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Showing Up Matters: *The State of Chronic Absenteeism in New Jersey, 2nd Annual Report*



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Giving Every Child A Chance

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Showing Up Matters:

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By Peter Chen and Cynthia Rice

Introduction

Missing too much school can put a child's future at risk. Yet for thousands of New Jersey school children, being absent happens far too often. In the 2014–15 school year, 136,000 or 10 percent of K–12 students in New Jersey were "chronically absent." Being "chronically absent" means missing 10 percent or more of total enrolled school days, including suspensions and both excused and unexcused absences.

When students are young, too many absences can reduce their chances of reading proficiently by third grade, a key indicator of long-term academic success. When students are older, absenteeism places them at risk of not graduating high school, not attending college or failing to find a meaningful career.

But chronic absenteeism can easily go undetected. By missing only two days each month or 18 days out

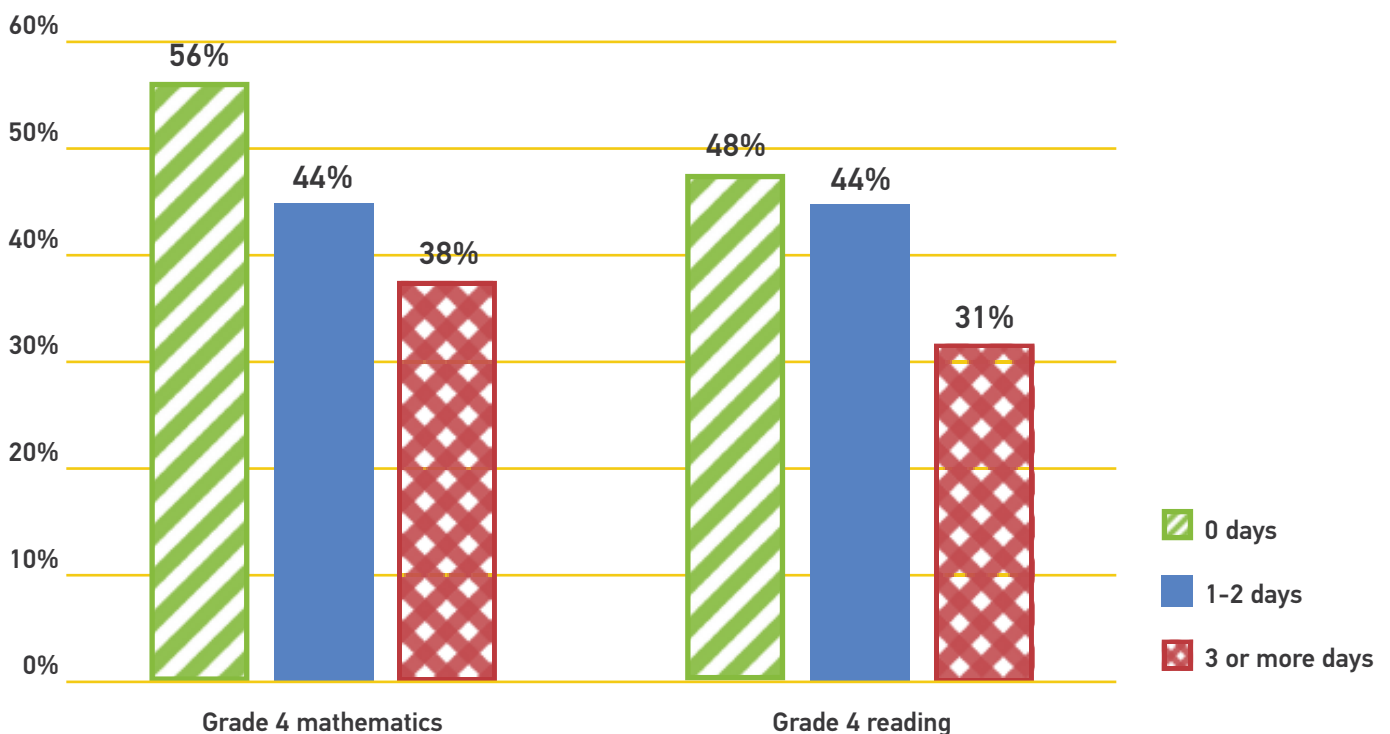
of a 180-day school year, a student can become chronically absent.

Even a few days missed can have a big impact on a student's academic performance. In the 2015 national reading and math tests for fourth-graders, students who missed no days in the month before the test were 50 percent more likely to score proficiently compared to students missing three to four days. The more school time missed the month before the exam, the lower the exam scores.

Fortunately, there is momentum at the national, state and local levels to help more children regularly attend school.

The U.S. Department of Education is leading "Every Student, Every Day," a national initiative to address and eliminate chronic absenteeism throughout the country. The New Jersey Legislature has introduced a bill defining

Percentage of NJ Students Scoring Proficient or Above, NAEP Grade 4 2015



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Data Explorer (2015).

chronic absenteeism, requiring school report cards to include chronic absenteeism data and convening coalitions in schools struggling with high absenteeism rates. Locally, some New Jersey districts have recognized the strong link between school attendance and academic success and are doing something about it.

This second ACNJ statewide report provides a snapshot of chronic absenteeism at the state, district, grade and demographic level. It also explains policy changes and shares lessons learned based on last year's report. This report highlights school districts and individual schools that have prioritized reducing absenteeism and are getting great results. Their stories are shared throughout the report.

*What's the difference between Chronic Absenteeism, Average Daily Attendance and Truancy?*¹

- **Chronic Absenteeism** counts all student absences, including excused, unexcused and suspensions.
- **Average Daily Attendance** counts the average number of students who show up to school on any given day.
- **Truancy** counts only unexcused absences.

A Snapshot of K-12 Chronic Absenteeism

Overall

Of the 1.3 million total New Jersey students in grades K–12 in the 2014–15 school year, more than 136,000, or about 10 percent, missed too much school.²

Many districts in New Jersey had high absenteeism rates, defined as 10 percent or more of their K–12 students being chronically absent. Although these 216 high-absenteeism districts made up only about 43 percent of total student enrollment, they accounted for about 68 percent or more than 90,000 of the state's chronically absent K–12 students.

By Race and Family Socioeconomics

Chronic absenteeism is more likely to affect low-income children and children of color, because they frequently experience risk factors for absenteeism such as: unmanaged physical and mental health issues, unreliable transportation, unstable housing, school suspensions and community violence.³

Higher absenteeism for low-income and minority students holds them back academically, accounting for as much as a quarter of the achievement gap between poor and non-poor students.⁴

Statewide data for New Jersey's preschool through 12th grade (PreK–12) students reflected these national disparities. Black students made up about 16 percent of New Jersey's total student population but made up 25 percent of the state's chronically absent students. Similarly, Hispanic students comprised about 26 percent of the state's total student population but about 32 percent of its chronically absent students.

Students in specific categories such as those who are economically disadvantaged, are enrolled in special education, or have limited English proficiency were at higher risk of chronic absence than their peers:²

- 17 percent of economically disadvantaged students reported as chronically absent compared to 8 percent of their non-economically-disadvantaged peers.
- 18 percent of students in special education reported as chronically absent compared to 10 percent of students not in special education.
- 13 percent of students with limited English proficiency (LEP) reported as chronically absent compared to 12 percent of their non-LEP peers.

As schools across the state tackle chronic absences, strategies to support these vulnerable populations will be key to improving overall attendance.



PreK-12 Absenteeism by Demographic, 2014-15*

Demographic	Total Enrolled	Enrollment Percentage of Total	Students Chronically Absent	Percentage of Demographic Chronically Absent	Percentage of State's Absenteeism Rate
Asian/Pacific Islander	134,835	10	8,103	6	5
Black	224,277	16	40,581	18	25
Hispanic	361,691	26	52,872	15	32
Multiracial	19,584	1	2,116	11	1
White	660,456	47	61,085	9	37
STATE TOTAL PreK-12	1,402,632	n/a	165,019	12	n/a
Economically Disadvantaged	524,991	37	89,602	17	54
Limited English Proficiency	78,206	6	9,840	13	6
Special Education	227,124	16	41,096	18	25
Female	679,293	48	79,119	12	48
Male	723,338	52	85,900	12	52

Sources: New Jersey Department of Education and specific district data from Community Charter School of Paterson, Closter Borough, Freehold Twp., Maria Varisco-Rogers Charter School, Newark Prep Charter School, Pace Charter School of Hamilton, Palisades Park, Wharton Borough. Sums may not add up to totals due to unreported groups and students in multiple categories.

*These totals include available preschool data, which increases the totals.

District Focus: Lakewood

Addressing the Issue through Flexibility

Lakewood High School principal Marcy Marshall knew something had to change if she and her team were to ever improve their school's absenteeism rate. Too many of the school's 1,000 students were either leaving school during the day or not coming at all.

Marshall recognized the need to connect those students with an adult, and asked the school's six guidance counselors and their attendance officer to talk to students about why they were missing so much school. It became clear that many were responsible for bringing home all or a portion of their family's income. Attending school took a back seat because many were working night shifts and were too tired to come to school after work.

As a Priority School, the district received approval—and funding—from the New Jersey Department of Education to develop an alternative school that would run between 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. "Students could work their night shifts, sleep for a while and then come to school," said Marshall. After instituting the new "Achievement Academy," overall student attendance improved.

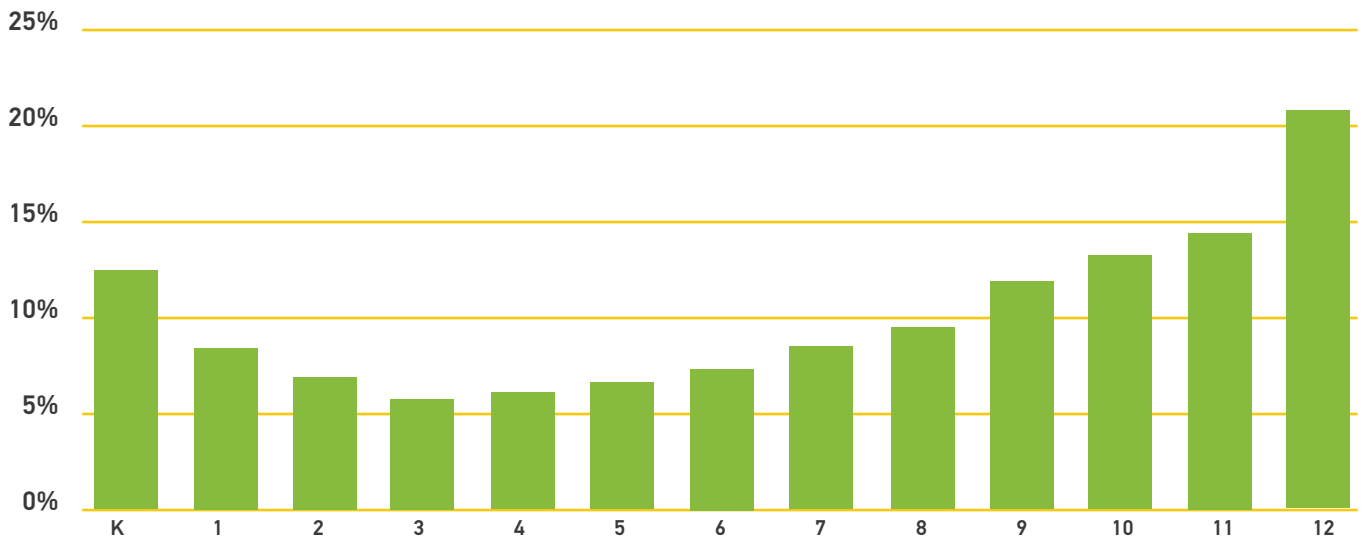
"I saw students receive their diplomas in June that I thought would never achieve that goal," added Marshall.



Marshall, however, recognizes that Lakewood was lucky to receive state assistance in this venture, which played a role in reducing Lakewood High School's chronic absenteeism rate from 32 percent in 2013-14 to 22 percent the next school year.

To provide incentives to come to school, Marshall and her administrative team created a raffle with tickets given to students with good or improved attendance. Despite limited funds, Marshall managed to purchase "Piners" gear for her students, using outreach and donations from Lakewood's business community. These incentives strengthened the school's climate by taking a positive approach in rewarding students who had improved their attendance.

Percentage of Students Chronically Absent by Grade, 2014–15 School Year



Sources: New Jersey Department of Education and specific district data from Community Charter School of Paterson, Closter Borough, Freehold Twp., Maria Varisco-Rogers Charter School, Newark Prep Charter School, Pace Charter School of Hamilton, Palisades Park, Wharton Borough.

By Grade

Chronic absenteeism in New Jersey remained highest in the very early grades and in high school, keeping with trends from last year's report. The data follow a "U curve," starting with high absenteeism in kindergarten, dipping in early elementary grades, and then rising back above 10 percent in high school. This culminated with 18 percent of high school juniors and seniors missing more than 10 percent of their enrolled days. In high-absenteeism districts, this number jumped to 26 percent of 11th- and 12th-graders.

Early grades. When children miss school in the early years, they lose out on the academic and social/emotional foundation necessary for overall success. Yet New Jersey continued to reflect national trends of higher absenteeism in these grades. Kindergarten in particular had high chronic absenteeism, with 12 percent of students chronically absent in school year 2014–15.

High absenteeism in the early grades has been shown to predict absenteeism in the later grades, as well as grade repeating, behavioral problems and low academic performance in elementary school.⁵

NJ Chronically Absent K-3 Students, 2014-15

GRADE	Total # Enrolled Students	Total # of Chronically Absent Students	Average Percentage of Chronically-Absent Students
Kindergarten	93,031	11,281	12
1	102,097	8,912	9
2	104,146	7,809	7
3	102,623	6,647	6
TOTAL K-3	401,897	34,649	9

Sources: New Jersey Department of Education and specific district data from Community Charter School of Paterson, Closter Borough, Freehold Township, Maria Varisco-Rogers Charter School, Pace Charter School of Hamilton, Palisades Park and Wharton Borough.

Because the 2014-15 state-funded preschool data are incomplete, this report does not compare preschool data with the data from other grades. Nonetheless, the available data indicates that 29 percent of 3- and 4-year-old New Jersey preschool students were chronically absent in 2014–15.

High school. In high school, the risk of missing too much school is linked with a higher likelihood of dropping out of school altogether. National research shows that absenteeism in ninth grade is more predictive of high school dropout than eighth grade test scores.⁶ Despite these risks, high schoolers had elevated rates of chronic absenteeism in New Jersey, with 15 percent of high schoolers chronically absent, compared to 8 percent of K-8 students.



NJ Chronically Absent High School Students, 2014-15

GRADE	Total # Enrolled Students	Total # of Chronically Absent Students	Average Percentage of Chronically-Absent Students
9	107,039	12,728	12
10	103,621	13,605	13
11	99,425	14,410	14
12	100,682	21,074	21
TOTAL 9-12	410,767	61,817	15

Sources: New Jersey Department of Education and specific district data from Newark Prep Charter School and Palisades Park.

Recent Developments in Battling Absenteeism

Since ACNJ's first chronic absenteeism report in September 2015, educators, policymakers and stakeholders have addressed absenteeism at the local, state and federal levels. Below are a few of the highlights:

Local changes:

- Individual districts and local groups are reaching out to learn more about chronic absenteeism or taking actionable steps to reduce absences.
- ACNJ released a report on K-3 chronic absenteeism in Newark. As a result, the city and the school district are working to address attendance issues.

State changes:

- A bill was introduced in the New Jersey Senate and Assembly that would define chronic absenteeism, require schools to include chronic absentee data in their school report cards and require schools with 10 percent or more of their students identified as being chronically absent to convene a team of

at least one teacher and parent to address the school's barriers to regular school attendance.

- The New Jersey Department of Education convened a statewide chronic absenteeism team, of which ACNJ is a member. The team attended a national chronic absenteeism conference in June 2016 to share data and develop strategies for addressing absenteeism at a statewide level.

Federal changes:

- The U.S. Department of Education, along with the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice, launched "Every Student, Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism." The goals of the initiative are to raise awareness about the chronic absenteeism problem throughout the country and to provide supports to states, school districts, communities and schools that are taking steps to address the issue.

District Focus: Trenton

“Be Present, Be Punctual, Be Prepared, Be Promoted”

As the new principal and vice-principal of Trenton's Hedgepeth/Williams Middle School of the Arts, Adrienne Hill and Gregory Green knew that big changes had to happen if the school was ever going to lose its status as a "Turnaround School." But, when the administrators began in September 2015, nearly a quarter of their sixth through eighth grade students were considered chronically absent. "If we can't get kids here, we can't turn this school around," said Hill.

Their approach was simple: Make students accountable, but help them and their families when they need it. The school team knew that they would succeed if they built strong relationships with the students and their families and made Hedgepeth/Williams a welcoming place for students, parents and staff.

Before Hill and Green took over at Hedgepeth/Williams, it was common for students to be promoted, even with high numbers of absences. Students soon found out that absences would now lead to clear consequences. But holding students to a higher standard without the appropriate supports did not address the issues that impede students from coming to school. Green advised, "It can't all be policy and procedure. Don't ignore the therapeutic."

Even before school started, the school formed an Attendance Team comprised of Vice-Principal Green, the school's climate leader, a truant officer and the parent liaison. The 30 most chronically absent students were identified, and the team developed a "human relations" strategy. Proactive mediation letters were sent home to parents, and students also began to receive "We Miss You" postcards. (Pictured right). "These postcards put some of the responsibility on the student, but also let them know that they were missed," said Hill.

To determine each family's attendance barriers, the school team scheduled family meetings and worked to reduce the barriers mentioned. For example, when non-English-speaking parents said that their children were missing school because they needed them to translate at a meeting or a doctor's appointment, the school offered online English classes for parents.

Teachers also became an integral part of the strategy. They were required to personally call students' homes after three absences to invite them back to school and to find out if there were any problems or help needed. Although this was a shift in practice for some, this step made a difference to the students and their families.

The administrative team also realized that addressing the needs of students was only part of the solution. The culture and climate of the school had to change.

The team rebranded Hedgepeth/Williams as "the best middle school in Trenton." The school's slogan became, "Be present, be punctual, be prepared and be promoted." By promoting student-driven activities such as a stronger student government and morning meetings, students were given a platform and a voice.

The school celebrates student successes by giving out "Tiger Tokens" (the school's mascot) when students demonstrate improved behavior or attend school regularly. "There is nothing expensive given out. It just shows the students that we recognize their efforts," said Hill.

In a single year, the school's leadership did turn attendance around. During one month, the school's absenteeism rate was reduced to just 6 percent. The team believes that the students now know that their school—and the adults in it—are there for them. Green noted "Our students are painfully aware of those individuals who care for them. In that way, they are all 'gifted and talented.'"



Policy “Lessons Learned”

Since the release of its first statewide chronic absenteeism report in September 2015, ACNJ has had the unique opportunity to examine this issue and why it is such a problem at the local, state and national level. During this time, ACNJ identified several important lessons that can improve school attendance.

- **Chronic absenteeism is the “gateway” to other issues.** Once a district takes an in-depth look at chronic absenteeism, it will find deeper issues that are contributing to those missed days. For example, in ACNJ’s 2016 Newark report on K–3 chronic absenteeism, school staff and parents identified risk factors that impacted school attendance. These included student/family health, transportation, conflicting work and school schedules, weather and safety. As a result, Newark’s school leadership is reviewing policies that will address some of these issues. ACNJ recommends that districts take an in-depth look at the issues and root causes driving absenteeism.
- **New Jersey needs a definition for “chronic absenteeism.”** ACNJ’s conversations with educators in preparing this report revealed a lack of a consistent definition for “chronic absenteeism,” with schools often focusing on “average daily attendance” or “truancy” instead. In order to ensure that districts define and accurately collect the same data, a state definition is necessary. Bills A2352/S447, which are currently being considered in the New Jersey Legislature, would address this issue.
- **It is difficult for schools to move past compliance.** School districts are often focused on the legal requirements of collecting attendance data and providing consequences for excessive absences. Though this is important to ensure fairness and accountability, compliance is only the first step in turning the curve on chronic absenteeism. Time and again, school administrators and teachers told ACNJ that improved

school culture and meaningful student-staff connections, such as phone calls to parents or home visits, were essential in reducing chronic absenteeism.

- **Reviewing data “early and often” drives improvement.** In order to reduce absenteeism, schools need to know as early as possible which students are missing too much school. Poor attendance in the first month of school is a strong predictor of chronic absenteeism for the rest of the year.⁷ By not reviewing absentee data in the first critical weeks in September, schools are missing an opportunity to prevent problems before they begin. Reviewing the data should also include attention to demographic risk factors for absenteeism including race, special education enrollment and family income.
- **Parents should play a role in identifying the problems and the solutions.** There was a great deal of overlap when Newark teachers, nurses and parents identified some of the reasons why so many young students missed so much school. However, the parents provided many additional insights about why getting to school every day was overwhelming for so many children and their families. Whether through focus groups, parent inclusion on attendance teams, surveys or other methods, ACNJ recommends that districts engage parents regularly to identify reasons for absenteeism and potential solutions.



District Focus: Pemberton

“Meeting Kids and Parents Where They Are”

“**M**eeting kids and parents where they are” was key in reducing Pemberton’s chronic absenteeism percentage by 11 percent between the 2013–14 and 2014–15 school years.

It was all hands on deck when former superintendent Dr. Michael Gorman prioritized reducing chronic absenteeism in the 2014–15 school year in this PreK–12 Burlington County district. The district’s Director of Special Services, Adelina Giannetti, led the reforms with lots of input from administrators and staff. By focusing on student strengths rather than deficits, the team came up with several approaches that aimed to combat chronic absenteeism in their district:

- **Knowing the data.** Pemberton identified students early on who were at risk of being chronically absent. “If we are going to address the problem, we need to put the names behind the numbers,” said Giannetti.

- **Connecting students with specific staff.** Pemberton’s guidance counselors, speech therapists and members of the Child Study Teams zeroed in on the more than 200 students who were chronically absent in the previous year. Each of the staff members built personal relationships with five to seven students to help them improve their school attendance.

- **Engaging parents early.** Rather than waiting until a student missed 10 days of school, the district wanted to engage parents earlier. After two absences in September or four total absences during the year, parents were brought in to discuss problems and solutions. “We wanted to put those students on the radar immediately,” said Giannetti. The team continued to talk to parents throughout the year.

- **Using incentives.** The team recognized the importance of offering incentives for improved attendance. Each school provided multiple opportunities for students to receive gift cards when students came to school regularly.

- **Board policy changes.** Pemberton’s Board of Education made student attendance a priority. The board clarified its policies and procedures to outline steps to be taken when students are absent. These responses ranged from a school counselor phone call, to the creation of an action plan for a student, to the involvement of the legal system.

Giannetti noted how important it is to emphasize the value of regular attendance to parents and families. “Not every parent values education the way we would like, and sometimes getting their kids to school is a chore for them,” said Giannetti.

She also said that it is important to encourage staff to think outside the box when trying to solve individual student absenteeism, rather than search for one-size-fits-all strategies.



Conclusion

It is common sense that regardless of age, when a student misses too much school, it becomes harder for them to achieve academic success. And it only takes missing school two days each month for a student's success to be at risk.

The good news is that the chronic absenteeism problem is not insurmountable. It can be turned around on the local level when schools, districts, community agencies and families collaborate to review the data "early and often," identify and remove the barriers that are causing absenteeism and provide a school culture and climate that engages students so they want to come to school. On the state level, New Jersey needs strong policies to ensure uniformity and accountability, beginning with defining chronic absenteeism and requiring teams to develop specific solutions at schools with high absenteeism.

In the last year, New Jersey has come a long way in both learning about its chronic absenteeism problem and taking steps to solve it. But there is still a long way to go. By demonstrating that every day matters, communities, schools and parents can work collaboratively to address the issues that often make it difficult for students to attend school every day. In the long term, effective collaboration will mean success for our students and our communities.



Data Sources and Technical Notes:

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