendance officials and data managers on how to code absences. But many states provide nothing at all. And classroom teachers do not typically receive attendance training.

Technology can play a key role in helping schools to gather, sort, and store attendance data. Time-starved teachers could benefit from software that allows them to enter attendance on tablets or smart phones. Attendance clerks could have a drop-down menu to enter the reason for absences.

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A clear, detailed handbook that teachers and clerks can refer to is also helpful. Kentucky has created such a handbook for school and district staff members, showing them how to access the district's computer system and record what steps are being taken to reach out to families.[33] The state audits the collection process at selected schools, making sure schools are following policies and providing a questionnaire related to data entry and verification procedures. Much of this effort, however, is focused on attendance clerks, rather than teachers.

A New Paradigm

Beyond these steps to improve the consistency and transparency of chronic student absenteeism information, states and districts need to shift the paradigm of how educators and the public think about absenteeism.

Missing school has long been a cause for blame and punishment—directed at either students or parents—for failing to comply with school rules. That has led to punitive approaches—ranging from suspensions to jail time—that have shown limited success in curbing absenteeism. A better frame is that any excused or unexcused absence, or any suspension, represents lost learning time that undermines students' academic progress.

State and local officials should use professional development around attendance for school staff and a strong community messaging campaign to recast the conversation. Cleveland's "Get 2 School. You Can Make It!" attendance campaign, and the Challenge 5 campaign in Grand Rapids, Mich., calling for fewer than five absences a year for each student, have led to substantial reductions in absenteeism rates.[34]

Rather than blaming students and parents, districts should focus on finding patterns in absenteeism data that suggest solutions. Doing so could mean discovering transportation and community safety problems that are keeping students from getting to school; it could help identify older students who miss school or arrive late because they are caring for younger siblings; and it could lead to partnerships with health providers to treat illnesses that are keeping kids home. The most successful efforts to combat absenteeism enlist entire communities, bringing together policymakers, educators, businesses, faith leaders, doctors, parents and students to tackle the problem.

Timely, dependable absenteeism information is the cornerstone of such work. If absenteeism trends are skewed by faulty data or efforts to game the system, the metric will lose its power to identify the students and schools most in need of support. And policymakers will lose the promising opportunity under ESSA to address a pressing problem facing the nation's educational system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The fact that so many states are planning to use chronic absenteeism to assess school performance under ESSA represents an important opportunity to help students headed off track academically and to target resources to schools and students that need the most support. Here is a summary of strategies that states and districts should use to make the most of this new policy window.

Set Consistent Rules

1. Define a Day

States should set the standard of what constitutes a day of attendance so that chronic absenteeism rates can be compared across districts and schools. The standard definition should not be so short a time period that it fails to capture the lost instruction time from missing too many classes. Nor should it be so long that it captures students who are merely tardy and do not need the interventions required for more severe absenteeism problems. We recommend adopting the U.S. Education Department's ED*Facts* definition: Students who miss at least half their normal school day are considered absent.

2. Define an Absence

Chronic absenteeism is a metric that captures all missed instructional time, so absences due to illness and other legitimate reasons should be included in counts, as should days missed due to suspensions. Generally, time spent out of school on school-sanctioned activities—such as field trips or athletics—should not be counted as absences. States should support school districts by providing or expanding a taxonomy of attendance codes for entering data. The codes should indicate reasons for absences so that schools and districts can identify the chief causes for absenteeism and develop solutions.

3. Define a Student

How many days must a student be enrolled to be included in school and district attendance numbers—10, 45 or 90? And how quickly can a school dis-enroll a student who doesn't show up to school or who takes an extended vacation? States should set a standard policy to ensure consistency. We recommend using the ED*Facts* rule requiring schools to report students who are enrolled at least 10 days. The policy should also set standard steps for removing students from school rolls, including proven contact with students and families, as well as with service agencies, when appropriate.

Support Data Collection And Monitoring

4. Establish Auditing Systems

The increased role that chronic absenteeism plays in school accountability means that state attendance collection systems to identify system glitches and to be sensitive to sudden drops and gains in absenteeism rates. This scrutiny can reduce errors, identify districts that have had success in improving attendance, and flag places that are struggling to record data accurately or are misreporting their information. Once such anomalies are detected, states should have a standard set of procedures for asking districts and schools to verify their data and explain the results. States should ensure that data from all grades are included in chronic absenteeism calculations.

5. Provide Public Access to Chronic Absenteeism Records

States should use absenteeism information to compare absenteeism rates among similar districts, highlight disparities among student subgroups, and point to trends in chronic absenteeism over time. Since students from low-income communities typically have higher rates of absenteeism than their others, it is important to allow comparisons among schools with similar populations. Public access can encourage community partners to use the information to determine where they might target support.

6. Train Attendance Clerks and Teachers to Record Attendance Accurately

Attendance clerks and teachers need training on the codes and appropriate responses to different sorts of absences. If funding is available, states should equip schools with the software and hardware that make it easier to track attendance.

7. Equip School and District Staff to Use Chronic Absenteeism Data

For chronic absenteeism data to make a real difference, school staff and district administrators must know how to use it. Many teachers and staff members are unfamiliar with the administrators need data tools and training to create attendance reports that can alert teachers and parents when a student has missed too much school or when school-wide absenteeism rates are too high. Schools and districts should use student attendance records from prior years to plan ahead for the level of supports needed to connect students to supports as early as possible.

RESOURCES

ATTENDANCE HANDBOOK

Kentucky's Pupil Attendance Manual covers everything from attendance definitions to withdrawal procedures. https://education.ky.gov/districts/enrol/Documents/2017-18%20PAM%20Final.pdf

ATTENDANCE DEFINITIONS

Connecticut's guidelines provides definitions for excused and unexcused absences, as well as best practices for preventing absences: http://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CT-guidelines_excused_and_unexcused_absences.pdf

ATTENDANCE SUPERVISION

California's State School Attendance Review Board provides a sample policy for attendance supervision https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/sb/samplepolicy.asp

CALCULATING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

New Jersey's attendance guidance offers examples of how to calculate chronic absenteeism: http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/safety/behavior/attendance/ChronicAbsenteeismGuidance.pdf

TAXONOMY OF ATTENDANCE CODES

The National Forum on Education Statistics' Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data provides a taxonomy of attendance codes. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/NFES2017007.pdf

PROCESS FOR DISENROLLING STUDENTS

California's State Attendance Review Board outlines a process for disenrolling students: https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sp/cl/calpadsupdflash132.asp

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION:

Connecticut has created a prevention and intervention guide for schools: http://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Publications/Reducing-Chronic-Absence-in-Connecticuts-Schools

Connecticut is urging superintendents to address immunization issues that are keeping students from attending school: https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Memo-on-Improving-Attendance.pdf

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California Education Code 48245 states that in any district or districts with an average daily attendance of 1,000 or more school children, according to the annual school report of the last preceding school year, no district supervisor of attendance shall be appointed, unless he has been lawfully certificated for the work by the county board of education. (Enacted by Stats. 1976, Ch. 1010.

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WRITING THE RULES

ENSURING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM DATA WORKS FOR SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS