

5 Things

for Advocates to Know About

Chronic Absenteeism

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Chronic absence is often hidden

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Improving attendance requires prevention and early intervention

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Chronic absence is a reflection of the school and community environment

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Reducing chronic absence requires authentic partnerships with students, families, and communities

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Punitive responses are not effective



School attendance is an important predictor of student outcomes. [Research shows](#) that chronically absent students are less likely to read on grade-level by third grade, more likely to score lower on standardized tests and get suspended in middle school. These students are also more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to continue to postsecondary education. [Chronic absenteeism](#) can also affect social engagement starting as early as kindergarten.

Regular attendance ensures students have access to learning in the classroom and allows students to build relationships with their peers and adults in schools. But too often, students face barriers in and out of school that influence whether they attend school consistently. Chronic absence (missing 10% of school for any reason: excused, unexcused or suspension) is a warning sign that students are experiencing challenges and are missing out on classroom instruction.

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In addition to helping to identify individual students who are experiencing difficulties and providing them with individualized supports, chronic absenteeism data can be used to notice problematic patterns affecting a particular school, classroom, grade, or group of students. If large numbers of students are affected, programmatic or policy solutions may be needed to rectify the situation.

Chronic absence is on the rise: 8 million students were chronically absent before the pandemic closed schools, and the pandemic has led to alarming increases in chronic absence. In the 2020-21 school year, at least [10 million students](#) missed 10% or more of school days. Recent data from Connecticut, Michigan, California, and Ohio reveal that chronic absenteeism doubled in 2021-22 in these states, and it has likely [doubled nationwide to 16 million students](#).

These high levels of chronic absence have exacerbated educational and societal inequities that existed long before COVID-19. Students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students whose families speak languages other than English, and those with disabilities are more likely to be chronically absent from school — and may lack the resources and opportunities to make up for lost time in the classroom.

This equity issue can be addressed, however, when evidence-based decisions are made to identify and support the underlying causes of chronic absence. Here are five things that advocates should know about how leaders can address chronic absence:

1

Chronic absence is often hidden

Chronic absenteeism data, which has only become a widely used education metric during the last decade, is easily masked by average daily attendance and truancy data, which have been collected for a much longer time. Chronic absence reveals how many and which students have missed too much school for any reason, while truancy only counts unexcused absences. Average daily attendance reveals how many kids typically show up to school each day but does not reveal when absences are adding up for individual students. For example, in a school of 200 students with 95% average daily attendance, 50 students could be missing nearly a month of school (i.e., chronically absent) over the course of the school year. It all depends on whether absences are due to a large number of students missing a few days, or excessive absences among a small but still significant minority of students. For more details, see [Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight](#).

When it is available, chronic absenteeism data needs to be disaggregated by student demographics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, disability status, English learner status, etc.). When the data is only shown in the aggregate, the inequities for certain groups of students are easily hidden.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO

At the school and district level:

- ✓ Encourage monitoring chronic absence data in real time and respond as early as possible in the school year.
- ✓ Promote tracking and responding to chronic absence data early in a child's education, ideally in preschool but no later than in kindergarten.

At the state level:

- ✓ Ask that chronic absence data be publicly available, reported by grade and student groups for each school and districtwide, so it can be used to highlight systemic inequities, target resources to the groups most in need of support, and identify schools, practices, or policies that may be making a difference.

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2

Chronic absence is a reflection of the school and community environment

Chronic absence reflects the challenges students face in school, such as bullying, lack of an engaging curriculum or meaningful relationships, and feeling physically or emotionally unsafe. It also results from insufficient resources in the community that lead to challenges, such as unstable housing, inadequate healthcare, and poor transportation. These barriers affect students' ability to engage in school and are cyclical in causing students to miss school. For example, a lack of meaningful relationships can lead students to disengage from school and choose not to attend. Those students then miss opportunities to build the relationships that would make them feel they belong in school, and the cycle continues.

Beyond the individual experiences that may lead to chronic absence, high levels of chronic absence in a school or among a group of students reflect systemic challenges and historical discrimination that typically require programmatic or policy solutions. It is the responsibility of policymakers and practitioners to create the environments where students and families feel welcome and valued. Learn more in [Using Chronic Absence to Improve Conditions for Learning](#).

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO

At the school and district level:

- ✓ Ask school and district leaders what kinds of professional development are available for all adults in schools to build relationships with students, support students from diverse backgrounds, and connect students with resources to meet their social, emotional, and academic needs.
- ✓ Ask what school and district leaders are doing to create positive, equitable learning environments, and how they are using school climate data to make improvements.
- ✓ Ask school and district leaders how the adopted curriculum is both rigorous for students at all levels and reflective of students' diverse experiences and backgrounds.

At the state level:

- ✓ Urge using chronic absence data and other metrics to allocate adequate resources in improving school and community conditions, particularly where educational disparities have been the greatest.

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3

Punitive responses are not effective

Punitive actions have not been shown to improve attendance. A [study](#) in South Carolina shows, for example, that absences got worse when using probation to respond to truancy. Efforts to institute civil penalties, such as tickets and fines, for truant students and their families, and criminal penalties, such as jailing parents, [have not been shown](#) to deter student absences, and the creation of a criminal record has long-lasting negative impacts for students and their families. Additionally, school and district-level actions that aim to punish students by refusing to accept make-up work, barring students from extracurricular activities, or suspending them for absences, only exacerbate the problem at hand.

Equally troubling, punitive actions do not lead to a real understanding of why kids miss school, nor do they address the underlying reasons that students are absent. What works is positive problem-solving to help students and families overcome what keeps them from showing up to class in the first place, whether they are barriers, experiences pushing them out of school, lack of engagement, or misconceptions about the importance of attendance.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO

At the school and district level:

- ✓ Urge school and district leaders to use evidence-based practices that address the root of the problem, rather than ineffective punitive approaches that push students out of school. Ask leaders to use quantitative and qualitative data to examine whether discipline policies and practices are adversely affecting student engagement, especially for students of color.

At the state level:

- ✓ Ask that state leaders publish data comparing excused vs. unexcused absences overall and disaggregated by school, grade, race/ethnicity, income, home language, disability, foster care, experiencing homelessness, zip code, and mode of learning.

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4

Improving attendance requires prevention and early intervention

The key to solving chronic absence is understanding and addressing the underlying challenges that cause students to miss school in the first place. What works is a tiered response, beginning with universal supports that promote positive conditions of learning and then bolstering with additional interventions that provide more personalized and increasingly intensive interventions, as needed. Such a prevention oriented approach, described in more depth [here](#), is not only more effective, but less costly than a punitive approach that depends upon the legal system.

To be most effective, the specifics of this tiered approach should be tailored to address local realities and challenges as well as build upon local assets and strengths. Truly grounding the tiered approach in what is happening locally requires partnering closely with students and families to understand their challenges and strengths. A cookie cutter approach is much less effective, especially in the aftermath of a pandemic that has resulted in even greater differences in the economic, social, and health conditions experienced by families.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO

At the school and district level:

- ✓ Encourage school and district leaders, as well as state and federal policymakers, to identify where additional investment and strategic support are needed to remove systemic barriers and expand opportunities to learn.
- ✓ Encourage school and district leaders to implement locally tailored multi-tiered systems of support to identify and connect students with the resources they need.

At the state level:

- ✓ Provide guidance and professional development to help districts review their own data and understand how they can take a tiered approach to improving attendance.

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5

Reducing chronic absence requires authentic partnerships with students, families, and communities

Schools and their partners need to develop strong relationships with students and families, especially from marginalized communities, and engage them in developing solutions to the attendance-related issues that affect their lives. Unless school leaders draw upon the knowledge of their students and families, they are unlikely to create effective solutions, especially given the diverse and rapidly changing realities that affect student attendance.

Chronic absenteeism reflects challenges in schools and/or the communities that can be collectively addressed when schools partner with community organizations, public agencies, and other groups with resources to help resolve barriers to attendance and build relationships with students and families.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO

At the local and state level:

- ✓ Organize youth and families to work with schools, communities, and the district to identify barriers to attendance and develop solutions.
- ✓ Encourage schools to create strong partnerships with students and families, especially from marginalized communities, to find out about barriers to attendance and engage them in co-developing solutions. An essential component of co-creating solutions is making sure that educators and staff invest in examining their own biases and learn about students' and families' identities and experiences.

At the state level:

- ✓ Ask for funding and technical assistance to help schools and districts forge authentic partnerships with students and families.

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