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POLICIES AND PRACTICES

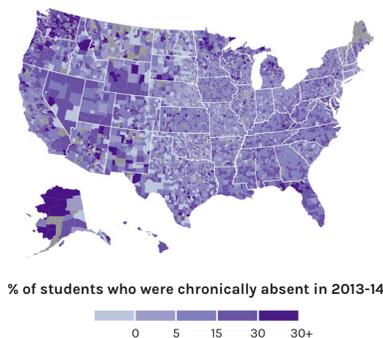
Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism, generally defined as missing either 10%+ of school days or 15+ days, affects millions of students and 89% of U.S. school districts. These students struggle academically, are more likely to drop out, and often struggle later in life. Recognizing chronic absenteeism as a key indicator of success, many states are now measuring annual rates under their Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) State Accountability Plans.

In addition to addressing the negative impact on student performance and average daily attendance (ADA) funding, school districts will now have further accountability for improving attendance across all student subgroup populations. Research and practice suggest that low-cost interventions such as ongoing communication with parents (and students) can help improve attendance and reduce the rates of chronic absenteeism.

The Chronic Absenteeism Problem

Some 6.5 million students (13%) were chronically absent in 2013-14. Chronic absenteeism affects 9 in 10 communities, while 50% of those students are in just 4% of districts (including many large suburban districts).



Chronic absenteeism follows poverty, especially where concentrated, and increases with a student's age. Its reasons include poor health, limited transportation, and a lack of safety.

Students who miss more school than their peers consistently score lower on standardized tests, controlling for other factors.¹

A study of Utah public high school students found that even one year of chronic absenteeism was associated with a 7x increase in school dropout.²

Chronic absenteeism correlates to substantially higher risk relative to academic achievement, graduation, drug and alcohol use, and crime. Low attendance in early grades creates poor habits and can create an achievement gap perpetuated into secondary school.

Yet many schools fail to detect high levels of chronic absence, because the problem is masked by usually strong average daily attendance (ADA).

Policy Background & New ESSA School Performance Indicators

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB as the primary U.S. federal K-12 law. Among the many changes was a broadening of performance indicators that states could use to measure schools (beyond student test scores and graduation rates). These indicators must be reported as part of a state accountability plan under ESSA Title I (including on state and local district websites). New alternative measures include school climate, including chronic absenteeism. Other measures may include course access as well as student engagement and safety.

As a result, many states are measuring chronic absenteeism starting in the 2017-2018 school year. As of July 2017, 70% of states submitting their accountability plans included chronic absenteeism as a key measure. Many more are considering or have not yet announced plans.

Reporting attendance by subpopulation demographics will provide transparency to counter the traditional masking of the averages.

Research-Based Interventions

Many factors contribute to a student's likelihood of chronic absenteeism including home environment, health, school readiness, and academic performance.

Research and experience demonstrate the opportunity and obligation for interventions aimed at improving attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism. These steps are varied in type and scale. Notably, "teaching attendance" involves building awareness, encouraging families, providing support, and engaging students.³

A 2017 control study in Philadelphia found that a single postcard, encouraging guardians to improve attendance, reduced student absences by 2.4%.⁴

Another found that weekly message from teachers to parents about their children's schoolwork decreased by 41% the students who failed to earn course credit (15.8% to 9.3%).⁵

A recent study of 22 West Virginia middle and high schools sent automated text-message alerts to parents about their child's missed assignments, grades and class absences. The intervention reduced course failures by 39% and increased attendance by 17%.⁶

Reducing absenteeism, especially in the early years, has long-term impact by changing habits and limiting cumulative impact.

In the 2017-2018 school year, the U.S. Department of Education is supporting a randomized control study on messaging's impact across several districts with high rates of absenteeism. The study intervention is regular electronic (SMS text) notifications to parents/guardians of elementary school students. Message types will include reminders, tips, and commitment challenges.⁷

This and other research recognizes the opportunity to address the underlying causes of absenteeism (e.g., inadequate awareness, understanding of consequences, and motivation).

Parent Messaging Intervention to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

Strategies to reduce absenteeism include monitoring, prevention, and intervention.⁸ Research suggests that low-cost, family communications can impact behavior and improve attendance.

School districts can deliver their own attendance messaging program to reduce chronic absenteeism. Federal ESSA funds can be used for measures aimed at improving performance indicators. In fact, family engagement and communication is a required Title I activity, while reducing absenteeism and communication technologies are eligible Title IV uses of funds.

West's SchoolMessenger Communicate was selected as the messaging platform for the federal study's intervention.

Components of a similar program for any school district could include:

- Development of a messaging blueprint including message content, schedule, recipient lists, customization rules, etc.;
- Use of SchoolMessenger's SafeArrival to better identify absence types to personalize intervention messages;
- Enhanced data queries and integrations from school data systems (e.g., SIS) to enhance customization; and
- Configuration of pre-scheduled Communicate broadcasts to automate a personalized messaging campaign.

Learn more about the chronic absenteeism messaging intervention with SchoolMessenger Communicate, SafeArrival, and professional services. Call **1-888-527-5225** or email **sales@schoolmessenger.com**.

¹ U.S. Department of Education: "[Civil Rights Data Collection \(CRDC\) for 2013-14](#)" & "[Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's School](#)"

² University of Utah, Education Policy Center: "[Research Brief: Chronic Absenteeism](#)" (2012)

³ Attendance Works: "[Teaching Attendance 2.0](#)"

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, REL Mid-Atlantic: "[Randomized Experiment Using Absenteeism Information to 'Nudge' Attendance](#)" (2017)

⁵ Economics of Education Review: "[Underutilized potential of teacher-to-parent communication: Evidence from a field experiment](#)" (2015)

⁶ Teachers College, Columbia University "[Leveraging Parents: The Impact of High-Frequency Information on Student Achievement](#)" (2017)

⁷ American Institutes for Research: "[Impact Evaluation of Parent Messaging Strategies on Student Attendance](#)"

⁸ Indiana Department of Education: "[Preventing Chronic Absenteeism & Truancy](#)"

