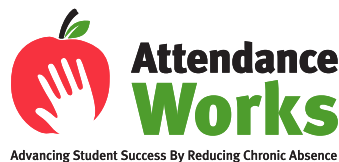


# Framework for Action: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism through ESSA Implementation



HEALTHY SCHOOLS  
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# Framework for Action: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism through ESSA Implementation

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) recognizes the need for schools to support the whole child and specifically acknowledges the importance of health and wellness. ESSA also provides an opportunity to ensure equitable access to quality education and the conditions that support student learning. Health is a key part of this. ESSA transitions authority from the federal government to state education agencies. Thus, as states begin to implement ESSA, it is critical they do so in a way that supports health and wellness.

The good news is that schools do not need to do this alone. ESSA calls for stakeholder engagement from multiple sectors to create state ESSA plans. The vision ESSA presents of supporting the whole child aligns closely with the visions of other sectors, including the public health sector.

States can take a comprehensive approach to developing their state ESSA plan by using the different plan elements to support each other. For example, an ideal state plan might include:

- State accountability system that requires schools to maintain healthy school environments
- State and local report cards that publicly track how schools perform on additional indicators not appropriate for an accountability system
- State assessments that ensure school districts are offering a well-rounded education by testing students on the state's existing, or emerging, standards in health, PE or social-emotional learning
- Needs assessments that consider health and wellness, and identify evidence-based policies, practices and programs to lead to school improvement
- A professional development program that equips educators to better meet the needs of the whole child

This resource is intended to supplement the document titled "[State ESSA Plans to Support Student Health and](#)

[Wellness: A Framework for Action](#)." It is meant to help those who are particularly interested in leveraging ESSA to support efforts to address chronic absenteeism.

Given that ESSA requires states to include rate of chronic absenteeism in their report cards, ESSA presents an important opportunity to create public accountability around chronic absenteeism and ensure state ESSA plans support a comprehensive approach to address chronic absenteeism. This approach can include integrating chronic absenteeism in state accountability systems required under ESSA, ensuring needs assessments are used to identify the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism, delivering evidence-based programs that address the root causes of chronic absenteeism and ensuring school staff receive professional development on how to address chronic absenteeism in their schools. Leveraging ESSA to address chronic absenteeism is a key strategy to supporting student success.

## What is chronic absenteeism?

Chronic absenteeism is most commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason: excused, unexcused or suspension. Chronic absenteeism is a proven early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout. While the causes of chronic absenteeism are multifold, research shows that student health and a school's health and wellness environment are key factors that can contribute to a student being chronically absent.<sup>1</sup>

More than 6.8 million students (14 percent) nationwide were chronically absent during the 2013-14 academic year, according to a report released by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). These chronically absent students included more than 3 million high school students (19 percent) and 3.5 million elementary school students (11 percent). While this data shows that chronic absenteeism impacts students in all parts of the country and is prevalent among all races, as well as

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1. Upstream Public Health, "The Connection Between Missing School and Health: A Review of Chronic Absenteeism and Student Health in Oregon." Available at: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Chronic-Absence-and-Health-Review-10.8.14-FINAL-REVISED.pdf>

students with disabilities, significant disparities exist. Compared to their Caucasian peers, American Indian and Pacific Islander students are over 50 percent more likely to be chronically absent, African American students are 30 percent more likely to be chronically absent and Hispanic students are nine percent more likely to be absent.<sup>2</sup>

### **What causes chronic absenteeism?**

Attendance is connected to multiple physical, social and environmental factors at the individual, family, community, school and district levels. Students miss school for a variety of reasons that researchers group into four categories: barriers, aversions, disengagement and myths. Barriers to attendance include unmanaged chronic health conditions like asthma, diabetes, obesity and related illness, seizure disorders, mental health and anxiety, and vision problems. Aversions to attendance include bullying, undiagnosed disabilities and overly punitive discipline policies. Disengagement includes a negative school climate or lack of supportive relationships at the school. Myths that affect attendance include fears related to issues like lice and also include the idea that absences are not a problem if they are excused.

While chronic absenteeism can affect students of any background, its most devastating impact is felt by students who face health disparities, poverty and other challenges in attaining school success. Research shows that these are the same students who benefit most from being in school. This impact is driven by two related factors: higher rates of health-related chronic absence, and a more profound impact of that absence. Students who face disproportionate rates of illness or other factors known to cause chronic absence (such as lack of transportation) often also lack resources to make up for missed instruction and the other missed benefits of being in school, such as access to nutrition programs and services.

### **What is the impact of chronic absenteeism on academic performance?**

Frequent absences can be devastating for a child's school success. For example, children who are

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2. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to be reading at grade level by the third grade.<sup>3</sup> Students who are not reading at grade level by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.<sup>4</sup> By sixth grade, chronic absenteeism becomes one of the leading indicators that a student will drop out of high school.<sup>5</sup> By high school, attendance is a better dropout indicator than test scores.

### **How can chronic absenteeism be addressed?**

Chronic absenteeism can be turned around if schools and community partners work together with families to monitor who is at risk for poor attendance, nurture a habit of regular attendance, and identify and address the challenges that prevent students from getting to school.

**Problem-solving approach.** First and foremost, it is critical that educators and community stakeholders use a problem-solving, rather than blaming, approach to addressing chronic absence. States and districts should use chronic absence rates to identify those schools and districts that need support and technical assistance. Next, districts and schools should analyze their chronic absence data and use the results to engage community partners in efforts to remove attendance barriers, solicit resources, and spread positive messages about the importance of daily attendance. The [Attendance Works website](#) offers a wealth of strategies and resources to help districts, schools and communities reduce chronic absence. One of the most effective ways to address chronic absence is with a comprehensive, multi-tiered system of supports that combines prevention with early and consistent interventions—as

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3. Ehrlich, S., Gwynne, J. A., Pareja, A. S., and Allensworth, E. M. Preschool attendance in Chicago public schools: relationships with learning outcomes and reasons for absences: Research summary. The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Reform, 2013. <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/preschool-attendance-chicago-public-schools-relationships-learning-outcomes-and-reasons>

4. Hernandez, D. Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011 April. p. 3.

5. Balfanz, R., Herzon, L., and Mac Iver, D. J. Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 2007; 42(4),223-235.

determined by students' needs. Legal action should be used only as a very last resort.

**Health and wellness.** While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing chronic absenteeism, it is critical that stakeholders understand the connection between school health and chronic absenteeism and have the information necessary to implement interventions that address student health needs. It is also important to note that there are many proven strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism and it is critical to provide states and districts with guidance on how to implement these effective solutions. Healthy Schools Campaign's [Addressing the Health-Related Causes of Chronic Absenteeism: A Toolkit for Action](#) provides additional details on effective solutions for addressing the health-related causes of chronic absenteeism. The health and public health sectors can play a key role in supporting the education sector in addressing the health-related causes of chronic absenteeism and ensuring students are present and engaged and prepared to lead healthy, productive lives.

**What data and policies exist to support making chronic absenteeism an accountability measure?**

As is described earlier, ESSA requires states to include chronic absenteeism on their state report cards. Title I of ESSA requires that both state and local report cards include rates of chronic absenteeism, defined by ED as missing 15 days or more of school for any reason in a school year. Given the connection between student health and chronic absenteeism, requiring states and districts to report their rates of chronic absenteeism is a key strategy for highlighting the importance of student health and raising awareness about chronic absenteeism.

Given that ESSA requires states to include rate of chronic absenteeism in their report cards, ESSA presents an important opportunity to create public accountability around chronic absenteeism and ensure state ESSA plans support a comprehensive approach to address chronic absenteeism. ESSA gives states the responsibility of choosing at least one indicator to measure school quality or student success that is reliable, valid and allows for disaggregation of data at the sub-group level. Chronic absence is a powerful early warning predictor of student performance. Based on

the correlation of chronic absenteeism with student achievement and the ability to provide action-oriented information on this metric to educators to improve school environments, chronic absenteeism is a highly effective measure of school quality and student success.

There is tremendous value in including rate of chronic absenteeism in both state accountability systems and report cards. State accountability systems serve as a concrete way to ensure that schools are meeting state benchmarks for priority areas. In contrast, state and local report cards are more of a community accountability system that can provide advocates with the information they need to push for changes. As a result, including rate of chronic absenteeism in both the state accountability systems and report cards is an important strategy to ensure states and schools establish goals related to chronic absenteeism and that states and schools are held publicly accountable for addressing chronic absenteeism.

In addition, it is also important to note that chronic absence is a measure which school districts must already report to the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and is based upon data they already maintain in their systems. Specifically, ED requires public schools across the country to report their rates of chronic absenteeism as a part of the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). The inclusion of chronic absenteeism was a new requirement for the 2013-2014 CRDC, which means that the 99.5 percent of schools across the country that complete the CRDC are now measuring and reporting chronic absenteeism as a part of the CRDC.

Since chronic absenteeism data is available, is already being reported and is requirement for state and school report cards under ESSA, making chronic absenteeism an accountability measure would not create a new burden for states or districts. It is also important to note that chronic absenteeism meets or exceeds all of the criteria ESSA has established for accountability measures.

The following table, created by Attendance Works, summarizes how chronic absenteeism aligns with each of the required ESSA accountability measure criteria:

ESSA Indicators Must:	
Be applicable to every student	All enrolled students are included in attendance counts; no students are excluded.
Provide summary and disaggregated data	Chronic absence rates can be reported separately for all subgroups of students in a school, district, and state.
Be comparable across a state’s school districts	States already have protocols that standardize attendance taking and reporting. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights has recently required states to track and report a standard measure of chronic absence. As a result, chronic absence rates will be comparable within states and, unlike many indicators, across the nation.
Be able to distinguish differences in performance among schools	Chronic absence levels vary substantially among students and schools within any district or state. These variations are not random; they represent meaningful differences in student engagement, achievement, and success.
Be valid	Test scores are measures of test success, which can be strongly or weakly related to subject matter mastery. Chronic absence, on the other hand, measures how much school has been missed.
Be reliable	Counting errors aside, taking attendance and computing chronic absence repeatedly will yield a consistent result.
Have a proven impact on achievement	An abundance of studies link chronic absence to academic achievement. <a href="#">Click here for a compilation of research</a> on chronic absence and its relationship to student success.

Credit: Attendance Works

In order for schools to solve chronic absenteeism problems, they will need to understand what is driving the low attendance rates. To that end, the chronic absenteeism indicator should also be integrated into other components of state ESSA plans, such as school report cards, needs assessments, evidence-based interventions and professional development programs, as outlined below.

### **How can state report cards support efforts to address chronic absenteeism?**

As described above, ESSA requires states that receive Title I funding to include chronic absenteeism on their state report card. ESSA also requires states that receive Title I funding to include other measures that relate to or inform student attendance: rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions; school-related arrests and referrals to law enforcement; and incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment. Including these measures on state report cards can help states and communities better understand the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism and intervene accordingly.

In addition, including the following measures of school health on state report cards is an important strategy for better understanding and addressing the health-related causes of chronic absenteeism:

- **School breakfast participation:** When students eat breakfast, they have better attendance rates and improved academic achievement. However, according to the Food Research and Action Center, only about half the number of students who are eligible for free school breakfast actually eat breakfast.<sup>6</sup> School report cards should include the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-cost school meals, the percentage of students who eat lunch and the percentage of students who eat breakfast at school.
- **Integrated pest management and green cleaning policy:** According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 10.5 million school days are missed each

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6. Food Research & Action Center, "Mapping School Breakfast: Participation, Funding, and Growth." Available at: <http://frac.org/research/resource-library/mapping-school-breakfast-participation-funding-growth>

year due to asthma. Maintaining a healthy school environment by eliminating triggers for chronic illnesses such as asthma would positively impact attendance rates.<sup>7</sup> Report cards should indicate whether a school's policies and practices comply with state law related to Integrated Pest Management and green cleaning.

- **Ratio of students to school nurses:** Research published in the Journal of School Health shows that when students have access to a school nurse, their attendance improves because they are better able to manage chronic illness and can avoid trips to the emergency room.<sup>8</sup> Schools are already required to submit this information to OCR.
- **Ratio of students to school mental health professionals:** Mental health conditions, behavior issues and trauma are all causes of school avoidance and truancy.<sup>9</sup> Schools are already submitting this information to OCR.

Including the above measures on state report cards can provide parents and other school stakeholders with information that creates a more comprehensive picture of a school's efforts to address chronic absenteeism.

### **How can needs assessments support efforts to address chronic absenteeism?**

Under Title I, schools identified for targeted or comprehensive improvement must undertake a comprehensive needs assessment to hone in on specific areas of need, as well as available resources and assets. Comprehensive needs assessments should help schools identify the root causes of chronic absenteeism specific to their student population. For example, while the causes of chronic absenteeism are

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7. United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Managing Asthma in the School Environment." Available at: <https://www.epa.gov/iaq-schools/managing-asthma-school-environment>

8. "School Nurses' Role in Asthma Management, School Absenteeism, and Cost Savings: A Demonstration Project." Available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josh.12102/abstract>

9. Upstream Public Health, "The Connection Between Missing School and Health: A Review of Chronic Absenteeism and Student Health in Oregon." Available at: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Chronic-Absence-and-Health-Review-10.8.14-FINAL-REVISED.pdf>

multifold, student health conditions present ongoing challenges to attendance. Health-related chronic absenteeism affects children in ways that can shape academic outcomes for their entire school career. Both chronic and acute health conditions can prevent students from attending school. Common conditions include dental caries, asthma, influenza, diabetes, obesity and related illness, seizure disorders, mental health and anxiety and hearing and vision problems. Additionally, students who are less connected to their school or adults in their schools, or those who experience a non-supportive school climate, may be less likely to come to school.

A needs assessment that helps schools understand the root causes of chronic absenteeism should take into account a range of student needs, including school climate and safety, environmental health risks, common health barriers and the availability of qualified on-site school health professionals. The needs assessment should help schools create coordinated interventions that include school and community-based resources. States should consider including the following in their needs assessment templates:

- School chronic absence data disaggregated by grade, student sub-population and, if possible, by classroom
- Information about the health status of students, such as the number of students attending school with asthma, diabetes or other chronic conditions
- School climate and safety, such as through the ED's School Climate Survey
- School discipline policies
- School suspension, expulsion and office referral data
- School mobility data
- School health policies and practices using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) School Health Index or the Alliance for a Healthier Generation Healthy Schools Program assessment
- Environmental health needs of school buildings against the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Model School Environmental Health Program guidelines.
- Staffing patterns, such as the ratio of qualified health professionals to students, including but not limited

to in-school school nurses, social workers and school counselors using district human resources data.

- Youth Risk Behavior Survey data (if available locally)
- Quality and availability of school-based before- and/or after-school programs (particularly those that support health and wellness through implementation of the healthy eating and physical activity standards)
- Methods of supporting family and community engagement
- School breakfast participation if the school has a breakfast program
- Access to physical activity, including recess and physical education

States can also help school districts identify additional public agencies or nonprofits that work on public health, health care, juvenile justice or behavioral health, to find locally available data to incorporate into their assessments. This may include hospital data, such as pediatric emergency room visits for specific conditions or crime rates by neighborhood, including gang activity or death rates.

Based on the findings from a school's comprehensive needs assessments, school districts could opt to use Title I funds to target policy, program and practice interventions to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism, in partnership with community-based resources (to the extent possible). In addition, this data can help school districts select evidence-based interventions to address any insufficiencies that are identified. A significant body of research documents evidence-based interventions that can be used to address chronic absenteeism. These include:

- Creating a supportive school climate that promotes health and well-being; for example, training teachers on methods such as Responsive Classroom, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Restorative Practices or other such approaches
- Increasing access to school health services, including physical and behavioral health services
- Adopting an early warning system to identify students at greatest risk of being chronically absent
- Addressing environmental health challenges of



the school to reduce asthma triggers; for example, implementing integrated pest management, reducing unnecessary chemicals in the school, implementing mold remediation, implementing the American Lung Association's Asthma Friendly Schools Initiative and other approaches

- Ensuring that students have chronic disease management plans, such as food allergy or asthma action plans that are shared and discussed with school personnel, including classroom teachers
- Developing staffing structures to support students with a range of needs
- Creating or enhancing partnerships with community entities to create wrap-around models of care
- Ensuring that students with chronic health conditions have a medical home
- Implementing a school breakfast program

Additional examples of evidence-based interventions to address the health-related causes of chronic absenteeism are included in HSC's [Addressing the Health-Related Causes of Chronic Absenteeism: A Toolkit for Action](#).

### **How can professional development support efforts to address chronic absenteeism?**

Professional development programs should ensure that school staff can attain the goals created by the state's accountability system, and performance of the indicators on state and local report cards. ESSA specifically creates an opportunity for districts to apply for funding that allows them to train all school personnel to address issues in the school climate that can create barriers to learning, including peer interaction and chronic absenteeism. This means that schools can use professional development to improve programs that help students feel more connected to school, as well as those meant to reduce absences caused by illness. ESSA funding might be used to support professional development programs focused on:

- Social and emotional learning
- Capacity building for school, community and parent/caregiver engagement
- Building the capacity of superintendents and

principals to develop and implement an early warning system, create a school environment that is supportive of students and staff, and support student health and school wellness

- Building the capacity of school personnel responsible for maintaining school facilities around EPA's School Environmental Health Program, green cleaning and integrated pest management

### **What type of partners can support the state or school districts?**

Many partners are available to support states and school districts in addressing chronic absenteeism.

[Attendance Works](#) is a national and state initiative that promotes awareness of the important role that school attendance plays in achieving academic success starting with school entry. Attendance Works is focused on building public awareness and political will around the need to address chronic absence, fostering state campaigns by developing coalitions to advance state and local policies that promote tracking attendance for individual students and reporting on chronic absence, and encouraging local practice by providing technical assistance and tools to help communities, schools and school districts monitor and work together to address chronic absence.

The following stakeholders might also be helpful partners in tackling chronic absenteeism:

- Local hospitals, particularly children's hospitals
- Accountable Care Organizations, Managed Care Organizations and health plans responsible for providing coverage to students in your community
- Local community benefits experts; this could be the individual responsible for overseeing community benefits or community outreach at one of the local, non-profit children's hospitals
- Community organizations dedicated to supporting children's health
- State or local advocacy organizations
- Public health agencies or public health departments
- Pediatricians and the local chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics
- Dentists



These partners will vary greatly by community; the most practical partnerships will emerge from comprehensive needs assessment that identifies the primary causes of chronic absenteeism and opportunities for change identified in your school community.

Additionally, these groups may be active on education issues in your state:

- Teachers unions ([American Federation of Teachers](#) and the [National Education Association](#))
- State chapters of organizations such as [National PTA](#), [School-Based Health Alliance](#), [National Association of School Nurses](#), [National Association of State School Nurse Consultants](#), [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), [National School Boards Association](#), [Association of School Administrators](#), [American Heart Association](#), [Society of Health and Physical Educators \(SHAPE America\)](#), and others.
- Nontraditional messengers such as local businesses, [Council for a Strong America](#), or the [Chamber of Commerce](#)
- Partners from other sectors, such as early education leaders, hospitals and health systems, district attorneys or local housing agencies

## **Conclusion**

Addressing chronic absenteeism is a key strategy for reducing the academic achievement gap and meeting the overall objectives of ESSA. Including rates of chronic absence in state accountability systems and report cards and supporting efforts to address chronic absenteeism through needs assessments and professional development serve as critical strategies for reducing rates of chronic absence across the country and supporting student success. As states develop and implement their state ESSA plans, it is critical they do so with an understanding of the connection between chronic absenteeism and academic success.

# Summary of Opportunities for Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Through ESSA

Section of ESSA Plan	Chronic Absenteeism
Accountability Measure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Percent of students who are chronically absent</li> </ul>
School Report Card	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions*</li> <li>· School-related arrests*</li> <li>· Referrals to law enforcement*</li> <li>· Percent of students who are chronically absent*</li> <li>· Incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment*</li> <li>· School breakfast participation</li> <li>· Integrated Pest Management and green cleaning policy</li> <li>· Ratio of students to school nurses</li> <li>· Ratio of students to school mental health professionals</li> </ul> <p>(*required by ESSA)</p>
Needs Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Information about the health status of students</li> <li>· School climate and safety, such as the U.S. Department of Education’s <a href="#">School Climate Survey</a></li> <li>· School discipline policies</li> <li>· CDC <a href="#">School Health Index</a></li> <li>· EPA’s <a href="#">Model School Environmental Health Program</a> guidelines</li> <li>· Staffing patterns, such as the ratio of qualified health professionals to students, including but not limited to school nurses, social workers and school counselors, using district human resources data</li> </ul>

Continued on the next page

# Summary of Opportunities for Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Through ESSA, cont'd.

Section of ESSA Plan	Chronic Absenteeism
Evidence-Based Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· A supportive school climate that promotes health and well-being such as Responsive Classroom, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports</li> <li>· An early warning system to identify students at greatest risk of being chronically absent</li> <li>· Environmental health challenges of the school to reduce asthma triggers, such as integrated pest management, reducing unnecessary chemicals in the school, mold remediation and other issues</li> <li>· Ensuring that students have chronic disease management plans</li> <li>· Staffing structures to support students with a range of needs</li> <li>· Partnerships with community entities to create wrap-around models of care</li> </ul>
Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Social and emotional learning</li> <li>· Capacity building for school, community and parent/caregiver engagement</li> <li>· Building the capacity of superintendents and principals to develop and implement an early warning system, create a school environment that is supportive of students and staff, and support student health and school wellness</li> <li>· Building the capacity of school personnel responsible for maintaining school facilities around EPA's School Environmental Health Program, green cleaning and integrated pest management</li> </ul>

## Stay connected!

We invite you to learn more, access resources and lend your voice to this dialogue. For questions or to discuss this issue, please contact Alex Mays at [alex@healthyschoolscampaign.org](mailto:alex@healthyschoolscampaign.org).

### Alliance for a Healthier Generation

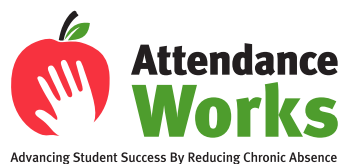
The Alliance for a Healthier Generation empowers kids to develop lifelong healthy habits, by ensuring the environments that surround them provide and promote good health. More than 25 million children have been helped by the Alliance's work with schools, communities and businesses across the country. Make a difference at [HealthierGeneration.org](http://HealthierGeneration.org) and join us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

### Healthy Schools Campaign

Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to making schools healthier places for all students. HSC provides leadership development and tools to school stakeholders and advocates for better access to nutritious school food, physical activity, school health resources and clean air to shape children's lifelong learning and health. For more, go to [healthyschoolscampaign.org](http://healthyschoolscampaign.org).

### Attendance Works

[Attendance Works](#) is a national organization dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, research and success stories about reducing chronic absence. Attendance Works also offers technical assistance to school districts and communities.



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