

Chronic Early Absence

- ▶ Providing solutions for increasing achievement in the early grades and preventing school drop-out

At the core of school improvement and education reform is an assumption so widely understood that it is rarely invoked: students have to be present and engaged in order to learn. That is why the discovery that thousands of our youngest students are academically at-risk — because of extended absences when they first embark upon their school careers — is as remarkable as it is consequential. Growing evidence indicates that chronic absence (missing 10% or more of a school year, nearly one month) is a hidden or underidentified problem. And, it can start in the early elementary years — a time when it is most critical for children to be in school so they can build the necessary foundational academic and social skills needed for later school success.

While chronic absence is not a problem everywhere, it can reach surprisingly high levels even in the early grades. Nationwide, nearly 10% of kindergartners and 1st graders are chronically absent. In some communities, chronic early absence can affect 25% of all children in kindergarten through 3rd grade across an entire district. Within particular schools in the same district, chronic early absence can range from less than 1% to more than 50%.

What's Inside

- ▶ Research on the impact of chronic absence on student achievement
- ▶ Data on the rates of chronic early absence
- ▶ Strategies to reduce chronic absence

States, districts and schools are now being offered unprecedented opportunities to develop programs that will improve student performance and turn around underperforming schools. An understanding of how reducing chronic early absence helps those efforts will go a long way to assure that innovative school improvement policies and practices will be successful in the long run.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* looks at two recent research studies on the issue of chronic early absence and addresses the following:

1. What are the impacts of chronic early absence?
2. Why has it been overlooked?
3. What contributes to chronic early absence?
4. What can be done to reduce chronic absence in the early grades?



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Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades

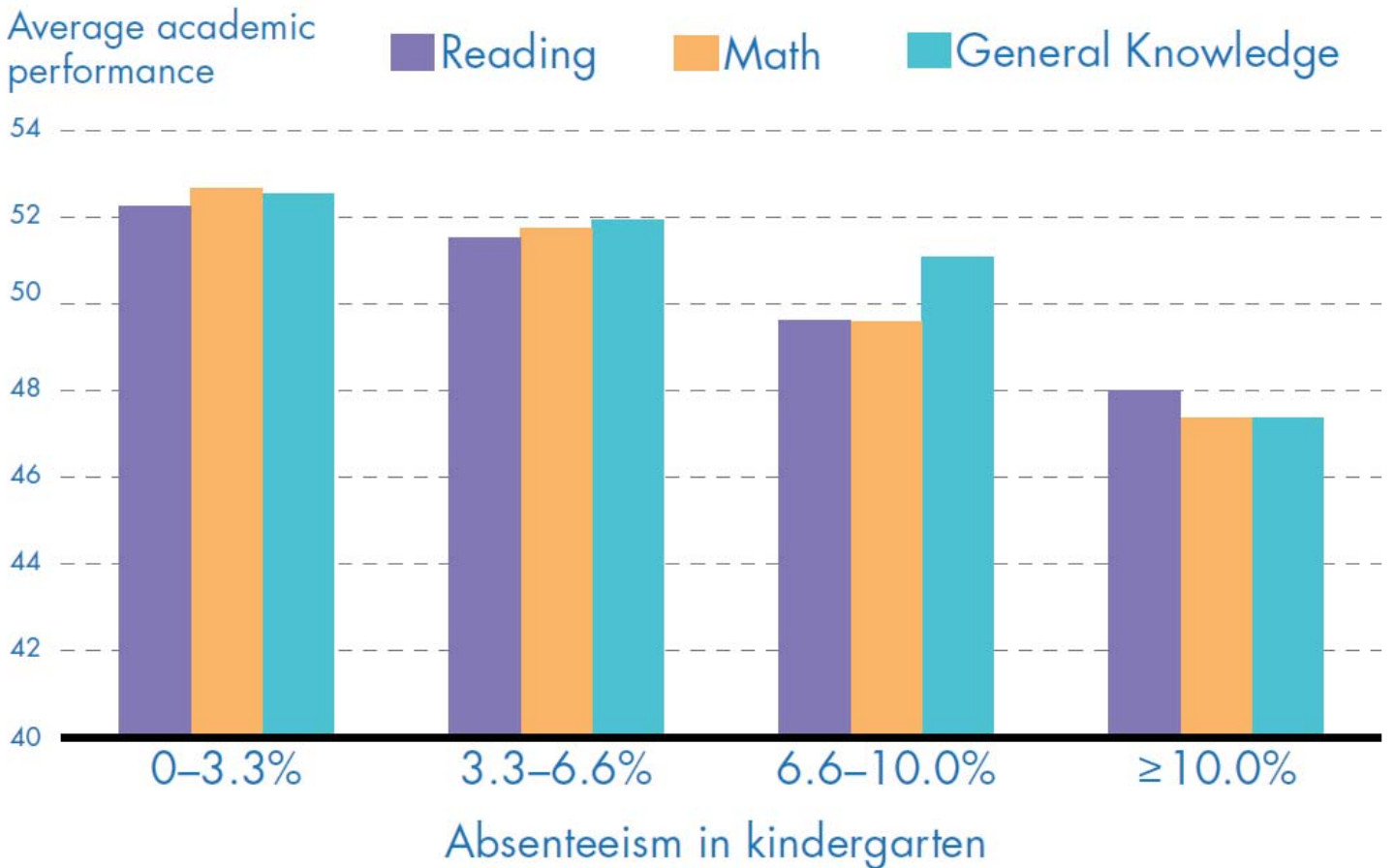
Hedy Chang and Mariajose Romero, National Center for Children in Poverty, 2008.

This national study investigates the impact, prevalence and possible causes of chronic early absence and provides recommendations for how to effectively intervene and reduce its occurrence. It is based upon: an analysis of longitudinal student data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort - ECLS-K; an examination of local attendance patterns in nine school districts; and a review of relevant literature and interviews with experienced practitioners and researchers to identify promising programs and practices.

What the authors found:

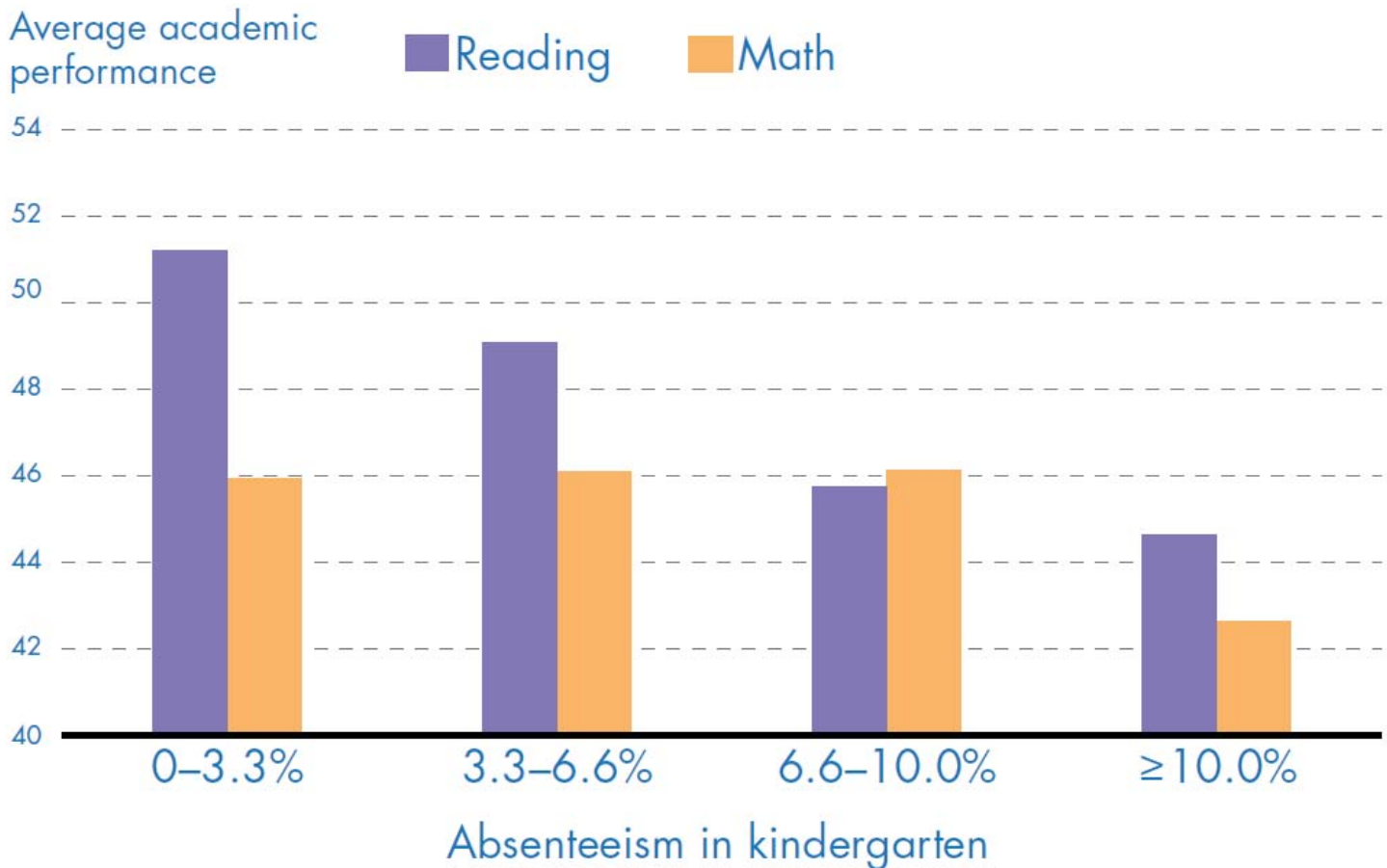
Chronic absence adversely impacts student performance. This is especially true for children living in poverty. All children, regardless of socio-economic background, did worse academically in 1st grade if they were chronically absent in kindergarten. Chronic absence in kindergarten especially affected reading performance for Latino 1st graders. Among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicted the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of 5th grade.

Figure 1: Chronic absentees in kindergarten had the lowest academic performance in 1st grade.



Source: Hedy N. Chang, Mariajose Romero, *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For, The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, September 2008.

Figure 2: Poor children who were chronic absentees in kindergarten had the lowest performance in reading and math in 5th grade.



Source: Hedy N. Chang, Mariajosé Romero, *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For, The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, September 2008.

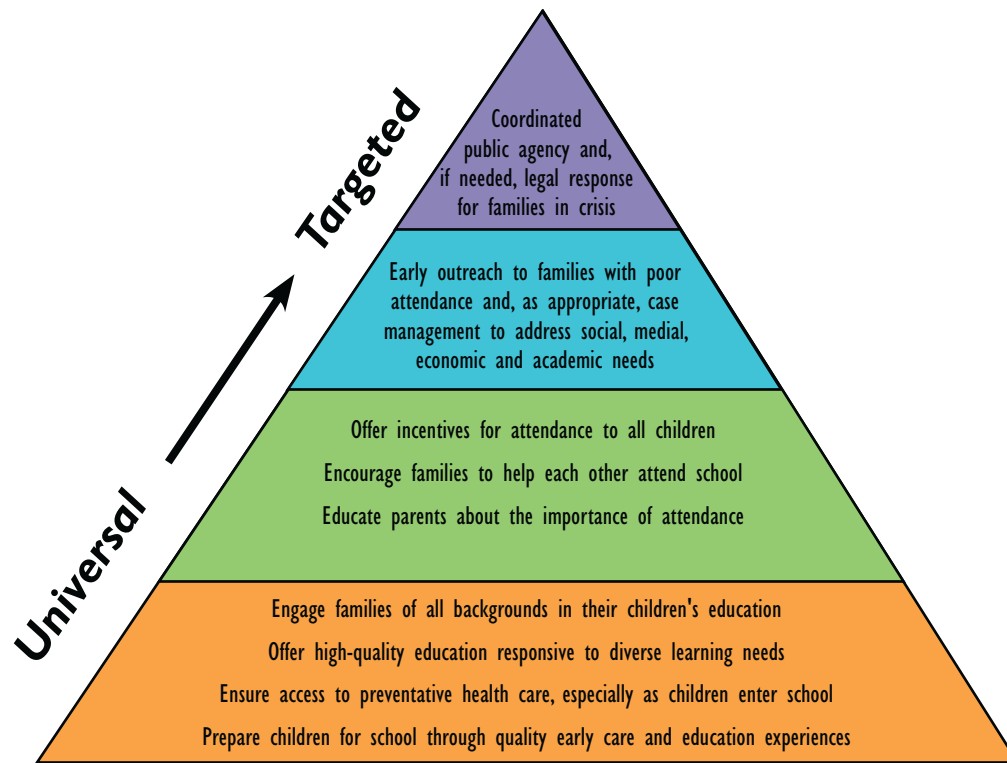
Knowing whether a school has a high level of chronic absences is essential to developing a plan for improving academic performance. Such data can help educators know if a first step is simply making sure children attend school.

Chronic early absence is often overlooked. Many states and districts do not know the extent to which chronic early absence is a problem in their schools. Typically, they only monitor average daily attendance — often used for funding purposes — or unexcused absences (truancy). Young children are less likely to be marked truant because they are not likely to be home without the knowledge of an adult to excuse their absence. At the same time, high overall school-wide attendance rates easily can mask significant numbers of chronically absent students. Even a school with an average daily attendance rate of 95%, for example, could find that 30% of its students are chronically absent. Educators may overlook frequent but sporadic absences versus consecutive absences. Further, data systems may not effectively track chronic absence for highly mobile populations of students.

Chronic absence is influenced by a variety of factors. Chronic absence in the early grades reflects the degree to which schools, communities and families adequately address the needs of young children. Schools contribute to chronic absence if they fail to communicate the importance of regular attendance to parents, do not monitor absences or contact families when children miss extended periods of time, are not providing quality, safe and engaging learning experiences or fail to effectively involve parents in children's learning. Chronic absence may be higher in families that do not understand the importance of regular attendance, are highly mobile, face multiple risk factors, or who are poor and lack basic resources. Communities may contribute to chronic absence as a result of lack of formal and informal services and supports, high levels of violence or inadequate provisions for helping families and children transition into formal education.

What the study's authors recommend:

Schools and communities can reduce chronic absence significantly when they work together to promote attendance through a combination of *universal strategies* (e.g. incentives for students, parent education, offering engaging academic programs and early childhood education) and *targeted interventions* (e.g. outreach and case management for chronically absent students).



Schools are most successful when the entire school community (principals, teachers, parent liaisons and attendance staff) and community-based partners offering health, social and economic resources share a strong commitment to improving student attendance and work together to implement all aspects of a comprehensive approach.

On the Path to Success: Policies and Practices for Getting Every Child to School Every Day

Jane Sundius and Molly Farneth, Open Society Institute-Baltimore, September 2008.

This study focuses specifically on chronic absence in one urban school system and offers recommendations for policies and practices to boost attendance. This research study is one of a group of three papers developed by OSI-Baltimore as an “urban case study of school absence epidemics.” The authors begin with the premise that attendance can be improved, but the key to success lies in the creation of new policies and practices that meet the needs of students, families and school staff — and in turn, hold each accountable for regular school attendance.

Authors place a high priority on curbing chronic absence based on findings that:

- ▶ Chronic absence is predictive of school disengagement and drop out.
- ▶ Students who drop out are likely to face diminished lifetime earning potential.
- ▶ Schools with high absence rates have slower-paced instruction and lower achievement as a result.

Other Resources

ECS Resources

Chronic Early Absence: A quiet problem that drives a lot of noisy problems.
This one page fact sheet was prepared for a session at the 2009 ECS National Forum on Education Policy:
www.ecs.org/docs/Chronic-Absence.pdf.

Other Resources

Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families: Community Strategies to Reverse Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades and Improve Supports for Children and Families
This report analyzes chronic absence in New York City public schools, describes how chronic absenteeism at an early age can result from problems at home, and shows how strong partnerships between public schools, community organizations and other institutions can make a difference.
www.newschool.edu/milano/nyc affairs/documents/StrengtheningSchoolsOct08.pdf

Lost Days: Patterns and Levels of Chronic Absence Among Baltimore City Public School Students 1999-00 to 2005-06.
Produced by the Baltimore Education Research Consortium, this brief reveals that chronic absenteeism presents a significant challenge to classroom instruction and learning rates in grades 1-5.
http://baltimore-berc.org/pdfs/Attendance_issue_brief_FINAL_JULY%202008.pdf

For more in-depth information about chronic absence in elementary school, also see **First Grade and Forward** at <http://baltimore-berc.org/pdfs/FIRST%20pathways%205-13-08.pdf>.

For additional information on attendance issues and potential strategies in Baltimore, see the work of the Baltimore MD Attendance Initiative supported by the Open Society Institute.
www.osi-baltimore.org

Addressing Chronic Absence in Schools
This Web site provides access to information on promising programs; new publications, reports and articles; and tools for understanding, monitoring and addressing chronic absence starting in the early grades. In addition, users can join an online blog to share questions and experiences with others.
<http://www.chronicabsence.net>

What the authors found:

In Baltimore City public schools, chronic absence was pervasive and had a negative impact on achievement. Approximately one out of six elementary school children was chronically absent. Rather than improving over time, these poor attendance levels remained relatively constant throughout elementary school only to reach epidemic levels in middle (34%) and high school (43%). Children chronically absent in elementary school were significantly less likely than regularly attending peers to score proficient or advanced in reading or math during the following year. Test scores for children excessively absent (attending less than 80%) are even lower. Students excessively absent in 6th grade have less than a 13% chance of graduating on time.

Causes of chronic absence were related to ineffective policies and practices in two areas:

- ▶ Weak and indifferent school and city agency attendance policies and practices
- ▶ School discipline policies that put children out of school without supports.

What the authors recommend:

Solutions to chronic absence issues in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) are grouped into three categories and include solutions to:

- ▶ Make schools safe, engaging and attractive to students
- ▶ Remove barriers and develop policies that make attendance everyone's responsibility
- ▶ Eliminate push-out practices by schools and school staff.

Recommended policies and practices in each category are based on research and an analysis of current conditions and existing barriers in schools, the community and the city of Baltimore.

Make schools safe, engaging and attractive to students.

- ▶ Assure each student is well known and cared for by at least one adult in the school.
- ▶ Restore high-interest programs such as the arts, music, physical education, etc.
- ▶ Invest in out of school time programs.
- ▶ Provide universal free lunch, breakfast and other feeding programs in high-poverty, high-absence schools.

Attendance, Achievement and Attainment (3A's): Priorities for Parent and Community Engagement

As part of their efforts to promote school success, The America's Promise Alliance and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have worked together to develop a framework and toolkit for engaging parents in dropout prevention. This toolkit identifies three priorities for parent engagement that are critical for student success throughout a child's academic career, and are heavily influenced by the actions and thinking of parents as well as educators, community-based providers and students themselves. These priorities are:

1. **Attendance every day:** Ensure children go to school regularly.
2. **Achievement every year:** Monitor and help children make satisfactory progress each year.
3. **Attainment over time:** Set high expectations for children and plan for attaining their long-term goals.

This framework begins with attendance because being present in school is a prerequisite for doing well in school and realizing educational goals. At the same time, ensuring a child attends school regularly is a concrete place to begin encouraging parent involvement. Although families, especially with limited resources, can face significant challenges getting their children to school, it is still a doable task for most, especially when communities work together to address systemic barriers like lack of transportation or access to health care. A positive experience with attendance can be built upon to inspire parent engagement in other aspects of their child's school career.

To be most effective, activities which bridge the gap between parents and educators should happen when children first enter preschool or kindergarten, since it lays the foundation for future parent involvement by helping parents gain the confidence and the skills to continue to be involved. Engaging parents in high school is much more difficult if parents felt alienated and patronized by educators when their children were younger.

See <http://www.americaspromise.org/Resources/ParentEngagement.aspx> for more information on the 3A toolkit.

Remove barriers and establish accountability policies.

- ▶ Communicate the importance of daily attendance to students, parents and community.
- ▶ Recognize absence as an early predictor of dropping out and respond with urgency.
- ▶ Improve the safety and reliability of transportation to and from school.
- ▶ Use available data to identify schools and neighborhoods with high levels of absence.

Create policies that eliminate push-out practices.

- ▶ Offer incentives for schools to retain students and increase attendance all year long.
- ▶ Revise student discipline codes to limit the use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion.

Policy Recommendations

Over time, policymakers and education leaders can help build capacity for monitoring and addressing chronic absence by supporting the following actions.

1. Ensure the state has a longitudinal student data system — ideally beginning in preschool — that tracks attendance for each student using a unique student identifier.
2. Use attendance data to calculate, monitor and report on the levels of chronic absence for every school, overall and by grade as well as student sub-groups; include chronic absence on data dashboards and school report cards.
3. Make absenteeism a policy priority and direct districts and schools to identify contributing factors and develop chronic absence reduction plans.
4. Share data on high chronic absence schools with other agencies to target allocation of resources and programs to improve school attendance.
5. Invest in professional development to help teachers and administrators understand the factors contributing to chronic absence and how to address them.

Conclusion

Monitoring absenteeism starting in kindergarten or preschool can be an effective strategy for identifying and addressing educational and familial issues early on before problems become more challenging to improve. Moreover, taking action does not always require establishing new programs. Schools and communities can embed attention to chronic absence into existing initiatives such as school readiness efforts, after-school programming, school-based health services, parent involvement programs and drop-out prevention. Monitoring chronic early absence and using it as a trigger for early intervention could help schools and communities partner with families to ensure every child begins school with an equal opportunity to reach his or her potential. Given the lack of standard policy and practice for collecting and monitoring attendance data for individual students, making headway on this issue starts with the simple act of counting so we know if and where chronic absence is a problem. With federal funds now available, this is the opportunity to make this happen.

Past issues of *The Progress of Education Reform* are available on our Web site at: www.ecs.org/per.

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