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Showing Up Matters: Newark Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Years



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School Attendance Critical for Newark’s Young Students

By Peter Chen and Cynthia Rice

Introduction

One absence at a time, thousands of Newark’s youngest schoolchildren are missing out on learning the skills critical to their future.

An alarming 4,328 Newark students in grades kindergarten through 3rd grade were chronically absent during the 2013–14 school year.¹ This means that nearly one in four children in Newark’s early elementary grades, including both traditional public and charter schools, missed 10 percent or more school days, according to statistics from the New Jersey Department of Education and Newark Public Schools. (This includes both excused and unexcused absences).

Based on a 180-day school year, any student who misses 18 days or more per year — or about two days per month — is considered chronically absent.

As noted in ACNJ’s recent report *Showing Up Matters: The State of Chronic Absenteeism in New Jersey*,² young students have some of the highest rates of chronic absenteeism — and Newark is no exception.

When young students miss too much school, they will likely struggle academically during that school year and in years to come. The early grades are a critical time for children to build social and academic skills for later success.³ National research indicates that children who

were chronically absent in kindergarten had the lowest performance in reading and math in 5th grade, as well as higher rates of absenteeism and social-emotional difficulties in later school years.⁴

In Newark, chronic absenteeism has many causes, with key factors typically being chronic health issues for both children and parents, transportation barriers and the lack of a support network.

The good news is that student attendance can be improved. School administrators, parents, teachers and other school staff across the nation and in Newark have begun to institute policies to encourage student attendance and reduce absenteeism. As Newark embarks on a new chapter in its education reforms, those efforts must focus on ensuring that all children attend school regularly.

This policy brief provides an overview of the state of chronic absenteeism in the early grades in Newark’s schools, takes a deeper look at the reasons causing severe absenteeism and offers strategies that schools, the district and the community can implement to ensure regular school attendance. While this brief focuses on Newark, many of the lessons learned through the research here can be applied to similar cities throughout the state.

Research for this Report

ACNJ collected 2013–14 attendance and absentee data for PreK through 3rd grade students from Newark Public Schools for traditional public school data and the New Jersey Department of Education for charter schools and state data. To dig deeper into the causes and potential solutions of chronic absenteeism, from September to December 2015, ACNJ reached out to a broad range of stakeholders to perform informal focus groups. Two parent focus groups were held at two different schools, with 35 parents in total participating. One focus group with teachers, administrators and staff was held, as well as a focus group with child care nurses. To supplement these focus groups, ACNJ interviewed additional teachers, administrators and staff at traditional public and charter schools.



A Snapshot of Newark's K-3 Chronic Absenteeism

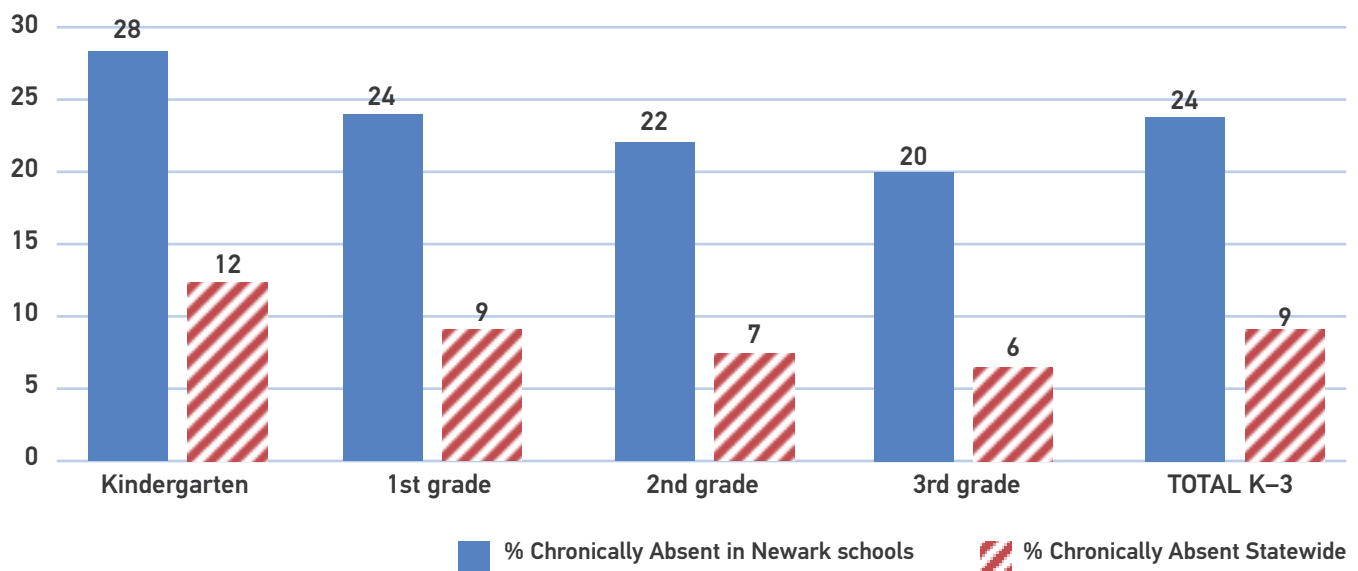
Most Newark elementary schools have too many students missing too much school. Fifty-one of 60 traditional public and charter schools had chronic absenteeism exceeding 10 percent of all students in the 2013–14 school year. Even more alarming, in 41 of these schools, more than 20 percent of K-3 students were chronically absent.

As noted in ACNJ's recent statewide report, chronic absenteeism rates are higher in the early grades of a student's K-12 schooling.⁵ Newark schools follow this

general trend, with chronic absences ranging from 28 percent in kindergarten to 20 percent in 3rd grade.

In addition, students attending traditional public schools are more likely to miss too much school. Twenty-eight percent of young students in traditional schools were chronically absent, compared to 9 percent in charter schools — which is equivalent with the statewide rate. These are overall averages; rates vary school by school. (See Appendix)

Chronic Absenteeism in Newark's Early Grades, 2013–14



Absenteeism, Total K-3 Students in all Newark Elementary Schools, 2013-14

	# of Students Chronically Absent	Total # of Enrolled Students	Percentage of Students Chronically Absent	% Chronically Absent Statewide
Kindergarten	1,334	4,750	28	12
1st grade	1,150	4,755	24	9
2nd grade	1,009	4,618	22	7
3rd grade	835	4,127	20	6
TOTAL K-3	4,328	18,250	24	9

Absenteeism, K-3, By Newark Traditional Public Schools and Charter Schools, 2013-14

	# Charter school students chronically absent	Charter school total enrollment	% Charter school students chronically absent	# NPS students chronically absent	NPS total enrollment	% NPS students chronically absent
Kindergarten	148	1,285	12	1,186	3,465	34
1st grade	112	1,185	9	1,038	3,570	29
2nd grade	84	1,013	8	925	3,605	26
3rd grade	54	815	7	781	3,312	24
TOTAL K-3	398	4,298	9	3,930	13,952	28

Risk Factors

Research has shown that students from low-income families, families of color, homeless families and families with limited English proficiency are all more likely to be chronically absent.⁶ Young students throughout the city share many of these risk factors. Newark children are more likely to live in poverty — 44 percent in Newark, compared to 17 percent statewide.⁷ They are also more likely to come from families of color, with 53 percent of children in Newark being black, compared to 15 percent statewide, and 42 percent Hispanic/Latino, compared to 24 percent statewide.⁸

Reasons for Absenteeism in Newark

While research was focused on Newark schools and families, many of the broad underlying causes of absenteeism, such as health, transportation and safety, exist in other cities throughout the state. In Newark — New Jersey’s largest city — these issues are intensified by the size of the city. The lessons learned in Newark, however, can provide a blueprint for the many other city school districts that also struggle with high absenteeism.

Overwhelming Issues

Through ACNJ’s conversations with parents and school staff, it became clear that many Newark families faced significant challenges in ensuring that their young children regularly attend school and that these challenges were often overwhelming.

The parents, teachers and administrators all stated that no one cause alone created the bulk of absences.

What Chronic Absenteeism Measures

Chronic absenteeism is different from average daily attendance or truancy — two measures that school officials traditionally use to measure attendance. Unlike average daily attendance, which tracks the percentage of a school’s *student body* that is in attendance on a typical day, chronic absenteeism measures how many *students* miss a certain percentage or number of days.

And, unlike truancy, which only accounts for unexcused absences, chronic absenteeism targets any missed class time for children, whether excused or unexcused. Missed class time impacts learning, regardless of the reason for missing school.

Instead, absences are often dependent on a variety of factors and circumstances. Each story from parents and teachers provided a glimpse into how everyday occurrences translate into school absences for young children — threatening their ability to succeed in school.

Transportation Infrastructure

The parents and teachers in focus groups made it clear that Newark’s transportation infrastructure contributes to the district’s absenteeism problem.

State law prohibits state funding from being used to bus children who live two miles or less from school.⁹ A district can opt to provide courtesy busing at its own expense. In Newark, only 56 percent of families own a car,¹⁰ so walking or public transportation are often their only options. Students living two miles or more from school are eligible to receive a voucher for public transportation, which presents its own obstacles for young children and their families.

Parents stated that reliance on city buses for school transportation was often unrealistic for their young children.¹¹ These children cannot use public transportation without being accompanied by an adult, who must purchase a ticket separately. Both work schedules and the cost of a bus pass for an adult were cited as reasons why public transportation can be a difficult option for many families.

Health Concerns

Nationally, health is listed as one of the most common causes for absences in the early years¹² and this trend holds true in Newark, as well. In all of the conversations held by ACNJ, health-related issues were routinely identified as a key cause of student absences. Oral health and children with multiple health issues were cited by parents and teachers as common causes, in addition to typical acute health issues, such as infections and colds.

Asthma, however, stood out as the primary health reason for children missing too much class time. Given that 25 percent of Newark children have asthma¹³ and the bulk of asthma hospitalizations take place in the early years,¹⁴ absences caused by this condition have an enormous impact on chronic absenteeism in grades K-3.

There were several reasons identified why asthma and other respiratory illnesses had such an impact on children not coming to school.

The distance between school and home. Because there is no public school busing for the majority of Newark students, many parents described their hesitation to walk their younger children to school on cold or rainy days, which aggravated asthma symptoms, choosing to keep their children home instead of risk an asthma attack.

A lack of preventive care. Many asthma interventions described by parents and school staff were “reactive” measures, such as using an emergency inhaler, taken once a student was already experiencing difficulty breathing. Although nurses described how they tried to help individual families better manage their child's asthma, coordinated efforts were lacking.

The healthcare system. The way in which the medical community addresses asthma may unintentionally add to the problem. Nurses said that few of their students struggling with asthma were ever referred by their primary physicians to a specialist. Consequently, young



Asthma Complicates School Transportation

One Newark mother related how cold, dry weather aggravates her son's chronic asthma. The mother's non-traditional work schedule changed throughout the week. Because of her son's asthma, she tries to drive him to school on days when she goes to work later in the day.

But on days when she has to be at work early, she is unable to drop her son off at school because there is no before-care. She had witnessed his severe asthma attacks in cold weather and stated, “As soon as I hear him wheezing, I don't want to take the chance of him having an attack on his way to school.”

Knowing that one acute episode could impact her son's breathing for several days afterwards, she chose to keep her son at home, rather than risk an attack. As a result of this combination of factors — asthma, non-traditional work hours and the lack of before-school care — the boy missed multiple days of school last winter.

children had to endure repeated visits to the primary doctor or emergency room to address acute asthmatic flare-ups. While not unique to asthma, parents said these frequent trips can be an all-day affair, especially because many doctors have office hours only during the school day, which led to missing school. Parents also said relying on buses to and from medical appointments added to the loss of instructional time.

The “snowball” effect. One family member being sick — whether a child, caregiver or parent — can have a snowball effect, causing multi-day absences for all students in the family because it disrupts transportation

to and from school. In the parent and teacher focus groups, individuals described that when one child misses school because of an illness, a parent often has no choice but to keep all the children home since the sick child cannot be left unattended while the parent transports the others to school. Many parents said they did not have anyone else to take the healthy children to school or to care for their sick child while they made the trip. Consequently, the siblings stayed home as well.

Conflicting Work and School Schedules

Parents said that scheduling conflicts caused by work hours and requirements led to additional absences. Parents spoke of forgoing job opportunities or working non-traditional hours so they could get their children to school, but noted that these situations were often not sustainable. Others described the tremendous daily stress of worrying about being either late to work or late to pick up their children. As one mother stated, "I am putting school first, but it is affecting my pocket."

Weather and Safety

Because of Newark's reliance on walking and public transit, safety concerns and weather can keep children home from school. Teachers and parents related stories of absences caused by lack of proper weather gear and inadequate street and sidewalk shoveling, making safe passage difficult. These situations reflect national trends.¹⁵

Because of high crime in Newark, many parents said they were afraid to let their young children walk to school unaccompanied. They complained about drug use, used drug paraphernalia and criminal activity on streets near and around their school. One mother worried routinely about the dangers on the route to school: "My little one always wants to run ahead, but I won't let him. There are always needles on the sidewalk and I am afraid that he will fall and be stuck by one of them."

Parents' Perception of Early Education

In educator and parent focus groups, the participants said that while they themselves grasped the importance of early education, some parents seemed to view preschool and kindergarten "more like babysitting," especially because preschool and kindergarten are not required by law. As one parent stated, "Some parents feel that if the state feels that it doesn't have to be required, how important can preschool and kindergarten be?"

Sick Day Snowballs for Mother of Three

A Newark mother has three children in 2nd grade, kindergarten and preschool. The mother typically walked all three children to school because she did not have a car. One day, the preschooler came home sick from school and the mother kept the child home the next day.

The mother did not want to take the sick child out with her to walk the other children to school, but she did not have anyone she could call on for help, such as a neighbor, relative or friend who could stay with her sick child while she brought her other children to school.

As a consequence, all of the children stayed home until the sick child was well. Then, the mother herself became sick. Because she transported the children to school, all three children continued to miss additional school days because she was unable to accompany them and had no one else to take her children to school.

The initial absence of one child may have been a single illness, but that one cause disrupted a tenuous child care and transportation schedule, resulting in multiple absences for all the children.

Teachers noted that parents who themselves may not have begun school until 1st grade may consider kindergarten or preschool less important than older grades.

Punishments for Absences

Both parents and teachers mentioned that punitive school measures, including court interventions, to address absenteeism or other issues often led to increased absenteeism. Punitive approaches to attendance have been shown to be ineffective in reducing absenteeism.¹⁶ When parents felt that a school was punishing them or was "out to get them" through a court proceeding, parent willingness to engage with the school and encourage attendance declined.

School Response to Absenteeism

The way in which school staff both reviewed attendance data and responded to absentee issues appeared to vary from school to school. In general, there did not seem to be a consistent approach, with designated staff responsible for reviewing the data comprehensively.

Although each school in Newark Public Schools has a “student support team” designed to address excessive absences, teachers and administrators said that these teams typically react after a child has already accrued substantial absences, rather than proactively addressing the root causes at the first sign of trouble. In addition, several teachers in the focus group were aware of these teams but did not know which staff members were part of the team or how referrals were made.

Lack of School Resources

When teachers and administrators were asked whether they received sufficient resources to proactively address the causes of student absenteeism, the response was a resounding “no.” Both groups noted that attendance counselor positions had been eliminated, leaving the responsibility for home visits and locating absent students to be absorbed by other school staff. At least two staff members said rewards for student attendance came out of teachers’ personal spending, rather than school funds.

Student Schedules

Particularly difficult for some families is the fact that all the elementary schools start at the same time and many lack before-care, which would allow a parent to drop a child off early at one school so they could make it to a different school on time. One parent stated, “I can’t be at both places at the same time.” In both focus groups, parents said it was the youngest child who most often was brought to school late — or didn’t make it there at all.

“I have a 6-year old, a 3-year-old and a baby. The 6-year-old and the 3-year-old go to different schools that both start at the same time. I drop off my 6-year-old early and hope that the parents who are there will watch her, as I would watch their children if the tables were turned. But, I am always nervous leaving her there alone, so that I can get my 3-year-old to school. It can be too much.” — Newark Parent



Connections between School and Home

How school staff and parents interacted when children were out appeared to vary from school to school. Parents described the automated phone call they received multiple times each day their children missed school, but human connections between school and home were limited. Some parents said that the school nurse called home, while others said that their child’s teacher contacted them to find out about the health of that child — but that was not always the case.

Strategies for Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades

Chronic absenteeism is not inevitable. Schools and districts around the country have put in place policies that can improve student attendance. Successes in other states and communities demonstrate that policies must be flexible and responsive to the unique needs of students and families, but winning strategies to reduce absenteeism share two common features:

- The early and regular review of absentee data by school teams who can proactively respond to specific causes of absenteeism for groups of students and schoolwide, and

- Engagement with communities and parents to share information, educate and build a support network that helps parents get their children to school regularly.¹⁷

This combination of using data proactively at the individual and schoolwide level and engaging parents emerged in the focus groups and interviews as necessary components to combat absenteeism.

Building a Culture of Attendance in Newark Schools

School leaders should take a comprehensive approach to building a culture that supports regular school attendance among students and parents. The following are effective strategies that have been implemented in other districts across the country.

Regular data collection and review. Schools cannot address the causes of absenteeism if staff members do not know who is absent and why. Data collection and review must begin as early as the first day of school to monitor potential attendance issues for individual children and for specific grades. During the focus groups held in September and October, staff said that they did not yet have sufficient data on student absences. National research shows that students with multiple absences in September average more absences throughout the year.¹⁸

This attendance data should include not only individual students, but also aggregate data of groups of students, such as by grade, classroom, date/cause of absence or special health need, in order to analyze schoolwide trends.

Solicit parent input. Attendance improvement strategies work best when tailored to meet the needs of the community. By presenting the data to parents, school administrators can get feedback from parents on the causes of absenteeism and on the supports they most need to ensure their child regularly attends school.

Additionally, teachers and administrators noted that the children of parents who volunteer or participate in school-related activities often

have better attendance. Allowing space for parent voices can both tailor absenteeism programs appropriately to community needs and encourage more parental involvement with schools.

Attendance teams. To successfully act on the data collected, school attendance or support teams led by a principal or administrator should work to develop policies to address schoolwide attendance patterns. Such teams should include the school nurse, social worker, parent representative and other staff members involved in family outreach. In addition, schools should review data for particular groups of children, such as students in certain grades or classrooms or children with special needs. School attendance teams should also report findings to teachers and staff.

Check-in/check-out systems. This best practice involves students being greeted, acknowledged and supported by an adult. Each afternoon students meet with the same adult for a farewell and encouragement for the next day. This approach has been a component of successful absenteeism reduction campaigns in New York City and Baltimore.¹⁹

Regular communication with parents in a variety of ways. Newark has already implemented some helpful systems to communicate with parents, including back-to-school nights in which parents and families receive information about the importance of attendance and automated phone calls when a child is absent.

These methods, however, may be insufficient to reach some parents, especially those facing the risk factors for high absenteeism. Communications strategies should



also include text messaging, e-mail, flyers, phone trees and home visits. Home visits in particular have been shown to have a strong effect on student attendance and can identify issues not found from school-based information sources alone.²⁰

In addition, some schools have a policy in which families sign pledges promising to get their students to school on time, while others encourage teachers to call parents at the first sign of absences. Another idea is to provide each student with a designated contact person at school who is available when attendance issues arise and who is responsible for following up with the family when a student is absent or tardy. This strategy has been used effectively in New York City's Success Mentor program.²¹

Supporting families and celebrating success. Newark parents and teachers noted that encouraging attendance with positive messages and rewards was more effective than punitive measures, which reflects national research findings.²² To implement culture change, more proactive approaches are needed to address root causes. Creating an environment in which parents feel comfortable and welcome encourages them to view school as a positive place where they want their children to spend their days.

From weekly stars or certificates to monthly or quarterly parties for perfect attendance, rewards can reinforce the message that successful school attendance is to be celebrated and that every school day counts. These celebrations can be made more successful if they involve families and parents who are essential to getting young children to school.

Building parent knowledge base. Parents and teachers in the focus groups noted that parents needed knowledge of the importance of school attendance, especially in the early grades. Schools can play a key role in educating parents on the critical role early education plays in their child's long-term academic success.

In addition, school staff should ensure that parents know how to access available supports, including transportation provided on an as-needed basis to children with special health needs under federal education law.²³ Other supports include plans with the school nurse or special education department to meet children's special needs, as well as before- and after-school care resources.

Connect families. Through the focus groups, it became clear that many parents lack a support system to call upon when they or their child is sick or when regular transportation glitches arise. In fact, parents are so

hungry for these connections that they began to develop during the focus groups themselves. At one focus group, one parent referred other parents to an after-care service. At another, two parents discussed the possibility of a phone tree if their transportation to school broke down.

Several parents who had recently moved noted their lack of a support network within the school and neighborhood. Parents also said they had limited opportunities in school settings to informally interact with other parents. Parents and teachers also expressed the desire for more workshops and meetings for parents to communicate with schools about their concerns, connect with each other and learn about available resources to address any obstacles to attendance.

Schools can help facilitate these connections and grow parent networks through mixers, parent summits and directories of parents who might be able to provide child care, transportation or other help to each other.

Building a Culture of Attendance at the District Level

While many steps can be taken at the school level, Newark Public Schools must also address certain issues and provide leadership to support school leaders in achieving the goal of regular school attendance for all students. Below are some issues and strategies that should be addressed at the district level.

A review of transportation options. While Newark provides bus passes to students to use to get to school, this tends to be an inadequate option for many young children. Newark Public Schools officials should explore other avenues for providing transportation, such as giving bus passes to families of young children who live less than two miles from school, providing bus passes for parents and studying whether busing should be provided on a more widespread basis.

Before- and after-care. Working parents need before- and after-school care, which also has an impact on student attendance. These programs can help ease the daily difficulty of balancing work and family demands, as well as provide stability when unpredictable disruptions in transportation and work schedules arise.

Although some schools in Newark provide supervision before and/or after school, the capacity of and eligibility for such programs are limited. Students who participate in afterschool programs demonstrate improved attendance in school, but to be effective, these programs must be broadly available to all students and should align with school attendance strategies.²⁴

Schools can also partner with existing community-based programs so they operate inside school buildings, eliminating the need for parents to arrange for transportation for their children between these programs and school.

Giving schools resources to combat absenteeism.

Schools cannot combat absenteeism without sufficient staff, data tools and training. Teachers and administrators were clear that the loss of attendance counselors diminished their ability to address chronic absenteeism. They said designated staff at every school are necessary as the first line of defense against chronic absenteeism.

Beyond staff dedicated to attendance issues, every staff member must play a role to make sure students are coming to school. Providing staff opportunities for professional development on best practice models, as well as supports for necessary on-the-ground work with families, would be a positive step toward creating a team approach for tackling absenteeism.

Enrollment. As Newark continues to review its enrollment process, attendance must be a key concern, particularly for families with more than one child. Under the current open enrollment system, which was implemented as part of the One Newark plan in 2014–15, some parents may have similar age children in different schools that start at the same time.

The district should examine the feasibility of staggering start times at the elementary schools, as well as using the enrollment process as an opportunity to communicate consistent districtwide messages about the importance of attendance and to identify key risk factors, such as chronic asthma or a long school commute.

Given the important role that transportation, distance to school and the ability to juggle several children’s school schedules play in regular attendance, the impact, if any, of the enrollment system on attendance requires

further examination and analysis. It is important to note that the data in this report predates the implementation of the new enrollment system.

Community Support of School Attendance

A Comprehensive Plan to Address Chronic Asthma

The City of Newark, the healthcare community and the Newark Public Schools should come together to develop a comprehensive, coordinated and proactive plan to address chronic asthma in young children.

In New York City, a task force was created to spearhead an asthma-friendly schools campaign aimed at increasing asthma prevention and decreasing school days missed due to asthma. Its activities included an “asthma ambassador” program that assigned a staff person at each school to connect students with asthma to appropriate referrals and community health resources.

It also included asthma summits at the schools that brought together school staff, community health organizations and parents, as well as asthma prevention education programs for parents and students.²⁵ Home-visiting programs and quality improvements in preventive asthma care have been shown to lead to a reduction in emergency room visits and school absences.²⁶ Taking a more preventative approach to the prevalent problem of asthma among Newark students is essential in efforts to improve student attendance.



Conclusion

There is no one fix to reducing chronic absenteeism among Newark’s young students, as myriad causes lead to one-quarter of K-3 students missing too much school. Yet, a strategic combination of data collection, communication and bolstering family supports can significantly improve student attendance.

Each Newark administrator and staff member who participated in the ACNJ discussions was clearly committed to taking steps to address this problem, recognizing that regular school attendance is critical for students to excel academically and for New Jersey to realize returns on the substantial investment it makes in public education.

It is time for committed Newark school administrators, educators, nurses, other school staff and community members to come together to develop a comprehensive, strategic plan to implement changes at both the school and district level.

The stakes are clear — young children who miss school on a regular basis struggle for years to catch up — and many never do. Ensuring good school attendance in the early years will pay off for years to come for children, their families and the entire Newark community.

Preschool Absenteeism: An Early Look

Patterns of absenteeism in the early grades often begin in preschool. Newark’s preschool student attendance data for the 2013–14 school year were incomplete, including only preschools operated by Newark Public Schools, and not private, community-based preschools or Head Start.

Nonetheless, the available data paint an alarming picture, with 40 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds chronically absent from classrooms that reported data in 2013–14.

Years of research have shown that New Jersey’s high-quality preschools can build the foundation for academic and developmental success for young children.²⁷ But when children are routinely absent from preschool, their academics suffer in kindergarten and beyond.²⁸

One driving factor of absenteeism in grades K-3 — lack of understanding of the importance of attendance — weighs even more heavily in the preschool years. The distinction between preschool and babysitting is often confusing. Families may not fully understand the educational importance of preschool. In focus groups, one parent noted that “preschool does not get recognition” as a necessary part of a child’s early education, while another stated that some parents viewed preschool as “daycare.”

Because comprehensive data is not yet available, firm conclusions are difficult to reach. It is clear, however, that any strategy to improve school culture and encourage attendance in grades K-3 should also include preschool. Just as patterns of later attendance begin in grades K-3, so does early elementary attendance begin in preschool.

Newark Pre-K Attendance, District-Operated Preschools Only, 2013-14

	Enrolled students	Chronically absent	Percent chronically absent
3-year-olds	541	235	43
4-year-olds	1,090	410	38

A Newark School of Strategy for Reducing Absenteeism

At SPARK Academy, a K-4 charter school currently serving 560 Newark students, improving attendance is a team effort. Diane Adams-White, SPARK's dean of students and families, stated that teachers, administrators and office staff all play a role in making sure that every "scholar" comes to school.

Reviewing absentee data, she said, is key. School staff and administrators currently use attendance data tools that look at data by school, individual student, grade and teacher to identify trends in absences that were hidden within their high average daily attendance figures. Despite average daily attendance at around 95 percent, the number of chronically-absent students was creeping upwards, with 12 percent of students missing more than 10 percent of school days.

Adams-White was adamant that that percentage was unacceptable and finding ways to address absenteeism was critical to the school's overall success.

SPARK already had a number of interventions in place that addressed underlying issues. All students at SPARK are eligible for school busing, even if they live less than two miles away.

Additionally, SPARK already has systems in place to treat early absences. On the first absence, a parent receives a phone call or text message from either the teacher or the office manager. A second absence prompts a phone call from the principal or social worker and attendance intervention meetings are held when a student begins accumulating multiple absences. The approach taken, said Adams-White, is not punitive, but aims to get at the underlying issue of the absences.

Yet Adams-White still worried about the chronically-absent students, knowing that missing out on school time leads to lost learning or even grade retention, especially in the early years. Using tools provided by *Attendance Works*, a national organization devoted to reducing absenteeism, Adams-White identified patterns in absences that required additional intervention.

For example, she found that students were often absent during family "rough patches," including a student's parents being in the middle of a divorce or the family being involved in a court proceeding. She met with staff to dig deeper into these and other attendance issues and to encourage better and more frequent communication between faculty and families.

SPARK now reaches out to parents during school orientations, home visits and regular parent contacts to stress the importance of attendance and to encourage students to come to school every day.

Adams-White pointed out that "relationships underlie everything." Informal family communications — and building trust between parents and school — have been key to improving attendance.

Recently, when one parent had health issues that kept her from walking her son to school, the problem was identified and the SPARK team was able to link the parent with another family in her neighborhood to help.

SPARK has also instituted policies to more broadly address absenteeism. For example, to encourage students to attend school in inclement weather, the school does not mark any student as "tardy" on those days. Families are informed and are aware of this policy.

"Even if a scholar comes in late, there are still plenty of hours left in the day to learn," said Adams-White.

Additionally, to ensure attendance on days immediately preceding holiday breaks, a time when students often miss school, SPARK issues homework packets that students receive immediately before school vacations. Rewards are given to students completing the packet—but they have to be in school to receive the packet.

Even a small issue, such as a lack of clean shirts, was leading to student absences, so SPARK now has on hand a box of clean uniform shirts in case a student needs one. Small common-sense solutions like this can help reduce absences one by one, Adams-White noted.

To address health issues, school officials are now formulating medical needs plans for children with asthma and other chronic health conditions, under a federal special education provision known as "504 plans." These plans help to put special supports in place as needed to ensure health issues do not prevent children from attending school.

Adams-White plans to continue to use SPARK's data tools to analyze the causes of absenteeism and target more solutions to keep kids in school.

"If the students are not in school," she noted, "they will not be learning."

Newark K-3 Chronic Absenteeism Rate, by School and Grade, 2013–14

School Name	Total Number K-3 Students	Kindergarten, % Students Chronically Absent	Grade 1, % Students Chronically Absent	Grade 2, % Students Chronically Absent	Grade 3, % Students Chronically Absent	K-3 Average, % Students Chronically Absent
Abington Avenue	350	27	22	8	15	18
Alexander Street*	229	n/a	38	32	23	32
Ann Street	436	52	32	36	35	39
B.R.I.C.K. Avon Avenue	341	38	43	40	32	38
B.R.I.C.K. Peshine Academy	343	39	40	29	24	33
Belmont Runyon	294	52	58	47	37	49
Benjamin Franklin	563	30	37	28	21	29
Boylan Street Early Childhood Center	76	37	n/a	n/a	n/a	37
Bragaw Avenue*	127	22	55	36	46	40
Branch Brook	141	23	40	36	23	30
Bruce Street School	19	50	67	25	67	47
Camden Street	290	24	27	36	19	27
Chancellor Avenue	58	n/a	n/a	n/a	24	24
Chancellor Avenue Annex	188	37	41	31	n/a	36
Cleveland	159	26	33	15	8	21
Dr. E. Alma Flagg	205	40	39	24	29	33
Dr. William H. Horton	422	42	30	20	33	31
Elliott Street	410	46	41	30	24	36
First Avenue	521	7	5	8	7	7
Fourteenth Avenue	238	32	29	32	19	28
George Washington Carver	291	48	39	42	26	40
Gray Charter School	181	0	0	0	0	0
Harriet Tubman	211	29	23	17	17	21
Hawkins Street	345	31	28	28	20	27
Hawthorne Avenue	201	54	40	37	40	43
Ivy Hill Elementary	246	25	28	28	10	22
Lady Liberty Academy Charter School	209	15	8	7	17	11
Lafayette Street	608	23	6	8	10	13
Lincoln	180	45	36	38	26	37
Louise A. Spencer	204	51	22	45	37	40
Luis Munoz Marin	334	25	29	27	43	31
Madison Elementary*	346	37	23	34	36	32
Maple Avenue**	196	39	57	19	27	36
Maria L. Varisco-Rogers Charter School	239	13	8	10	4	9
Marion P. Thomas Charter School	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
McKinley	299	38	36	28	18	30
Miller Street	251	51	42	30	34	39
Mt. Vernon	348	13	14	14	12	13
New Horizons Community Charter School	331	18	23	18	8	17
Newark Educators Community Charter School	194	0	0	0	0	0
Newark Legacy Charter School	241	11	10	13	11	12

Continued on following page

Continued from previous page: Newark K-3 Chronic Absenteeism Rate, by School and Grade, 2013-14

School Name	Total Number K-3 Students	Kindergarten, % Students Chronically Absent	Grade 1, % Students Chronically Absent	Grade 2, % Students Chronically Absent	Grade 3, % Students Chronically Absent	K-3 Average, % Students Chronically Absent
Newton Street***	153	15	22	26	23	22
North Star Academy Charter School	1,168	10	10	6	5	8
Oliver Street	450	9	9	10	11	10
Park Elementary	438	21	17	19	15	18
Philips Academy Charter School	167	5	0	0	0	1
Quitman Street Community School	313	56	29	32	32	38
Rafael Hernandez School	154	49	41	31	16	36
Ridge Street	265	39	21	23	16	25
Robert Treat Academy Charter School	307	5	4	5	4	5
Roberto Clemente	549	31	27	24	30	28
Roseville Avenue**	98	38	47	26	32	37
Roseville Community Charter School	258	23	20	16	23	20
South Seventeenth Street	255	53	25	32	14	30
South Street	262	20	29	18	20	22
Speedway Avenue	250	49	41	35	40	41
Sussex Avenue	319	44	33	23	34	33
TEAM Academy Charter School	735	14	11	9	4	11
Thirteenth Avenue	436	52	32	36	35	39
University Heights Charter School	268	11	5	10	12	9
Wilson Avenue	540	16	16	9	14	13
NEWARK TOTAL	18,250	28	24	22	20	24

Source: All data provided by Newark Public Schools and the New Jersey Department of Education. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent of enrolled days. For a full school year, that would be 18 days.

* Please note that since the 2013-14 school years, the following schools have been converted to charter schools. The new names are in parenthesis.
 Alexander Street (North Star Academy Alexander Street Elementary School),
 Bragaw Avenue (KIPP Life Academy),
 Madison Avenue (Newark Legacy Charter School at Madison Avenue)

** The following schools have closed since the 2013-14 school year and have not yet re-opened.
 Maple Avenue, Roseville Avenue

*** Newton Street School is no longer an elementary school. Now serves students ages 17 to 21.

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