



# Portraits of Change

ALIGNING SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY  
RESOURCES TO REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENCE

SEPTEMBER 2017



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**Attendance Works** ([www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)) is a national initiative dedicated to improving attendance policy, practice and research. Its website offers a rich array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.



**Everyone Graduates Center** ([www.every1graduates.org](http://www.every1graduates.org)) at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Education seeks to identify the barriers that stand in the way of all students graduating from high school prepared for adult success, develop strategic solutions to overcome the barriers and build local capacity to implement and sustain them.

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# Introduction

More than seven million students nationwide are chronically absent from school—missing so much school, for any reason, that they are academically at risk.<sup>i</sup> Starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence erodes students' ability to learn and achieve in school. It increases the likelihood that children are unable to read well by third grade, fail classes in middle school and drop out of high school.<sup>ii</sup> Children living in poverty are two to three times more likely to be chronically absent<sup>iii</sup>—and face the most harm because they lack the resources to make up for the lost learning in school.<sup>iv</sup> Students from communities of color (African American, Native American, Pacific Islander and Latino) as well as those with disabilities are disproportionately affected.

Also troubling is the discovery that some schools are much more affected by chronic absence than others. Our analysis of national data from 92,333 schools found that in one of ten schools, more than 30 percent of students were chronically absent in 2013–14, the most recent year for available data to analyze. In an additional 11 percent of schools, between 20 to 29 percent of students were chronically absent.

When chronic absence reaches high levels in a classroom or school, all students—not just those with too many absences—may suffer because the resulting classroom churn hampers teachers' ability to engage all students and meet their learning needs.<sup>vi</sup> And while urban areas and high schools typically have the largest percentage of students missing school, the problem also exists in rural, town and suburban districts as well as in elementary and middle schools. Greater poverty predicts higher levels of chronic absence.

Our analysis also found that, across states, the percentage of all schools in a given state experiencing extreme chronic absence (30 percent or more of students) varied significantly from 2 to 29 percent. To best understand how many and which schools are most affected by chronic absence, data must be examined at the state and local levels. Gaining a deeper understanding of the size and scale of the problem is critical to determining how best to align resources in order to prevent and address

chronic absence. State by state analyses of school level chronic absence [can be obtained here](#).

Inspiring examples found throughout the country demonstrate that chronic absence can be turned around, even when it reaches high levels in a school or district or among a particular student population. What works is taking a data-driven, comprehensive approach that begins with engaging students and families as well as preventing absences from adding up. The key is using data as a diagnostic tool to help identify and target where chronic absence is a problem. This enables schools, families and community partners to jointly determine the causes and implement sufficient supports and solutions that prevent students from missing so much class that they fall behind academically. Schools with higher levels typically require a more comprehensive approach as well as more support from community partners and public agencies.

Previously rarely calculated, chronic absence data is increasingly available, providing more opportunity than ever before to use data to align resources and take timely action. Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, chronic absence is a required reporting metric for local and state report cards and an optional measure for school accountability. A growing number of states already make chronic absence data available annually online. Equally important, timely data on chronic absence is increasingly available at the district

level, thanks to technology improvements, including the adoption of early warning systems (which use a combination of data on attendance, academics and behavior to identify at risk students) and clearer, easier-to-use data dashboards displaying key metrics.

While not a substitute for quality teaching, reducing chronic absence is key to realizing the benefits of investments in improved instruction and curriculum. Ensuring that children have an equal opportunity to learn, regardless of social class or the circumstances in which they are born, is a broadly shared American value. And reducing chronic absence is critical to ensuring that all children have a shot at success in a global economy, where graduating from school and advancing to college are more essential than ever.

Reducing chronic absence is a matter of concern for the entire community. It helps produce a strong and skilled workforce, today and tomorrow. When students are in school, their parents are more likely to be present at their jobs. When students develop the habit of attendance while they are young, they are better equipped to succeed on the job as adults. Improving attendance is also a matter of public safety. Being in class helps engage students in productive activities during the school day and prepare them for a productive future. High levels of absences can also be an indicator of problematic health or environmental conditions that threaten the well-being of the entire community. By reducing chronic absence and ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to learn, we lay a foundation for vibrant, healthy, economically viable communities.

We all share a responsibility to act in order to ensure that children are in school every day. School administrators as well as district and state education leaders are especially key because they need to lead in collecting, monitoring and sharing data. As this brief details, many others also have a key role to play in ensuring that all students, especially the most vulnerable, receive the supports they need to get to school, including executives in public agencies and nonprofit organizations; parents and students; community organizers; local, state and federal policymakers; philanthropists; and journalists.

## Defining Chronic Absence:



Chronic absence refers to students who are repeatedly absent during the school year, for both excused and unexcused absences.

**Attendance Works recommends that chronic absence be defined as missing 10 percent of school—the equivalent of two days every month or 18 days over a 180-day school year—because this better enables early detection and action to improve attendance.<sup>v</sup>**

**In this brief's data analysis, however, chronic absence refers to missing 15 or more days because this is the data point captured in the Civil Rights Data Collection for school year 2013–14, the only currently available national dataset.**

**Chronic absence is different than truancy, which typically refers only to unexcused absences. Chronic absence level (how many students don't attend school regularly) differs from average daily attendance (how many students typically attend school each day).**

**Both truancy and average daily attendance can easily mask substantial levels of chronic absence. Chronic absence data often reveal an undetected challenge among our youngest students who may miss a substantial amount of school but for whom many absences are excused. For more information, see [Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight](#) and [What's the Difference Between Chronic Absence and Truancy?](#)**



## Using Data to Inform Action

As states and districts take on the challenge of improving attendance at scale, using data to identify which schools have the highest levels of chronic absence is essential. Knowing how many and what percentage of students are chronically absent in each school helps states and districts determine the level of resources and support needed to improve attendance. While the research on what works is still emerging, common sense and experience suggest that schools with high chronic absence need to employ different strategies than schools with low chronic absence. For example, a school with 30 percent or higher chronic absence may need more school-wide or community-wide strategies, whereas a school with less than five percent chronic absence may be able to address the situation with targeted outreach and support to specific students.

In addition, a high chronic absence level in a school often is an indicator of systemic barriers present in the community—such as lack of access to health care, environmental hazards, poor transportation, community violence or unstable housing—or barriers in the school, such as a negative climate and problematic disciplinary practices. It can also indicate barriers due to race and disability biases, including a lack of an engaging curriculum, supplies and materials needed to adapt instruction and support students with disabilities. It can also mean a lack of opportunities such as clubs, extracurricular activities and after-school programs that effectively serve students with disabilities alongside typical peers. The presence of multiple schools with high levels of chronic absence could suggest the need for a district-wide or regional approach.

Monitoring rates of chronic absence for schools helps alert states and districts to which ones most need outside assistance to determine the causes of absenteeism and to craft solutions. Understanding the size and scope of chronic absence is a first step toward developing a strategy that reflects any given school community's unique strengths and challenges.

To better understand the challenge we face as a nation, Attendance Works asked researchers at the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University to help us examine three questions related to levels of chronic absence in schools.

### 1. **What are the chronic absence levels in schools across the country? To what degree are schools experiencing the following levels?**

- ◆ extreme chronic absence (30 percent or more of students)
- ◆ high chronic absence (20-29 percent of students)
- ◆ significant chronic absence (10-19 percent of students)
- ◆ modest chronic absence (5-9 percent of students)
- ◆ low chronic absence (less than 5 percent of students)

### 2. **How do levels of chronic absence in schools vary across states?**

### 3. **Is there a relationship between particular school characteristics (e.g., ages of students, type of locale and presence of poverty) and higher or lower levels of chronic absence? What is the pattern nationally? Do these patterns vary across states?**

Researchers studied chronic absence levels in 92,333 schools across the nation during the 2013–14 school year, using the most recent data available for this analysis from the Civil Rights Data Collections (CRDC) and adding in data from the Common Core of Data (CCD) and revised numbers from New York City Schools. See Appendix A.

# Key findings

**1 One out of ten schools in the nation have extreme chronic absence (30 percent or more of students chronically absent), while another 11 percent face high levels (20–29 percent of students chronically absent) and almost half of all schools have a more modest problem, with less than 10 percent of students chronically absent.** (Table 1)

These results likely are conservative and underestimate chronic absence levels. The CRDC survey data represents the first time that districts nationwide were asked to report chronic absence. Even though definitions were provided, explaining how chronic absence should be calculated, the data submitted for this first-time collection likely reflects biases based on pre-existing differences in local practice about how to accurately measure attendance. Some states and districts may not, for example, have included excused absences or days lost due to out-of-school suspensions, yet these are days when students missed class and content material needed for course completion. An examination of the data suggests that the levels and numbers of students reported as being chronically absent are likely to increase if a more standardized approach to collection and reporting existed. For example, in the 2014 Office of Civil Rights database, 1,747 school districts reported that no students missed 15 or more days of school. The 1,747 represents 11 percent of all districts nationwide. In many, if not

most, of these districts, this likely represents an absence of data rather than an accurate figure.

**2 Across all 50 states, the percentage of schools experiencing extreme chronic absenteeism varies significantly, ranging from 2 to 29 percent.** (Figure 1)

While the range is wide, the median (or mid-point) percent of schools with extreme chronic absence levels for states is 8 percent. In other words, in half the states, less than 8 percent of schools have extreme chronic absenteeism. In three-quarters of the states, 12 percent or fewer schools have extreme chronic absence.

FIGURE 1

**Variations Across 50 States in the Percentage of Schools with Extreme Levels of Chronic Absenteeism**

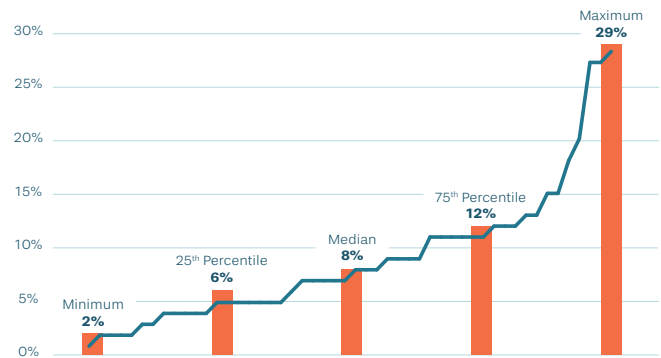


TABLE 1

<b>% Students Chronically Absent</b>	<b># Schools</b>	<b>% Schools</b>
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	9,921	<b>11%</b>
High Chronic Absence (20–29%)	10,330	<b>11%</b>
Significant Chronic Absence (10–19%)	28,320	<b>31%</b>
Modest Chronic Absence (5–9%)	21,190	<b>23%</b>
Low Chronic Absence (0–5%)	22,572	<b>24%</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>92,333</b>	

An issue worth further exploration is what might explain these varied findings. Some states may show a low level of extreme chronic absence, in part, because of a lack of systematic reporting. And the four states reporting 20 percent or more of schools with extreme chronic absence may have more accurately recorded and reported chronic absence data.

Another factor may be that students in locations reporting high chronic absence face different—or more intense—social and economic challenges. Additional demographic factors behind high chronic absence could include, for instance, differences between states in levels of poverty, access to health care or prevalence of chronic disease, as well as the extent to which the state or multiple localities have invested in improving attendance.

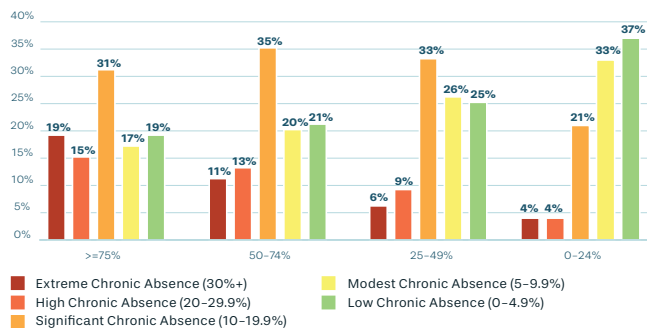
State by state details about the levels of chronic absence across schools [can be obtained here](#).

**3 Chronic absence levels are higher in schools with larger percentages of low-income students. (Figure 2)**

Schools with greater percentages of students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to experience high and extreme chronic absence levels, whereas those with the least percentage of students from low-income backgrounds typically experience modest or low levels. This correlation mirrors findings from

FIGURE 2

**Schools Serving More Students in Poverty Have Higher Chronic Absence Levels**



multiple national and local studies.<sup>vii</sup> It reflects the harsh reality that students have a harder time getting to school every day when they face poverty-related barriers such as unstable housing, family stresses related to employment or lack of employment, lack of access to health and mental health care, greater exposure to environmental hazards and community violence. While this is generally true, the situation may vary in particular states or districts, depending on the local context. States and districts should understand the relationship between poverty and school absence, although they should also examine their own data to see where their unique populations and context may deviate from more general patterns and findings.

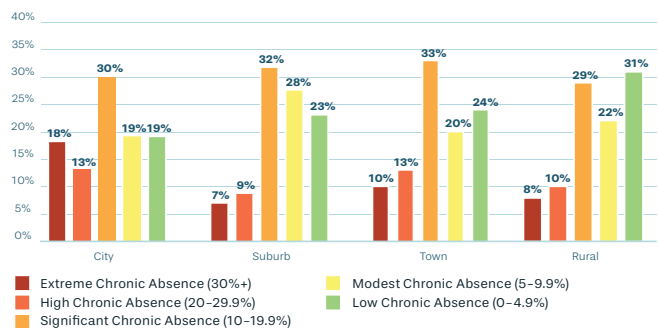
**4 While national data show that schools with extreme chronic absenteeism are more likely to be located in urban areas—rather than suburban, town or rural locations—this pattern did not hold true across states. (Figure 3)**

Nationwide, about one in five urban schools report extreme chronic absence as compared to about one in ten suburban, town or rural schools. This finding reflects the reality that cities are more likely to have schools with high levels of students from low-income backgrounds.

However, this pattern did not always hold true when examining state-level data. For example, in [Wyoming](#) and [California](#), chronic absence levels were higher

FIGURE 3

**Distribution of Chronic Absence Levels for Schools Across Different Locales**







in rural communities than in cities. In California, one possible explanation is that urban districts, which are generally much bigger, are more likely to have resources (people, programs and community partners) to address chronic absence, especially since school funding is based upon average daily attendance. You can find the reality for your state [on our website](#).

Again, while these findings are true at the national level, individual communities' patterns may vary, depending on the local context. For example, in Detroit Public Schools, chronic absence rates among elementary schools are higher than those in high schools (even though high school rates are very high)—counter to national trends and even trends for the state of [Michigan](#).

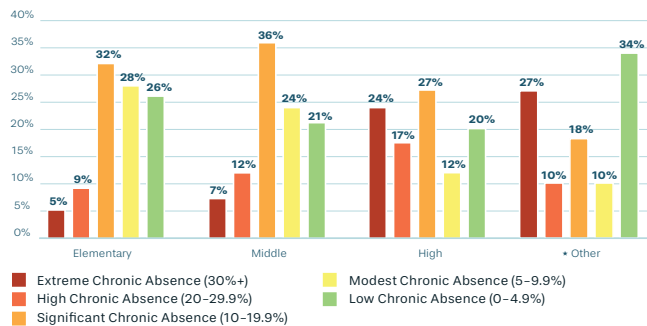
**5 High schools have the highest chronic absence.** (Figures 4, 5, 6)

About one-quarter of all schools with students in grades 9–12 have extreme chronic absence. This finding reflects what has been previously established and discussed in the existing literature. <sup>viii</sup>

Also, because data are not available by grade level, this analysis may mask higher levels of chronic absence typically found in kindergarten and first grade. The overall level of chronic absence for an elementary school often appears modest because students in grades 2–5 typically have the best attendance. Chronic absence among kindergarten and first-grade students can have a particularly adverse impact on learning since those initial years of schools are a critical time for gaining the skills that lay a foundation for success in future years. If students miss so much school in kindergarten and first grade that they cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade, they are still likely to struggle academically even if their attendance improves in upper elementary grades.

FIGURE 4

**Chronic Absence Levels for Schools Vary by Grades Served**



\* "Other" are predominantly K-12 and 6-12 schools that include high school

Among different types of high schools, special education and alternative high schools are most likely to have extreme chronic absence. About half of these schools have 30 percent or more of students missing 15 or more days. Additionally, more vocational high schools than regular high schools report extreme rates of chronic absenteeism. The value of disaggregating chronic

absenteeism data by both location and school type, as well as the importance of each district analyzing its own data, however, can be seen in the fact that some special education, alternative and vocational high schools have higher rates of low chronic absence than regular high schools. High levels of chronic absence among students in special education and alternative schools holds true for elementary and middle school as well. This means that in some districts, alternative, special education and vocational schools will have very problematic rates of chronic absenteeism and in others they will not.

These somewhat confounding findings suggest the need to examine a range of possible barriers and factors, including stigma for students assigned to

special education and alternative schools, court-related absences for students in alternative schools, problematic and unimaginative design of the instructional day in special education and alternative schools, lack of student voice in designing a school day that works, and lack of opportunities for community-based learning and internships. Often, segregated special education schools transport all students on school buses, thus affording improved attendance outcomes.

FIGURE 5

**Percentage of U.S. High Schools by Chronic Absence Concentration and School Type**

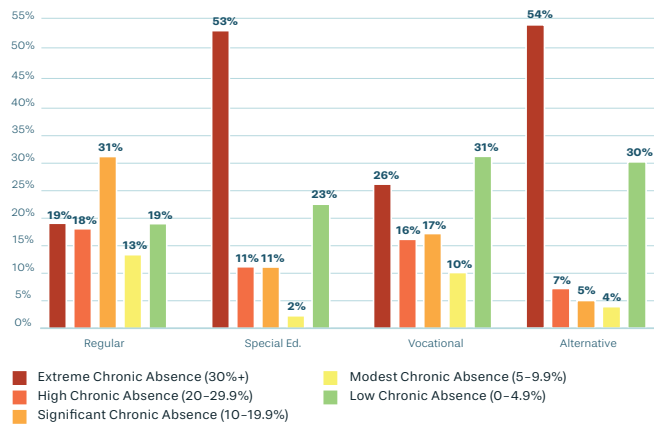
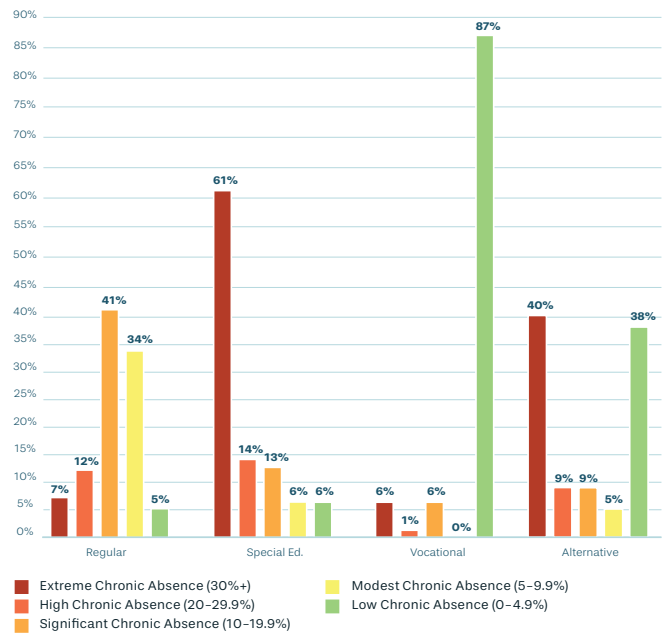


FIGURE 6

**Percentage of U.S. Elementary and Middle Schools by Chronic Absence Concentration and School Type**





## Portraits of Change

Across the nation, a growing number of schools, districts and communities are successfully tackling chronic absence—and, in the process, providing concrete proof that the problem is not intractable. It is solvable. Attendance Works has collected many of these communities' stories and offers a select few here—as portraits of change, with the power to galvanize.

Collectively, the portraits demonstrate that chronic absence can be reduced—even when it has reached high levels, even when it occurs in high schools where it is particularly prevalent and even among student populations, such as Native Americans, where it is most common.

The portraits also show that attendance is higher when schools, families and community partners work together to create engaging school environments and positive relationships that motivate students to show up every day and avoid unnecessary absences. These successes demonstrate the value of a problem-solving, non-punitive approach to improving attendance. And they illustrate the benefit of using data to identify and address common barriers that keep students from getting to school.

What works to reduce chronic absence is a three-tiered intervention that begins with universal prevention for all students, provides early intervention as soon as a student becomes chronically absent and turns to intensive supports only when needed. To effectively implement what works, interventions need to be tailored to fit the particular challenges and assets on-the-ground. The level of resources needed will depend upon the scale and scope of the challenge, for example, taking into account how much chronic absence affects a school, several schools or a district; particular grades and/or student populations. Schools with higher levels of chronic absence are likely to need more resources and supports to ensure they can put in place a sufficiently robust system of supports.

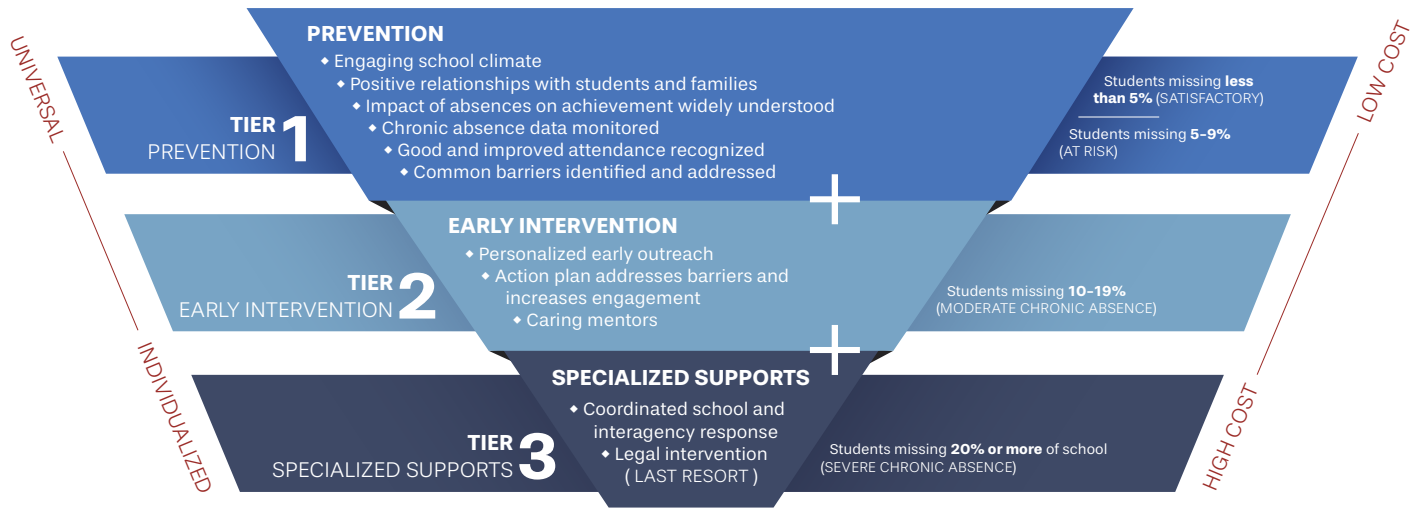
As this graphic (below) shows, the attendance levels of individual students are an excellent indicator of how much support they are likely to need. We inverted the pyramid to convey the idea that a tiered support

system is akin to a funnel. Investing in Tier 1 narrows the stream of students requiring early intervention or specialized supports. High levels of chronic absence in a school can be a sign of insufficient investment in Tier 1. While all schools should put Tier 1 supports in place, they can use prior-year data on how many students had moderate or severe chronic absence to determine how much they need Tier 2 or 3 supports.

Portraits of Change from Cleveland (Ohio), Grand Rapids (Michigan), New Britain (Connecticut) and Long Beach (California) illustrate the power of a district-wide effort. All four communities strengthened school capacity. Some created regularly functioning attendance teams and improved school climate and engagement. Some strengthened building principals' ability to tackle chronic absence while also expanding supports from community partners to address attendance barriers such as health and transportation as well as to engage in positive messaging.

The Contra Costa County (California) portrait demonstrates the value a county office of education can bring, by using its relationships and convening power to advance a positive approach that yielded improved outcomes even among alternative high school students. In Oregon, the Tribal Attendance Pilot Project illustrates the power of using data to raise awareness of attendance challenges (in this case, Native American students) and the power of partnering, in this case among tribes, rural districts and families.

Other portraits illustrate how change can occur at the school level, as well as district-wide. The portrait of Hedgepeth/Williams Middle School, in New Jersey's capital city, Trenton, shows how an urban school reversed high chronic absence by



using a whole-school approach to create a welcoming and engaging school climate while also problem-solving attendance barriers with individual families. In the agricultural northwest Arkansas city of Springdale, Monitor Elementary’s attendance effort demonstrates the importance of schools tailoring strategies to their families and communities.

The portraits of attendance work carried out by an elementary school in rural Maine and a K-8 school

in Phoenix show that more modest reforms may suffice when the chronic absence issue is less severe. Meanwhile, City Neighbors in Baltimore illustrates how a small K-12 charter school network laid a foundation for high attendance, including among students identified for special education, by intentionally focusing on relationship-building and offering engaging educational experiences.



**PORTRAITS OF CHANGE** Attendance Works has highlighted the stories of 11 Portraits of Change from across the country that each illustrate how chronic absence can be turned around, even when it reaches high levels in a school or district or among a particular student population. Read a Portrait from each of these communities in Appendix A:

**Cleveland, Ohio:** An urban district tackles extreme chronic absence through a combination of strong district leadership, staff training and community partners.

**Grand Rapids, Michigan:** Persistence, partnership and clear messaging help reduce chronic absence districtwide in an urban district.

**New Britain, Connecticut:** Using data to target resources to reduce chronic absence among young students in a diverse district.

**Long Beach, California:** Enlisting the community to focus on schools with the highest chronic absence as part of a district-wide campaign.

**Contra Costa County, California:** An alternative school improves attendance by leveraging the power of a learning network and county education office.

**Oregon Tribal Attendance Pilot:** Schools, Native American families and tribes partner to reduce chronic absence in a small rural community.

**Trenton, New Jersey:** A “full court press” makes a difference in improving attendance in an urban middle school.

**Springdale, Arkansas:** An elementary school tailors strategies to the culture and needs of families.

**West Newfield, Maine:** A small rural school benefits from a larger prevention-oriented attendance effort.

**Phoenix, Arizona:** A K-8 school improves attendance by creating a positive and safe school climate.

**Baltimore, Maryland:** A K-12 Charter school network lays a foundation for excellent attendance through a unique structure for relationship building and engaging educational experiences.



# Enlisting Partners for Change

Ensuring that students get to school every day requires a team effort that includes support and partnership from community and public agencies, especially when schools or districts face excessive or high chronic absence. Government and public agencies are especially important, given their capacity to address challenges at scale such as homelessness, transportation, health care and public safety. In addition, there is a large and growing number of private and nonprofit stakeholders in communities willing to partner with schools to improve attendance.

Chronic absence data can be used to help community and public agency partners understand where resources are needed most and to trigger timely action. With excessive or high chronic absence, help from multiple partners is likely needed to address the challenges facing children and families as well as to create engaging, welcoming school environments.

This initial list below identifies several possible partners. It can be refined or expanded – based on what's available on-the-ground in a particular school, district or state.

- ◆ **Businesses** of all sizes and types recognize that improving attendance helps produce a strong and skilled workforce, today and tomorrow. Businesses know that consistent on-time attendance is essential to a productive workforce. How business can best contribute varies. Convenience stores and fast food chains can agree to stop serving students during school hours and help convey the importance of being in school. Many retail business may agree to contribute items – such as school supplies or gift certificates for dinners or movies – that can be used as incentives or rewards for good and improved attendance. Business leaders showing up at school events to lend their prestige to the significance of consistent on-time attendance adds real world importance to this essential school-to-work habit. Sports teams can use their star power to convey the attendance message.
- ◆ **Community Schools** are excellent partners for attendance efforts because this challenge begs for collaboration between educators and community partners. It is also easily understood and offers tangible measures to gauge progress. Community Schools serve as a hub for their neighborhoods, uniting families, educators and community partners in providing students with top-quality academics, enrichment, health, social services, out-of-school programs and opportunities to succeed in school and life. See the profile (below) of Communities in Schools, which is one approach to implementing a community school. To locate nearby Community School Initiatives, refer to this Coalition of Community Schools [directory](#).
- ◆ **Family Support Organizations** throughout the United States are ideal partners for schools in helping reach families of chronically students. Sometimes known as family resource centers, they can help unpack and address common attendance barriers as well as provide activities at school that engage, welcome and support families. To locate nearby family support organizations, visit the [National Family Support Network](#) website. These organizations typically take a multi-generational approach to promoting the well-being of children and their parents or caregivers. And they use a strength-based approach to prevent child abuse, promote school readiness, improve family functioning and advance family economic success.
- ◆ **Early Childhood Education Programs** care about attendance because it aligns well with their work with families to prepare young children socially and cognitively for success in kindergarten and beyond. Regular attendance in an early childhood program is essential to ensuring that a child is well-prepared

for kindergarten – both instilling an important habit of good attendance (a school readiness skill) and ensuring that children reap the full benefits the program offers. Early childhood educators also can use attendance to assess how well they are engaging and supporting families and their children. Attention to chronic absence increased significantly when the latest Head Start performance standards added a requirement to monitor and address when students miss 10 percent or more of preschool. Working with children and parents to encourage good attendance, early childhood educators can provide motivation and help families develop routines. They also can assist with early identification of developmental delays

and disabilities, provide families with information and access to community-based services and supports, assist families with the transition from early childhood programs to pre-K and kindergarten, and provide resources about how families can advocate for their children as they enter school.

- ◆ **Faith Based Organizations** and schools, despite different missions, share a common goal: preparing children for the future. Local congregations are well-positioned to help with attendance issues because families often turn to them for guidance or parenting. Chronic absence can be both a symptom and a cause of many of the problems that faith leaders already work to solve in distressed



## Communities in Schools:

### Bringing Holistic Solutions to the Challenge of Chronic Absence

Communities In Schools (CIS) is a national network of organizations working to keep students in school and on the path to graduation. Operating in 2,300 schools in 25 states and the District of Columbia, CIS places a trained professional in a school to work closely with school leaders, teachers, guidance counselors and others. A comprehensive plan is developed that identifies and aligns community supports and resources with the needs and challenges of the entire school as well those of individual students and families. CIS helps schools tackle chronic absence by putting in place a tiered system of supports and interventions, as explained in this video.

In Memphis, Tennessee, CIS helped 19 schools in 2015–16 reduce the average percentage of chronically absent students from 32 to 23 percent in one year. Success was due to attendance initiatives (e.g., incentives, campaigns), as well as attendance

monitoring, behavioral interventions and social and emotional development supports at both the school and student level. Also critical was timely and constant communication with parents and guardians – including praise and recognition of student progress, as well as discussion of challenges.

The CIS approach is tailored to each community's needs. In Charlotte–Mecklenburg, North Carolina, CIS is helping expand the evidence-based Check and Connect program to six pilot schools as part of case management of chronically absent students. In Abilene, Texas, CIS of the Big Country is helping the school district launch the Never Be Absent (NBA) school-wide attendance campaign to ensure that chronically absent students receive additional supports.

The response to chronic absence needs to be as varied as its many causes, which range from transportation issues to illness, bullying and disengagement. CIS is one example of the type of community partner that can work collaboratively with schools to shape a holistic solution to the challenge of chronic absence. Learn more about attendance on the CIS website.

communities, such as unstable housing, violence, insufficient health and mental health care access, or family stressors. Faith organizations can help improve attendance in many ways – for example, offering a food pantry or clothes closet to address basic needs, organizing "[walking school buses](#)," providing volunteer mentors to encourage daily attendance and support literacy, or helping parents/caregivers seek mental health treatment for themselves and their children, if needed.

◆ **Health Providers** can play a significant role because many excused school absences, especially among the youngest students, are tied directly to health factors: asthma and dental problems, learning disabilities, and mental health issues related to trauma and community violence. Pediatricians operating their own practices, major medical facilities and public health departments can help to determine major health-related attendance barriers and secure resources to address them. Providers can help families understand when to keep children home due to illness and the importance of avoiding unnecessary absences. Families do not always recognize, for example, that a stomachache can be a sign of anxiety and not a reason to keep a child home. If a student has a chronic illness, a health-care provider can help the family develop a plan to ensure that a child's health issues are addressed, while missing the least possible school days. Providers can help reduce the time spent getting health care by setting up school-based clinics, providing telehealth services or offering medical appointments during out-of-school hours. They can decrease absences by offering access to immunizations at schools.

◆ **Housing Agencies** already address a major attendance barrier by providing stable, affordable housing for millions of families nationwide. Homeless children are 2.5 times more likely to be chronically absent. Children facing particularly challenging living conditions, such as living in a shelter or foster care, are often even more likely to miss school. <sup>ix</sup> Many children living in public and

subsidized housing also have chronic absence issues related to challenging economic, social, health conditions often present in these facilities. A growing number of housing authorities, from California to Florida, are working to improve attendance, as this Campaign for Grade-Level Reading [piece](#) shows. Attendance work helps housing agencies build relationships with residents around their children's success. As landlords and managers of housing vouchers, housing agency staff are often uniquely positioned to reach out to families and help them address attendance challenges.

◆ **Hunger Relief Organizations** are good to enlist, especially when hunger is prevalent and poses an attendance barrier. Consult with the nonprofit group [Feeding America](#) to locate local food banks and hunger relief organizations. Consider [these strategies](#) from the nonprofit group Share Our Strength. Hunger and the health-related consequences of poor nutrition can hamper children's ability to get to school. Hungry children who manage to show up to school may struggle to concentrate. Providing a free, nutritious breakfast to children in the classroom, in a welcoming, non-stigmatizing way, provides incentive for children to attend and has been shown to reduce absenteeism as well as to improve other academic outcome, as this [video](#) shows. "One in six kids in America doesn't get the food they need every day," according to [Share Our Strength](#). "This takes a terrible toll on their health and development, and threatens their futures in profound ways. It also drags down our nation's economy by perpetuating the cycle of poverty."

◆ **Institutions of Higher Education** are invaluable partners in addressing chronic absence. Colleges and universities are a critical source of volunteer mentors who can encourage daily attendance or extra professional support in the form of student interns seeking a degree in social work, counseling, nursing or other relevant fields. Equally important, as research institutions they have the capacity to help schools and community agencies use

qualitative and quantitative data to examine barriers to getting to school, conduct program evaluations and produce reports that paint a picture of the scale and scope of chronic absence and how it has been or could be addressed.

◆ **The Juvenile Justice System** has historically played an important role in addressing attendance, particularly truancy (unexcused absences). Typically, truancy policy begins with notifying parents. A meeting with the parents may be required to develop corrective action. If the situation doesn't improve, the family may be summoned to court. When prevention and early intervention are lacking – including delays in referrals within schools to identify students with disabilities and deliver appropriate services – the system quickly becomes overwhelmed with students who are truant and cannot be helped in a timely or high-quality manner. Judges, attorneys and other juvenile justice staff can call for using chronic absence to trigger preventive action and personalized supports at schools in order to reduce the number of students who eventually require court support. When students are involved in the system, courts need to work with schools to develop a plan that gets students back in school.

◆ **Local Governments** – city, county or tribal – are critical to reducing chronic absence because so many of their programs and resources address out-of-school factors that influence attendance. Government officials who know which schools, neighborhoods or student populations are most affected by chronic absence can help marshal community resources to gain a deeper understanding of local attendance and respond to the findings. They are uniquely positioned to leverage existing assets and cultivate new resources to improve attendance. This can take many forms – launching a city-wide messaging campaign, redirecting health-care assets to asthma sufferers, increasing funds for out-of-school programs or creating safer school walking routes. It may mean supporting policy change, such as using chronic absence data to create shared accountability with city-funded

agencies for improving attendance. The U.S. Conference of Mayors unanimously adopted a [resolution](#) in 2012 urging mayors to raise awareness of the pernicious effects of chronic absenteeism on student achievement and to engage the community to help parents get children to school regularly.

◆ **Parent and Youth Leadership Organizations**, present in many schools and communities, can help schools ensure that their attendance (and other) strategies are informed by the perspectives, insights and assets of parents and youth who know from experience what causes and reverses chronic absence. In addition to being a sounding board, these organizations can conduct focus groups or surveys to gain insights from students and families. Some groups, for example, parent-teacher-student associations, operate out of the school and include school staff. Others are based in a nonprofit or faith-based organization. Some have community organizing roots. High school youth in these organizations can contribute valuable ideas about high school re-design that can promote improved attendance including, among other things, increased opportunities for internships and community-based learning during the school day.

◆ **Volunteers and National Service Members** can be invaluable assets to schools, by working directly with students and families as well as organizing community-wide events and activities aimed at improving attendance. The [My Brother's Keeper Success Mentors initiative](#), which operates in 30 school districts, builds off the research-validated and common sense principle that students are more likely to attend school when they feel connected to caring adults who notice whether they show up and who help them address attendance barriers. Schools in particular that face high levels of chronic absence should seek out partner organizations that can provide more adults who can build relationships with students. National organizations such as [City Year](#), [Experience Corps](#), [Mentor](#), [Points of Light](#) (particularly its [Corps 18](#) program) and the [Corporation for National and Community Service](#)



are excellent resources. The United States has a long, rich history of volunteerism and national service. People with a wide range of backgrounds and ages want to make a meaningful difference.

- ◆ **Out of School Time (OST) Programs** – including before school, after school and summer learning programs – can help improve school-day attendance, as described in [this article](#). They give students a reason to show up at school by creating a sense of belonging, expanding connections to caring adults and offering engaging academic enrichment. When attendance emerges as a problem, they can help reach out and connect families to additional supports. They can bolster schools' ability to create a safe, positive school climate by offering activities and experiences that promote social and emotional learning and the development of peer conflict resolution skills. Good-quality OST programs – with staff members who have the knowledge and skills to effectively serve students with disabilities alongside typical peers – are an invaluable support to families and youth and can improve attendance for all students.
- ◆ **Philanthropy** already works to solve many problems connected to chronic absence, which can be a symptom or cause of those problems. High absenteeism can signal that a community is in distress due to unstable housing, violence or insufficient health-care access. It can signal a breakdown in family functioning or an ineffective school district. It can erode foundation or donor initiatives to improve schools and improve graduation rate. It can stall philanthropic efforts to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty or to boost the local economy. At the same time, reducing chronic absence can be a winning way for philanthropy to engage the entire community. Local funders – whether community foundations, family foundations focused on a particular geographic area or local United Ways – are well-positioned to help because attendance is inherently an intensely local challenge requiring locally informed solutions.
- ◆ **Social Service Agencies**, which serve the most vulnerable children and families, are essential to putting in place comprehensive attendance efforts. Social service agencies are well-positioned to encourage the families they serve to prioritize school attendance as a way to ensure a better future for their children. They can integrate attendance messaging into their programs that help families meet basic economic needs. They can use chronic absence data to determine when additional social or economic supports are needed – supports that also may prevent a family's situation from deteriorating. This, in turn, may prevent some children from entering the child welfare system or help a family move out of poverty. They can make sure that children and youth already in foster care have a coordinated education plan that takes into account attendance. Operating in multiple states, [Foster Ed](#) offers an excellent model for improving educational outcomes, including attendance, for system-involved children and youth.
- ◆ **Population-Specific Service or Civic Organizations** offer a rich source of information about how to ensure that attendance strategies are culturally and linguistically appropriate and wisely use community assets. When a community has a large number of children and families of a particular ethnicity or demographic (such as LGBTQ families or families with disabilities), a nonprofit or civic group often develops to offer supports, services and/or advocacy. To identify these groups, consult with local families and community leaders or search the Internet. Sometimes families need legal or advocacy assistance to get appropriate services and supports for children with disabilities. These services can be located through the National Disability Rights Network, [www.ndrn.org](http://www.ndrn.org), and the Parent Training and Information Centers, <http://www.parentcenterhub.org>.



# Recommendations for Action

Reducing chronic absence requires action at the state and local levels. State-level action can produce resources and supports that, in turn, help districts and schools – including those lacking sufficient local resources – reduce chronic absence. At the same time, district-level action is essential to ensuring that strategies are implemented on the ground and tailored to local needs and strengths.

**State Action:** State-level action is critical to ensuring a consistent approach to collecting accurate data as well as ensuring all schools and districts have access to supports to help them reduce chronic absence.

## Step 1. Examine data and ensure quality.

The state department of education should review the state-level data included in this brief for your state. In addition, use the most current data source to examine the chronic absence levels of your state's schools, along with information about their demographics, grades and types of students served. Examine district levels of chronic absence to identify how school and district levels of chronic absence might interact. Identify trends over time and detect patterns for different regions, types of schools and demographics.

As part of this process, assess whether the attendance data submitted seem accurate and, if not, determine why and take steps to improve the quality and consistency. Looking at multiple years of data can help. A state may need to take a closer look if a district or school experiences sudden shifts in chronic absence level or unusually low chronic absence even though it is doing nothing to support better attendance. Consider asking the district or school more questions – or auditing attendance practices and records.

States can also offer guidance that results in more uniform attendance-taking procedures and, in turn, more accurate attendance data that can be used to make valid comparisons between schools and districts within a state or across states. They can, for example, recommend a common definition of a day of absence or encourage roll-taking twice a day in elementary school and every period in secondary schools. They can

suggest setting the default for marking students absent in electronic databases to neutral vs present or absent. They can promote monitoring teachers and staff to make sure they submit attendance records in a timely manner.

## Step 2. Form a state leadership team.

Form a state leadership team that can leverage the knowledge, insights and resources of a team of individuals willing to take collective responsibility for advancing the work. The team could take responsibility for reviewing data, determining the implications and action priorities, developing and implementing a work plan, engaging key partners, and continually assessing how to strengthen the work. Such a team will be especially essential in states with large numbers of schools or districts with high or extreme chronic absence.

A state leadership team can include:

- Senior leaders from the state department of education who can promote collaboration across departments and leverage expertise on data, research and school improvement.
- Districts administrators who can share insights about the challenge and needed support.
- Representatives from key government or public agencies with authority over relevant resources, for example, the departments of health services, social services, juvenile justice, workforce development and community development.
- Liaisons to the Governor's Office and Legislature.

- Executives from philanthropy, the non-profit sector and business.
- A person with the skill, will and time to staff the work and the ability to collaborate with multiple agencies and sectors.

Ideally the team should be large enough to offer diverse perspectives and skills. Use an understanding of the scope and scale of the challenge to inform decisions about the composition of a leadership team. States with larger numbers of schools with high or extreme levels of chronic absence will need deeper interagency partnerships. Larger teams should be organized into appropriate work groups with a designated executive committee so scheduling and decision-making remain manageable.

### **Step 3. Develop a data-informed comprehensive system of technical assistance.**

A comprehensive technical assistance system begins with making resources universally available and then offering increasingly intensive supports based on need. Use data on chronic absence levels across the state to determine where help is most needed and to identify "bright spots" (e.g., a school with relatively low chronic absence despite having many students from low-income families – a population at greater risk of chronic absence) that can inform and inspire work by other schools, districts and communities.

Below is an example of how a state can construct a comprehensive response that includes universal supports, group professional development and intensive technical assistance.

#### **A. Universal Supports**

State education departments could provide all districts with access to chronic absence data and guidance on steps to improve attendance. For example, in Connecticut, any district or school can go online to obtain [Reducing Chronic Absence in Connecticut's Schools: A Prevention and Intervention Guide](#)

[for Schools and Districts Guide](#) and view chronic absence data via the [EdSight](#) searchable data portal.

Convey the message that even a school with a relatively small number and percentage of chronically absent students needs to continue tracking chronic absence. Fortunately a school or district in this situation may be able to use existing resources (such as a student support team) to make improvements.

State government and nonprofit partners also can provide all schools with meaningful attendance messaging materials that raise awareness of the importance of showing up to class every day and taking steps to prevent unnecessary absences. The Attendance Works [Count Us In Toolkit 2017](#) offers an abundance of information, inspiring examples and no-cost tools for messaging.

A state-level communications effort can reduce costs and promote consistent messaging. Examples of state-level campaigns include [Every Student Present](#) in New York and [Make Every Day Count](#) in Arkansas. Some states have developed public service announcements (e.g., this [infomercial](#) with Washington Governor Jay Inslee and Seattle Sounders soccer player Henry Wingo) to spread the word.

#### **B. Group Professional Development**

A state could invest in group professional development to build districts' and schools' capacity to reduce chronic absence. These investments may include peer networks that meet in-person or online – or some combination of the two.

A peer learning network approach involves convening district or school teams (often three or four times a year) to review their data, learn new strategies to reduce chronic absence, apply new strategies and share lessons learned. Typical topics include how to monitor data, unpack the causes of absence and develop multi-tiered responses, including Tier 1/strong prevention and Tier 2/early intervention. They also

include how to enlist contributions from community partners and develop strong attendance teams. Another key component is to have "bright spot" districts or schools share their stories and lessons learned.

A peer learning opportunity can be offered as a stand-alone professional development experience (e.g., the Contra Costa Peer Learning Network described on page 29). Or it can be included as part of another learning opportunity. In Connecticut, for example, a chronic absence focus was integrated into broader school improvement convening for districts offered by the state education department. States could also consider working together to create regional professional development opportunities.

### C. Intensive Technical assistance

Data showing higher levels of chronic absence help states to identify which districts or schools need the most intensive help and additional resources. This technical assistance should be integrated into the state education department's plans for supporting the lowest-performing schools. These districts or schools could receive a comprehensive needs assessment that identifies factors contributing to chronic absence, potential assets for improving attendance and the highest-priority actions. High chronic absence typically reflects systemic barriers and occurs in tandem with poverty. States can use their convening power to ensure that the right stakeholders (public agencies, nonprofit organizations, businesses, parent organizations, etc.) partner with a district and/or school. The need to secure additional support from outside

agencies is why an interagency leadership team at the state level is so important in states with large numbers of schools with high or extreme chronic absence.

If professional development is typically provided by a regional entity (e.g., county education office, intermediary school district or educational service district), the state could work through that entity to offer attendance supports. Working through regional entities can be especially important in rural areas where a school may have high chronic absence but the number of students affected is small, or in large states, which traditionally are divided into regions for state support.

### **Step 4. Publicize the challenge and available resources for reducing chronic absence.**

States can generate support by publicizing the size and scope of the chronic absence challenge, sharing their plans to tackle it and enlisting key stakeholders' help.

States also can inspire involvement by identifying and highlighting "bright spots" – schools, districts, programs and/or communities – that demonstrate that change is possible, even with the most disadvantaged or challenged students.

State agencies and advocacy groups can raise awareness by holding public forums, publishing a report with a clear set of recommendations, generating coverage in traditional and social media, and encouraging key community spokespersons to speak up about chronic absence.

**District Action:** District-level action is critical to ensuring concrete steps are taken that affect the daily lives of students and their families. How much action and resources are needed depends upon the levels of chronic absence faced in schools and found across the district.

### **Step 1. Form a local leadership team.**

Change only occurs when key individuals are willing to step up to organize the work. Similar to a state team, a district-level team takes responsibility for monitoring data, setting priorities, implementing a work plan, engaging key partners and continually assessing how to strengthen the work.

Ideally, a district leadership team includes:

- Senior district leaders with authority over instruction and teaching as well as student support services and school climate.
- A data analyst.
- Representatives from public agencies overseeing relevant resources, for, example the departments of health services, social services, workforce development, transportation, community development and juvenile justice.
- A liaison to the Mayor's Office, City Council and/or County Administrators, depending upon what makes sense locally.
- Executives from philanthropy, the non-profit sector and/or business.
- A person with the skill, will and time to staff the work. This could be someone from a city department or local policy or advocacy organization. It could also be someone from a local university with facilitation and/or research skills to offer.

The team should meet regularly and report to the Superintendent as well as to key city or county officials to ensure sufficient resources are available to reduce chronic absence.

### **Step 2. Map assets and secure additional partners.**

Identify the people and organizations most likely to care about chronic absence and enlist their support. Determine if your community is already home to an existing initiative focused on academic achievement or dropout prevention, such as the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#) or [Grad Nation](#). All the right players might already be in place and involved in related work. In addition, some communities may have launched a local attendance awareness campaign that could be leveraged to build a more enduring coalition capable of supporting a more comprehensive, multi-tiered approach. See [this 2016 map](#) and [this 2017 map](#) to identify if your community participates in Attendance Awareness Month activities. For additional assistance in identifying and recruiting potential partners, see [these tips](#) in Attendance Works' [Count Us In Toolkit](#).

Coalitions already working to reform schools, promote literacy, reduce dropout rates, address health needs and improve communities might offer enthusiastic partnership and leadership to address chronic absence. If districts or schools already track early warning indicators, they're already paying attention to attendance. If no coalition exists, consider launching one by convening community partners who can help schools improve attendance. Use the list of potential partners (see [Enlisting Partners for Change](#)).

### **Step 3. Unpack causes.**

Developing effective solutions requires knowing why students in a particular school, district or

community miss class. Reasons for absences typically fall into four broad categories: myths about attendance, barriers to attendance, aversion to school and disengagement from school.

Understanding which factors are causing absences helps your effort respond to individual students and recognize when a broader programmatic or policy solution is needed because of the many students affected. A large number of chronically absent students in a school or neighborhood or from a particular population often indicates systemic challenges that need to be addressed.

The district-level team should gather qualitative, not just quantitative, data to afford a deeper analysis of the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism for a particular student, school, community or state. Not everything is easily measured. Qualitative information such as the results of focus groups, individual interviews or surveys, helps ground strategies in a deeper understanding of the lives of students and families struggling with chronic absence. Students and their families are critical sources of this information. Their insights can be gathered via interviews, focus groups and surveys as well as by looking for patterns in data collected from families by case managers

#### Step 4. Develop and implement solutions.

Work together to put in place a tiered approach that begins with prevention and then targets more at-risk students with personalized interventions tailored to address their particular barriers. Use a deeper understanding of barriers to identify which community partners are needed to support the most affected schools and student populations. If data shows high chronic absence in kindergarten, consider partnering with preschool leadership and Head Start agencies on prevention activities.

#### Step 5. Assess results.

Once strategies are implemented, use attendance and chronic absence data to secure immediate and ongoing feedback about the effectiveness of current strategies and how they can be improved. If more students are showing up at school with greater frequency, the strategies are likely worth continuing. If students still consistently miss class, a greater investment is needed to review whether strategies have been implemented effectively and are appropriate given the specific challenges facing chronically absent children. Use regularly updated attendance data to fuel continuous improvement, reviewing and revising when need be. In many localities, local universities can be ideal partners to helping review data and determine how to use results to improve practice.

Myths	Barriers	Aversion	Disengagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused</li> <li>Missing just 2 days per month won't affect learning</li> <li>Sporadic absences aren't a problem</li> <li>Attendance only matters in the older grades</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of access to health or dental care</li> <li>Chronic illness</li> <li>Trauma</li> <li>No safe path to school</li> <li>Poor transportation</li> <li>Housing instability</li> <li>High mobility</li> <li>Involvement with child welfare or juvenile justice system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Struggling academically or socially</li> <li>Bullying</li> <li>Ineffective/exclusionary school discipline</li> <li>Parents had negative school experience</li> <li>Undiagnosed disability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of engaging and culturally relevant instruction</li> <li>No meaningful relationships with adults in school</li> <li>Vulnerable to being with peers out of school vs. in school</li> <li>Poor school climate</li> <li>Discouraged due to lack of credits</li> </ul>



## Conclusion

Increasingly widespread public access to chronic absence data potentially allows a broader array of stakeholders than ever before to use this information to promote earlier intervention and supports aimed at setting students on a pathway for success. A major benefit of focusing on chronic absence is that data can be used to give immediate and real-time feedback on whether strategies are working or mid-course corrections are needed. It also has a direct relationship to achievement. While reducing chronic absence does not replace high-quality instruction and curriculum, those investments won't make a difference unless students are in school.

A critical component of this equation is ensuring that educators, families and community members know how to interpret and use chronic absence data. Chronic absence is not solved if it devolves into a blame game directed at children, families or educators. The power of chronic absence is using it to trigger a deeper inquiry about barriers to getting to school and make strategic investments in prevention.

Everyone needs to pitch in to tackle chronic absence. Districts and schools are at the front lines. The actions of educators determine whether data is accurate, analyzed and reviewed in a timely manner and

shared with other community partners. Students' and families' insights are critical to unpacking barriers and identifying what might help. Community and agency partners often can provide additional data and perspectives on barriers as well as offer relevant resources to help students and families overcome the challenges that they face. Funders and elected officials are uniquely equipped stakeholders and can garner public supports for needed actions. Chronic absence can and must be overcome.



## **APPENDIX A: Individual Portraits of Change Profiles**





## Cleveland, Ohio

An urban district tackles extreme chronic absence through a combination of strong district leadership, staff training and community partners.

In 2015, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District launched a "Get 2 School. You Can Make It" campaign that significantly reduced chronic absence, from 35 to 29 percent during the 2015–16 school year in an urban district serving over 39,000 students, most from low-income families and nearly two-thirds African American.

The attendance campaign activities in Ohio's second-largest city include phone banking, canvassing, college scholarship opportunities, giveaway incentives, social media, celebrations and mentoring. Students are urged to miss fewer than 10 school days per year—a message inspired by the district's data showing that missing 10 or more days is associated with significantly lower reading and math achievement as well as being off-track for high school graduation.

Key to Cleveland's success has been the deep commitment of top school leadership, including district CEO Eric Gordon, and an attendance implementation team to organize the work. Other important

factors include the district's **strong foundation of social and emotional learning practices** and an investment in addressing barriers. School administrators and teachers also learn effective chronic absence reduction approaches during professional development gatherings and coaching support for staff working in the lowest-performing schools.

Many community partners have been engaged, including **Cleveland Browns** players, who have promoted attendance via school visits and phone messages. After learning that lack of clothing suitable for school is an attendance barrier, players hand-delivered "special teams packages" that provided clothing to over 2,000 students. In April 2017, a **Chronic Absenteeism Summit** held in the Browns' stadium attracted hundreds of educators and community partners, including some from other districts and the Ohio Department of Education. An inspiring example of how a district with extreme chronic absence can improve student attendance.



## Grand Rapids, Michigan

Persistence, partnership and clear messaging help reduce chronic absence districtwide in an urban district.

Educators and community leaders in Grand Rapids, Michigan's second-largest city, knew they had to act after discovering that 36 percent of their nearly 17,000 public school students missed almost a month of school every year. Determined to reduce absences for all students (the district's diverse population represents 55 countries), they focused on scrutinizing pertinent data and providing support to students facing major barriers to getting to school – and the students' families. The startling result: Chronic absence dropped from 36 to 27 percent during the effort's first two years, as this [description and video](#) detail.

Grand Rapids has been persistent. When gains in attendance and achievement did not materialize after the effort's first year, the district and its partners kept meeting and fine-tuning strategies. Professional

development was intensified to help principals set attendance goals, use data to identify students in need of support, provide attendance incentives and promote messaging. A more concrete attendance message to the community was developed (known as [Challenge 5](#)) that urges students to miss fewer than five days of school each year.

A community-wide approach is "the secret" to the district's success, says Superintendent Teresa Weatherall Neal. This includes partnering with the [Believe 2 Become](#) initiative as well as a broader, regional initiative led by the [Kent School Services Network](#) involving community schools in nine school districts across the county. With Grand Rapids' chronic absence most recently at 21 percent, the work continues.



## New Britain, Connecticut

Using data to target resources to reduce chronic absence among young students in a diverse district.

When school officials in New Britain—one of Connecticut's poorest school districts—first crunched their numbers in 2012, they discovered that an alarming 30 percent of kindergartners and 24 percent of first-graders were chronically absent. Armed with this information, the district and community partners launched a comprehensive strategy. Two years later, chronic absence rates in the district—which is home to 10,500 students—fell to 13 percent of kindergartners and 9 percent of first graders. And early literacy scores were on the rise.

New Britain's strategy includes forming school attendance teams and providing professional development to school teams and community partners. To inspire action, chronic absence data reports are distributed every 10 days. Home visits are made—with extra outreach to families of kindergarten and preschool students. The district's extensive parent engagement

and communications include intensive interagency case management for the most challenged students.

New Britain's success helped Connecticut, particularly the state's education department, make the case that reducing chronic absence is doable and critical, as reported [in the New York Times](#). The state's effort has successfully resulted in over 10,000 fewer chronically absent students and measurable reductions for every student sub-population. [Connecticut's strategies](#) include using an [interactive portal](#) to make data publicly available and passing legislation requiring districts to monitor absenteeism and establish attendance review teams if levels are excessive. Districts now must address chronic absenteeism in their improvement plans and accountability systems. Connecticut also produced a prevention and intervention guide that includes strategies to increase attendance for students with disabilities.

# Long Beach, California

Enlisting the community to focus on schools with the highest chronic absence as part of a district-wide campaign.

As the new student support services director for California's [Long Beach Unified School District](#), in fall 2013, Dr. Erin M. Simon was determined to understand the drivers of chronic absence that she knew contributed to the gap in achievement between low-income students and their more affluent peers in the district, which has a diverse enrollment of 75,000 students – 69 percent of whom are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

During a "road trip," she met with parents at over 40 schools in Long Beach – Southern California's third-largest city – sharing the importance of attendance and learning about barriers parents face to getting their children to school. Realizing that "community" was the missing ingredient for many students, she collaborated with the City of Long Beach's [Safe Long Beach](#) Violence Prevention Program to launch "All In" – a campaign aimed at ensuring that every student is in school every day. While it is a district-wide effort, the campaign focuses on four schools with the highest chronic absence, using data to drive action. Each school put in place a customized, multi-tiered support system and received help from social work interns assigned by California State University Long Beach. Three out

of the four schools saw an average reduction of 9 percent in chronic absence in school year 2015–2016.

The campaign enlisted teachers and families but also – to emphasize that school attendance is everyone's responsibility – the broader community, including clergy and businesses as well as the Long Beach Police Department and the Long Beach Fire Department. With federal Department of Justice funding, Simon and a small team of professionals and social workers visited chronically absent students' homes. In the four targeted community areas, they distributed school calendars, school staff information and "All In" decals to business owners, non-profit organizations and community members so they would know when and who to call if students were not in school.

Community and institutional partnerships are critical in the ongoing efforts of the "All In" campaign. Simon worked closely with an array of partners, including the city prosecutor on a pre-intervention effort to identify students with issues, rather than waiting until their absences lead to intervention from the [School Attendance Review Board disciplinary action](#). Middle school students were linked with the City's employee mentoring program for additional guidance and encouragement. The mentoring program was integrated into the City's [My Brother's Keeper](#) Initiative, and will continue to support the achievements of youth. Students and their families also receive medical and social services through a partnership with [The Children's Clinic, "Serving Children & Their Families" \(TCC\)](#). TCC, the only federally qualified clinical provider in Long Beach, has school and community-based clinics that address health challenges connected to asthma, nutrition and access to basic health services. Together, these and many other partners have forged pathways to ensure students are prepared to thrive in school and become leaders in their communities.





## Contra Costa County, California

An alternative school improves attendance by leveraging the power of a learning network and county education office.

After reviewing attendance data, an alternative education school in California's Contra Costa County discovered that 71 percent of its students were chronically absent in 2014–2015. "Students were out so often we would celebrate when students were in school just three days a week," says Ed Brown, principal of the Golden Gate Community School, which serves about 75 students in grades 7–12 who have been expelled or had issues elsewhere.

Brown and his team learned to design and implement a tiered set of chronic absence reduction strategies, thanks to participation in the Contra Costa Attendance Learning Network, convened by the [Contra Costa County Office of Education](#) and Attendance Works. The result: The school reduced its chronic absence by 12 percent in only two years – illustrating that attendance is not a "lost cause" for the most vulnerable students. Working to understand these students' attendance issues helps educators better address the students' overall needs.

This portrait also demonstrates the power of a county education office to promote district collaboration and drive change. Seven of the learning network's

eight districts have seen chronic absence reductions, ranging from 0.5 percent to as high as 12 percent. The county office of education also conducts a year-long attendance awareness campaign "[Every School Day Counts](#)" that provides resources, key messages, tools and strategies to all of its 18 districts. The county education office is also a leader in the "Keeping Our Kids in School" countywide initiative, which is spearheaded by the juvenile court.

At Golden Gate Community School, a team now uses data to identify chronically absent and at-risk students, as well as the causes of poor attendance. The [School Attendance Review Board](#) switched from a negative, punitive process to a more positive process focused on increasing student supports.

Predisposed to high-intensity interventions (Tier 3) given its population, the school's most significant changes have been at Tiers 1 (prevention) and 2 (early intervention). The school now works to [cultivate an attendance culture](#) and uses incentives like gift cards to reinforce strong attendance habits.



## Oregon Tribal Attendance Pilot Project

Schools, Native American families and tribes partner to reduce chronic absence in a small rural community.

Revealing that nearly one-third of American Indian/Alaska Native students were chronically absent, a **landmark 2014 study** motivated Oregon state lawmakers to create the **Tribal Attendance Pilot Project (TAPP)** – a \$1.5 million effort to reduce chronic absenteeism among native students in nine Oregon districts. The project's family advocates work to build a culture of attendance and help American Indian families learn to trust public schools, which in the past sought to strip native children of their language and customs, even forcibly removing them from families. The state education department administers and is evaluating the full TAPP initiative, which has received another two years of state funding.

At Willamina School District, in rural Oregon's Yamhill County – where 48.01 percent of students were chronically absent – the project resulted in the chronic absence rate dropping to 42.40 percent. While the rate is still high, the introduction of attendance assemblies, tracking attendance in each class and monthly attendance challenges is building a school-wide culture of attendance. The family advocate makes personal connections with families and creates individual family plans and student incentives to improve attendance.

A stronger relationship and communication between the school and the tribe was also reinforced.

At Warm Springs K-8 Academy in rural Oregon's Jefferson School District – where 29 percent of students were chronically absent in the first two quarters of 2014-15 – the project resulted in the chronic absence rate dropping to 23 percent (156 of 598 students) in first two quarters of 2016-17. The rate is still high, but the increased buy-in from the community is palpable: More families are willing to ask for help, and regular attendance has become a community effort. Successes have included drastically reduced truancy and a positive relationship formed with the local Juvenile Prosecution. Working with the school resource officer and the courts, the Warm Springs TAPP reduced the number of citations from 14 for the K-4 level to just one this year. Local store employees even call if they see students skipping school.

Other TAPP schools have embraced Native American culture and languages – creating a culturally responsive curriculum, having tribal members produce board books or offering Native American story times.



## Trenton, New Jersey

### A “full court press” makes a difference in improving attendance in an urban middle school.

Staff members at Hedgepeth/Williams Middle School of the Arts in Trenton, New Jersey, were shocked to find out in the fall of 2015 that nearly a quarter of their 471 students were already chronically absent. Led by Principal Adrienne R. Hill and Vice Principal Gregory Green, they worked to find out why students were missing school and launched a deliberate multi-pronged school-wide strategy to address the challenges they discovered, launching a “full court press,” as [this video](#) describes.

By the end of February 2017, chronic absence was reduced by more than half, to less than 10 percent. Hedgepeth/Williams was featured as a success story in a statewide report on chronic absence, [Showing Up Matters](#), produced by Advocates for Children of New Jersey, providing an inspiring call to action for educators throughout the state.

The entire faculty worked together to create an engaging school climate that lets all students know they are welcome and emphasizes the importance of being in class every day. The attendance team monitors students' attendance and develops interventions ranging from connecting students to staff mentors to sending letters to parents and “We Miss You” postcards directly to chronically absent students.

To create a greater sense of accountability among students and families, school leaders clarified consequences for excessive absences, such as the possibility of repeating a grade. They addressed issues that often affect attendance, for example, by offering online English language classes to parents who in the past had taken their English-speaking children out of school to translate at doctors' appointments or meetings.



## Springdale, Arkansas

An elementary school tailors strategies to the culture and needs of families.

In the small city of Springdale, Arkansas, school administrators at Monitor Elementary School – which serves more than 860 pre-K to fifth-graders – were astonished to discover that their 94 percent average daily attendance rate in 2012–13 masked a 19 percent chronic absence rate at the school, where most students are from low-income families and two-fifths are Latino. Chronic absence was highest among kindergarten students and among certain populations, including **immigrants from the Marshall Islands**, who account for about one-fifth of students. Over the next two years, Monitor Elementary reduced its chronic absence rate to 6 percent.

The school raised awareness through banners and multi-lingual handouts and changed the practices of its well-intentioned front-office staff so they engaged, rather than scolded, families arriving late to school. When a student's absences mount, teachers call the student's home to express concern and offer help. They coordinate with the school nurse when health issues are involved. Teachers and staff members mentor students who are missing too much school. Attendance circles encourage students to share what they like about school and what might help them arrive on time every day. The school's community liaison schedules family conferences to talk about turning around absenteeism. The school partners with social services agencies and community nonprofits to help students and families with deeper needs.

A key to Monitor's success, as this **video** details, has been tailoring its family outreach to the communities it serves. The school, for example, hosts family nights for Marshallese and Latino community members. Because Marshallese parents are often not literate in their own language, a community liaison from the Marshallese community helps school officials connect with them via phone or in-person rather than relying on written materials. "It is a culture that holds personal connection primary," explains Sierra Engelmann, a school counselor. "Lecturing is very offensive but celebrations are very welcomed." The school hosts Islander nights, where parents bring food and good attendance is recognized.

Monitor is among several successful attendance-improvement efforts nurtured by the **Make Every Day Count** initiative of the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Launched by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the campaign is a collaboration of state and local nonprofits, parents and families, government agencies, foundations, educators, business leaders and policymakers committed to taking a comprehensive approach to ensuring all children will read at grade-level by the end of third grade.





## West Newfield, Maine

A small rural school benefits from a larger prevention-oriented attendance effort.

Located in the tiny rural southwest Maine town of West Newfield, Line Elementary School once struggled to improve attendance. Like many rural Maine communities, families face challenging economic conditions as well as harsh winter weather. When Principal Tim Stinson began tackling the school's over 10 percent chronic absence rate with the support of Count ME In, a Maine attendance effort, he questioned the value. "Our past efforts to improve attendance didn't yield much," recalls Stinson, whose school is part of Regional School Unit 57 District, which includes seven schools in six rural towns.

But, soon after Line Elementary – which serves 284 students, over half from low-income families – began working with Count ME In to implement its district's attendance plan in Fall 2015, Stinson began to see the positive impact of work that included establishing an intervention team, a system to track absences and an accountability process. By the end of the

second school year, Line Elementary's chronic absentee rate decreased by 44 percent. Stinson and his staff were excited to begin a new school year with a plan they knew could make a difference.

Over the past three years, Count ME In has learned that implementing a comprehensive model to address chronic absenteeism requires supporting implementation of effective practice with fidelity at the school site. This approach involves raising awareness; engaging all staff including teachers and reaching out to absent students; intervention teams monitoring data and strategies; and school and community agency staff partnering with families to develop effective solutions. **Count ME In's** mission is to increase student attendance through data-driven strategies so every child is an engaged, successful learner. It partners with several districts, helping schools adopt a prevention-oriented approach to reducing chronic absence and nurture a school culture that promotes learning.

## Phoenix, Arizona

### A K-8 school improves attendance by creating a positive and safe school climate.

Located in Phoenix, Arizona, Loma Linda K-8 School once faced many challenges with gang activity, drugs, alcohol and weapons, especially among its older children. Fighting and bullying stemming from lack of social skills and the ability to solve conflicts were big issues for all grades – including during school recess.

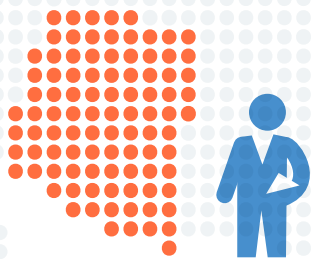
Loma Linda worked hard to put systems in place school-wide to reduce conflict, reduce suspensions and office referrals, and focus on teaching and learning. As one piece of the solution, Loma Linda partnered with Playworks, a national non-profit that builds social and emotional skills by introducing inclusive and fun playground practices that help students feel involved and active.

Now, Loma Linda's school climate has become safer and more positive. The change has had a direct impact on attendance. "Before we started with Playworks, our chronic absence rate hovered at 12 to 15

percent. Last year, we ended at about 4 to 5 percent," says Principal Stephanie De Mar.

To change Loma Linda's playground atmosphere and, in turn, its school culture, the Playworks intervention added more structure and routine. One strategy that proved particularly effective is "Class Game Time." During Class Game Time, a Playworks coach introduces students and teachers to games they can play at recess. Teachers welcomed the 30 to 45 minutes spent building relationships with students through something beyond instruction. Playworks coaches are trained to promote and teach activities to meet the needs of diverse learners, fostering an inclusive school culture and climate.

The number of students sent to the school office for behavior issues during lunch recess alone dropped from 400 the year before Playworks' arrival to four the year after. Most office referrals now are students who transferred to the school – and the longer students are enrolled in the school, the fewer issues they experience, a data review shows. Teachers are happier, too. Loma Linda's teacher turnover has decreased, and staff see benefits of the Playworks intervention in multiple aspects of their jobs.





## Baltimore, Maryland

A K-12 Charter school network lays a foundation for excellent attendance through a unique structure for relationship building and engaging educational experiences.

Guided by the belief that children are creative, capable, powerful and worthy of the deepest respect, the City Neighbors is a charter school network rooted in the arts and project-based learning and inspired by the **Reggio Emilia** philosophy. Dedicated to promoting shared ownership, it is structured as a parent, teacher, student cooperative where all have a voice in shaping the curriculum as well as in governance, budgeting and hiring.

Comprised of three schools (two K-8 and one high school) serving 850 students, City Neighbors has no entrance criteria. Instead, students are chosen through a citywide lottery. Nearly 65 percent of its student population receive free and reduced-price lunch and a third are students with disabilities. Its chronic absence rates are three to four times lower than the rest of Baltimore City schools, falling below 5 percent in elementary and middle school and hovering around 10 percent for high school. Unlike most schools, attendance for students in special education is on par with the rest of the students. An essential element is ensuring that teachers have materials and supplies, including assistive technology, to effectively adapt classroom instruction as needed. Each school has an active administrative team that uses data, including on attendance, to inform the development of a tiered system of support.

City Neighbors High School demonstrates how to lay a foundation for excellent attendance through a powerful combination of relationship-building and engaging learning experiences. Every morning, the school leader and assistant principal stand at the front door greeting every child by name. They offer high-fives and take students aside to ask "Hey, what's going on

today?" The goal is for students to attend not because of the law or expectation, but because of their sense of belonging and purpose. An extensive internship program based on student interests brings over 75 business partnerships to the school and connects the community to the success of each student.

Each student is assigned to a **pod** – a physical space where 15 or 16 students gather every day with a pod advisor throughout their school years. Students have the opportunity to connect and interact with each other as well as their advisors. The pod – combined with challenging classes, project-based learning, performance assessment, structures that give students a voice and attention to the physical environment – fosters a culture of learning and respect. Students have access to meaningful community-based internships beginning in 11th grade.

The Pod Advisors serve as a direct connection to the students and families. Because of their strong relationships, families and faculty help each other through challenges that might otherwise affect attendance, such as arranging for car pools and reaching out to help with wrap around services for students and their families when they are challenged with a particular crisis.

City Neighbors reveals the power of providing a school experience that is rich in educational opportunity and of creating a structure for belonging designed to make sure that the City Neighbors motto comes true – "every student is KNOWN. LOVED, and INSPIRED."

## APPENDIX B: Methodology

Everyone Graduates Center drew upon two primary sources of data for the 2013–14 school year: the Office of Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) survey to obtain how many students missed 15 or more school days, by school, and the Common Core of Data (CCD), provided by the National Center for Education Statistics, offering background information on each school. CRDC is the only available source of national data on chronic absence. The CCD includes a school's type (regular, special education, vocational, alternative), level (elementary, middle, high, other) and locale (urban, suburban, town, rural), as well as the percentage of enrolled students eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program (a proxy for low income level). In addition, the New York City Department of Education provided accurate counts of the number of students who were chronically absent at its schools during the 2013–14 school year. This last file was used to replace the data originally submitted to CRDC, which was reported as erroneous by the New York City Department of Education, and included 303,077 students who had missed 15 or more school days increasing their numbers by almost 270,000 more students

than their initial submission. Adding in the corrected New York City data increased the total number of students nation-wide estimated to be chronically absent from 6.8 million to slightly more than 7 million.

Combining the CRDC and CCD data sources provided an analytic sample of 92,333 schools for the 2013–14 school year. It includes only schools based in the 50 states and the District of Columbia (excluding schools in any U.S. territories or possessions). The sample further excludes any schools that were missing chronic absenteeism data from the CRDC (8,372), or were missing school-level information from the CCD (another 344), and a smaller number of remaining duplicate records (122). Lastly, for 244 schools for whom the number of chronically absent students reported was higher than the reported total enrollment (less than 1 percent of the total sample), their chronic absence rate was capped at a maximum of 100 percent. The analysis conducted by the Everyone Graduates Center was retested by an independent third party (Professor Michael Gottfried and J. Jacob Kirksey, a PhD student, from the University of California, Santa Barbara) to confirm its accuracy and reliability.

## Endnotes

- i. This estimate of 7 million students includes the 6.8 million students identified as missing 15 days or more in SY 13–14 by the Office for Civil Rights in the [Civil Rights Data Collection](#) after its estimates were updated with new data from the state of Florida plus revised figures provided directly to Attendance Works by the New York City Department of Education for SY 13–14. **Please note that while Attendance Works typically recommends using missing 10 percent or more of the entire school year as the definition of chronic absence, we are also using the term to refer to 15 or more days – which is a reasonably close level and also likely an undercount of days absent given the challenges associated with accurate data collection.**
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- iii. [Balfanz, Robert, and Vaughan Byrnes, The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools. Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, Baltimore, Md., 2012.](#)
- iv. Ready, Douglas D., Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development, The Differential Effects of School Exposure, Sociology of Education, October 2010.  
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- v. The Attendance Imperative: How States Can Advance Achievement by Reducing Chronic Absence, Attendance Works 2014.
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- vii. [Attendance Matters: White Paper on Chronic Absenteeism in San Antonio Schools, P16Plus Council of Greater Bexar County, August, 2015.](#)  
Balfanz, Robert, and Vaughan Byrnes, [The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools.](#) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. May 2012.  
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- viii. Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012.
- ix. [Chronic Absence in Utah Public Schools](#), Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah, July 2012.