

# The Importance of Being in School:

## A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools

Robert  
Balfanz

Vaughan  
Byrnes

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UNIVERSITY

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## Executive Summary

America's education system is based on the assumption that barring illness or an extraordinary event, students are in class every weekday. So strong is this assumption that it is not even measured. Indeed, it is the rare state education department, school district or principal that can tell you how many students have missed 10 percent or more of the school year or in the previous year missed a month or more school – two common definitions of chronic absence.

Because it is not measured, chronic absenteeism is not acted upon. Like bacteria in a hospital, chronic absenteeism can wreak havoc long before it is discovered. If the evidence in this report is borne out through more systematic data collection and analysis, that havoc may have already undermined school reform efforts of the past quarter century and negated the positive impact of future efforts.

Students need to attend school daily to succeed. The good news of this report is that being in school leads to succeeding in school. Achievement, especially in math, is very sensitive to attendance, and absence of even two weeks during one school year matters. Attendance also strongly affects standardized test scores and graduation and dropout rates. Educators and policymakers cannot truly understand achievement gaps or efforts to close them without considering chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism is not the same as truancy or average daily attendance – the attendance rate schools use for state report cards and federal accountability. Chronic absenteeism means missing 10 percent of a school year for any reason. A school can have average daily attendance of 90 percent and still have 40 percent of its students chronically absent, because on different days, different students make up that 90 percent.

Data from only six states address this issue: Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon and Rhode Island. How these states measure chronic absenteeism, however, differs by number of days and by whether or not data include transfer students.

Such limited data produce only an educated guess at the size of the nation's attendance challenge: A national rate of 10 percent chronic absenteeism seems conservative and it could be as high as 15 percent, meaning that 5 million to 7.5 million students are chronically absent. Looking at this more closely sharpens the impact. In Maryland, for instance, there are 58 elementary schools that have 50 or more chronically absent students; that is, two classrooms of students who miss more than a month of school a year. In a high school, where chronic absenteeism is higher, there are 61 schools where 250 or more students are missing a month or more of school.

The six states reported chronic absentee rates from 6 percent to 23 percent, with high poverty urban areas reporting up to one-third of students chronically absent. In poor rural areas, one in four students can miss at least a month's worth of school. The negative impact chronic absenteeism has on school success is increased because students who are chronically absent in one year are often chronically absent in multiple years. As a result, particularly in high poverty areas, significant numbers of students are missing amounts of school that are staggering: on the order of six months to over a year, over a five year period.

Chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among low-income students. Gender and ethnic background do not appear to play a role in this. The youngest and the oldest students tend to have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, with students attending most regularly in third through fifth grades. Chronic absenteeism begins to rise in middle school and continues climbing through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, with seniors often having the highest rate of all. The data also suggest that chronic absenteeism is concentrated in relatively few schools, with 15 percent of schools in Florida, for example, accounting for at least half of all chronically absent students.

#### **Missing school matters:**

- In a nationally representative data set, chronic absence in kindergarten was associated with lower academic performance in first grade. The impact is twice as great for students from low-income families.
- A Baltimore study found a strong relationship between sixth-grade attendance and the percentage of students graduating on time or within a year of their expected high school graduation.
- Chronic absenteeism increases achievement gaps at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.
- Because students reared in poverty benefit the most from being in school, one of the most effective strategies for providing pathways out of poverty is to do what it takes to get these students in school every day. This alone, even without improvements in the American education system, will drive up achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates.

Students miss school for many reasons. These can, however, be divided into three broad categories:

- Students who *cannot attend* school due to illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, the need to work or involvement with the juvenile justice system.
- Students who *will not attend* school to avoid bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment and embarrassment.

- Students who *do not attend* school because they, or their parents, do not see the value in being there, they have something else they would rather do, or nothing stops them from skipping school.

Despite being pervasive, though overlooked, chronic absenteeism is raising flags in some schools and communities. This awareness is leading to attendance campaigns that are so vigorous and comprehensive they pay off quickly. Examples of progress nationally and at state, district, and school levels give hope to the challenge of chronic absenteeism, besides being models for others.

In addition to these efforts, both the federal government, state departments of education, and school districts need to regularly measure and report the rates of chronic absenteeism and regular attendance (missing five days or less a year) for every school. State and district policies need to encourage every student to attend school every day and support school districts, schools, non-profits, communities, and parents in using evidence-based strategies to act upon these data to propel all students to attend school daily. Mayors and governors have critical roles to play in leading inter-agency task forces that bring health, housing, justice, transportation, and education agencies together to organize coordinated efforts to help every student attend every day.

## Introduction

The public education system is based on the assumption that students regularly attend school. Compulsory education laws back up this assumption. The standards and accountability movement of the past 25 years represent an on-going attempt to make every day of school matter. The assumption that except for illness or the occasional doctor's appointment, family vacation, special event or crisis, students do in fact attend school every day is so strong, that it is not measured. It is the rare state department of education, school district or school principal that can tell you how many students have missed 10 percent or more of the school year or in the prior year missed a month or more of school -- two common definitions of chronic absence. Parents and community members can readily learn the test scores of their local schools and their average daily attendance from school report cards that are routinely available on state and district websites, but they cannot readily know if, as is the case in some schools, a quarter or more of the students in the school are not attending regularly.

Because it is not measured, chronic absenteeism is not acted upon. This is deeply problematic. As this report will highlight, chronic absenteeism functions much like bacteria in a hospital -- an unseen force that wreaks havoc on efforts to improve life outcomes. In fact, if the fragmentary evidence that this report assembles is verified through more systematic data collection and analysis, the failure to measure and act upon chronic absenteeism will be seen as a fundamental reason why the school reform efforts of the past quarter century have not been as effective as intended. By the same token, it will be realized that if chronic absenteeism is not addressed it will continue to under-cut the impact of current and future school improvement efforts in an era when the nation, its communities, and citizens are dependent more than ever on increasing educational attainment and achievement.

Simply put, students need to attend school regularly to succeed. The good news of this report is that being in school leads to succeeding in school. This may seem obvious, but the steady drumbeat about under-performing schools and the failures of the public education system can lead people to believe that missing some school days won't matter that much. But the emerging evidence argues the opposite.

Chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among low-income students, and it is low-income students who benefit the most from being in school every day. This indicates that one of the most effective strategies for providing pathways out of poverty is to do what it takes to get students who live in high-poverty neighborhoods to attend school every day, and that this alone, even without any additional qualitative improvements in the American education system, will drive up achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates and through them economic productivity and social progress.

What the emerging evidence tells us is that in some states like Oregon and Rhode Island, close to 1 in 5 students does not attend school regularly and misses essentially a month or more of schooling in a year. In some high-poverty school districts this can climb to more than 1 in 3 students. There are even high schools where 75 percent of the students do not attend regularly. Even states where the percentage is considerably lower, such as Nebraska where 6 percent of students miss 21 or more days of school, the absolute numbers of students missing lots of school in a year are still considerable. In Nebraska, that number is 18,100. Moreover, the available data indicate that while chronic absenteeism is deeply detrimental to educational success, just missing more than a week of school can have consequences. In this regard, there is widespread room for improvement. In Georgia, for example, only 53 percent of students miss five or fewer days of school, in Maryland 38 percent of students miss less than five days of school.

The goal of this report is to gather and analyze all available data on chronic absenteeism at the state level to begin the process of mapping its extent and characteristics, to synthesize existing work on the consequences of missing school, to extend that work with new analysis at state and national levels, and highlight some promising practices among cities, school districts and non-profits to combat chronic absenteeism.

This report concludes with a set of policy recommendations, including that it is imperative for both the federal government and state departments of education to regularly measure and report the rates of chronic absenteeism (missing 10 percent or more of school or a month or more per year) and regular attendance (missing 5 or fewer days per year) for every school, to engage in policy reviews to ensure that current state and district policies encourage every student to attend every day, and to work with and support school districts, schools, non-profits, the community and parents in using evidence-based strategies to act upon these data, to propel all the nation's students to attend school on a regular basis.

## **What is Chronic Absenteeism?**

Although there is no standard definition, chronic absenteeism is typically based on total days of school missed, including both excused and unexcused absences. This is critical because the evidence indicates that it is how many days a student misses that matters, not why they miss them. In other words, the detrimental impacts of missing school occur if a student misses because of illness, suspension, the need to care for a family member, or any other reason.

In this regard, chronic absenteeism is not the same as truancy. Truancy is typically defined as a certain number or certain frequency of unexcused absences. Truancy numbers typically underestimate total absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism is often defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days. In practical terms this translates into 18 days a year. Several states define chronic absenteeism as missing more than 20 days, or a month, of school. Some states set the bar at 15 days. In a number of locales, missing 20 percent or more of school, 40 or more days, is defined as severely or excessively chronically absent.

## **Chronic Absenteeism is Not Routinely Measured and Reported**

The federal government neither requires nor asks states or school districts to report chronic absenteeism. As part of the No Child Left Behind re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), most states choose to report the average daily attendance of elementary and middle schools, as the second required accountability measure, along with achievement tests in mathematics and English in grades 3 to 8. Average daily attendance, however, masks more than it reveals.

This is one of the rare instances when 90% is not a good grade. It is possible for a school to have 90 percent average daily attendance and still have as many as 40 percent of its students chronically absent because on different days different students are in school. Chronic absenteeism typically has not been included as a common variable in the various federal student and school surveys. For example, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights school survey examines discipline, access to advanced courses, and other key metrics of educational opportunity, but not the extent to which absenteeism varies by race, ethnicity and family income.

Few states report on chronic absenteeism. A comprehensive search undertaken for this report found chronic absenteeism data for only six states – Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon and Rhode Island -- with only four of them making school level data accessible on state websites -- Maryland, Georgia, Florida, and Rhode Island. Moreover, several states, including California and New York, do not even collect the underlying individual attendance data needed to calculate chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism was not included in the initial set of data elements promoted by the Data Quality Campaign and, as a result, is not a readily accessible variable built into a number of emerging state longitudinal data systems. Nor has it, by and large, been built into the next generation of accountability and reporting systems that states are seeking to implement via flexibility waivers from ESEA.

On the positive side, because chronic absenteeism has been identified as a key early warning indicator of students likely to drop out of high school, it is included in the growing number of statewide early warning systems. In most cases, however, these systems and their data are made available to districts, but not mandated, nor always aggregated at the school level. As a result, the extent to which they will make school data on chronic absenteeism available is uncertain.

At the school district level, measuring and reacting to chronic absenteeism have recently been driven by mayors and school superintendents working together. Mayoral interest has helped galvanize inter-agency responses to chronic absenteeism, but has not reached the critical mass needed to propel policy changes at the state and federal levels to ensure that absenteeism is routinely measured, reported, and acted upon by all schools.

### **How Prevalent is Chronic Absenteeism?**

Because it is not routinely measured, we do not know how prevalent chronic absenteeism is. From available data, however, we can begin to paint a picture of its extent, how it varies across schools, and how much students who are chronically absent for multiple years cumulatively miss. What these data tell us is that significant percentages and large numbers of students, particularly in high-poverty schools, are missing lots of school.

Overall, we found some data on chronic absenteeism from six states. The states, however, do not measure chronic absenteeism in the same way. Oregon and Rhode Island measure how many students miss 10 percent or more of enrolled school days. In a 180-day school year, this means students would be counted as chronically absent if they missed 18 or more days.

Maryland, Florida, and Nebraska report the number and percentage of students who miss 21 or more days of school (roughly speaking more than a month of school). Maryland and Florida restrict their counts to students who were enrolled for the full school year, while Rhode Island counts any student enrolled for at least 90 days. Georgia and Nebraska report the number of students who miss 15 days or more of school. Georgia and Maryland are the only states that also provide data on the number and percent of students with good attendance, those who miss five or fewer days in Georgia, and fewer than five days in Maryland.

The data on state absenteeism rates reported in Tables 1 and 2 tell us several things.

First, lots of students are missing lots of school. Even in the state with the lowest reported rate we found, Nebraska at 6 percent, 18,000 students a year are missing more than a month of school. Florida’s reported rate of 10 percent translates into more than 300,000 students a year missing more than a month. In Oregon and Rhode Island, where the bar for chronic absenteeism is set a little lower (missing 10 percent of school, or 18 out of 180 days), nearly 1 in 5 students is not attending school regularly. In Georgia 164,000 students are missing more than three weeks of school, and in Nebraska, when the bar is dropped from 21 to 16 or more days, the number of students with poor attendance doubles from 6,000 (6%) to 12,000 (12%).

**Table 1 - Chronic Absenteeism Rates in Five States**

<b>State</b>	<b>Percent Chronically Absent</b>	<b>Number Chronically Absent</b>
Oregon	23% (2009-10)*	129,190
Rhode Island	18% (2010-11)**	30,168
Maryland	11% (2010-11)***	85,188
Florida	10% (2009-10)***	302,382
Nebraska	6% (2010-11)***	18,100

\*Missing 10% or more of enrolled school days \*\* Missing 10% of enrolled school days, for those who attended at least 90 days \*\*\*Students absent 21 or more days-of those enrolled all year

**Table 2 - Percent and Number of Students Missing More Than 15 Days of School**

<b>State</b>	<b>Percent of Students missing more than 15 days</b>	<b>Number of Students missing more than 15 days</b>
Georgia	8.8% (2010-11)	164,000
Nebraska	12.2% (2010-11)	35,121

State data combine school districts and schools with lower and higher rates of chronic absenteeism. To get a sense of how the magnitude of chronic absenteeism varies by location, it is illustrative to look at school districts. Table 3 below highlights, for example, the school district in Florida with the highest reported rate of chronic absenteeism. In Taylor County, more than a quarter of the students are missing more than a month of school and it is a rural district, demonstrating that chronic absenteeism is not just an urban issue.

Table 3 also reports data from three high-poverty, urban school districts -- Baltimore, New York City, and Providence. Here we can see that depending on how it is measured – that is, students missing 21, 20 days or 18 days, respectively -- that between one-fifth and one-third of students are not attending school regularly. Table 3 also begins to highlight the sheer magnitude of the challenge some school districts face. In Taylor County, Fla., more than 1,000 students miss more than a month of school. This is a considerable challenge when you consider the size and infrastructure typically available to rural counties with lower wealth. In New York City, the largest urban district, there are 200,000 students to respond to.

**Table 3 - Chronic Absenteeism Rates in Selected School Districts**

<b>City/County</b>	<b>Chronic Absenteeism Rate</b>	<b>Number</b>
Taylor County Florida	28.8% (2009-10)	1,017
Baltimore	25% (2010-11)	17,796
New York City	20% (2010-11)	200,000
Providence	34% (2010-11)	8,000

Dropping down to the school level brings into clear view the potentially overwhelming number of students who are chronically absent in the most affected schools. Table 4 examines the 10 percent of schools with the highest chronic absenteeism rates in Rhode Island and Maryland at the elementary, middle and high school levels. We observe that in the most affected elementary schools, between a quarter and a third of the students, on average, are not attending regularly. In Rhode Island, there are 18 elementary schools where more than a quarter of the students are missing at least 10 percent of school. In Maryland we find 39 middle schools where at least one-quarter of the students are missing more than a month of school. In high schools, the numbers are astounding. Here the norm is for more than one-half to two-thirds of the students in the most impacted schools to be chronically absent. In Maryland there are 28 high schools where half or more of the students are chronically absent.

**Table 4 – Chronic Absenteeism Rates in Most Impacted Schools (Top 10%) by School Level in Maryland and Rhode Island 2010-11**

School Level/ State	Average	Max	Min	N
<b>Elementary</b>				
Rhode Island	32%	46%	26%	18
Maryland	24%	69%	16%	93
<b>Middle School</b>				
Rhode Island	36%	40%	31%	6
Maryland	41%	90%	25%	39
<b>High School</b>				
Rhode Island	57%	64%	51%	5
Maryland	67%	95%	50%	28

Table 5 takes the analysis one step further, using Maryland as a case study to examine the scope and magnitude of the challenge as experienced by schools. It asks how many schools have large numbers of students who are chronically absent? In Maryland, at the elementary level there are 58 schools that have 50 or more chronically absent students, and the elementary school with the largest number of students has 137 students not attending school regularly. In the middle grades, there are 26 schools with 100 or more chronically absent students spread over eight school districts. The middle school with the most absentees has 152. Among high schools, the school with the greatest challenge has an astounding 807 chronically absent students. Eleven other high schools have 500 or more students who miss more than 20 days of school; 61 schools have 250 or more of these students, and 161 high schools throughout the state have 100 or more students not attending school regularly.

Think of it this way. In the most affected elementary schools there are two full classes (25 students each) of chronically absent students. In the most impacted middle schools there are four classrooms of chronically absent students and in high schools there are an astounding 10 to 20 classrooms.

**Table 5 - Number of Schools with Large Numbers of Students Chronically Absent- Maryland 2010-2011**

Chronically Absent Students	50 or more	100 or more	500 or more	Greatest Number
<b>Elementary</b>	58	3	NA	137
<b>Middle School</b>		26	NA	152
	100 or more	250 or more	500 or more	Greatest Number
<b>High School</b>	161	61	12	807

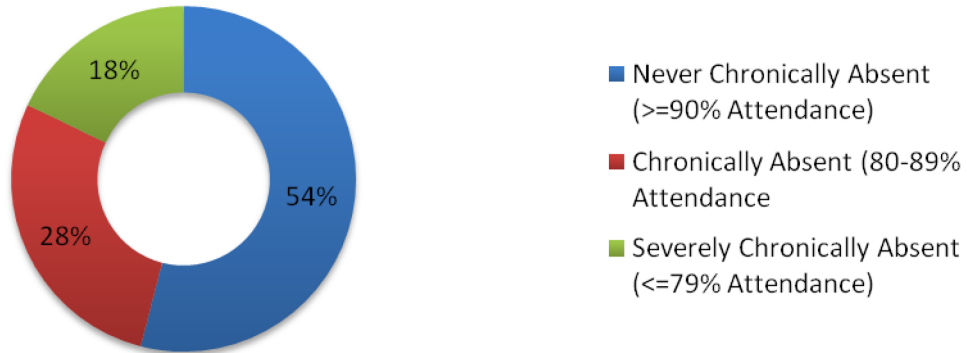
## Significant Number of Students Miss Truly Extraordinary Amounts of Schooling

So far our analysis has focused on the extent of chronic absenteeism across a state, school district or school in a given year. There are three other ways to examine absenteeism. How many students are chronically absent at least once, over a span of years? (For example, the elementary and middle school years). How frequently are students chronically absent over the school years? And when both these are combined, how many days of schooling are students cumulatively missing over multiple years? To answer these questions it is necessary to have a longitudinal data set that follows individual students over time. Increasingly states are building the data systems and data sets to enable this analysis (though as mentioned earlier some have not built in crucial attendance variables). In the following set of charts and tables we use longitudinal data from Florida to follow a cohort of all first-time sixth-graders in the state (178,188 in total in 1997-98) over seven years. If the students in this cohort stayed on track and were promoted annually, they should have graduated at the end of the last year we tracked, 2003-04. We also draw on two data sets from Baltimore, analyzed by the Baltimore Education Research Consortium that followed one cohort of students from first grade five and seven years forward, and another from sixth grade, five years forward.

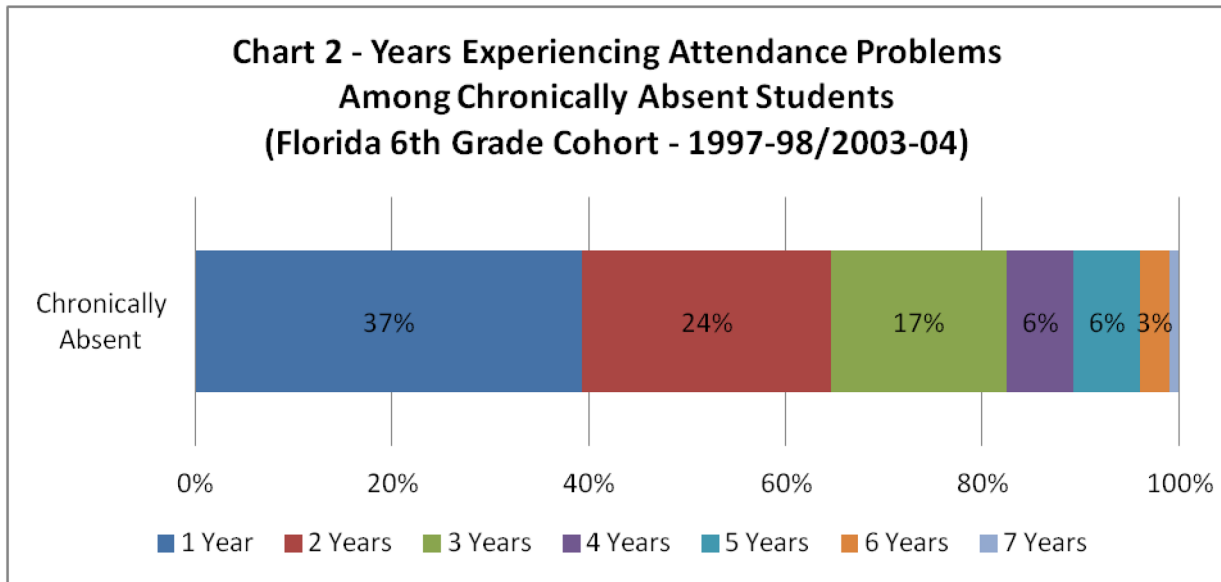
**Chart 1** shows that across their middle and high school years **almost half** the students in the Florida sixth-grade cohort had been chronically absent in at least one year (missing a month or more of school). But what is perhaps even more revealing is that one in five students had been severely chronically absent in at least one year (missing two or more months of school). In other words, during the critical middle and high school years when students need to be prepared for adult success, 46 percent of students in at least one of those years missed a month or more of school and 18 percent missed two or more months of school. Some of this occurs in the run-up to dropping out, but not all of it.

This can be seen in data from Baltimore (Plank et.al 2009), which followed students over their elementary and middle grade years. In one cohort that was tracked from first grade forward for seven years, 22 percent of students missed two-ninths, or 40 days, of at least one year, and an additional 25 percent missed more than one-ninth but less than two-ninths, of the year – between 21 and 40 days. Thus, **nearly half** the students in the cohort missed a month or more of school at least once during their elementary and initial middle grade years. It is important not to over generalize from the tracking of just two cohorts over time, but taken together the data from a sixth-grade cohort in Florida and a first-grade cohort in Baltimore are suggestive, that at least in some locales, over the elementary and middle grades, and middle grade and high school years, it is possible for nearly half of all students to experience at least one year of chronic absenteeism, and close to a fifth of students, at least at one point, to miss two or more months of school.

**Chart 1 - % of Students Ever Chronically Absent  
(Florida 6th Grade Cohort - 1997-98/2003-04)**



The next characteristic of chronic absenteeism to examine is how often students are chronically absent. Among the sixth-grade cohort of students in Florida, of those students who experienced chronic absenteeism at least once across middle and high school, **Chart 2** shows that attendance problems were episodic (occurring only once) for only a third of them. For the other two-thirds, their attendance problems were persistent, occurring in at least two years. Roughly one-third (39 percent) of these students were chronically absent in at least three years, missing three or more months of school in that time span. Just under one-quarter (22 percent) were chronically absent in four or more years (missing four or more months of school) and 10 percent were chronically absent in five or more years across the middle and high school grades (missing at least half a year of school during that time). Thus, the Florida cohort data suggests that in most cases chronic absenteeism is not an isolated occurrence but a frequent and recurring one with cumulative effects for such students. Similar findings were found with the Baltimore data. Among the first-grade cohort, 51 percent of the students experienced episodic chronic absenteeism (i.e. only once) between the first and fifth grades, but among the sixth-grade cohort, only 30 percent were chronically absent in just one year and half where chronically absent in three or more years (Balfanz, Durham, & Plank 2008).



The true magnitude and implied subsequent consequences of chronic absenteeism on educational outcomes stand in stark relief when total days of school missed over multiple years are examined. Here the findings can only be described as jaw-dropping. As seen in Table 5, the 20 percent of students in the Florida sixth-grade cohort who missed the most days over their middle and high school years missed on average **almost one full year of school**. The 20 percent of students with the second lowest attendance missed on **average half a year of school**. Conversely, on average the top 60 percent of students missed less than two weeks of school per year, with the top 20 percent missing less than one week.

**Table 5 – Florida 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Cohort-Cumulative Days Absent Over Seven Years of Middle and High School by Quintile**

	Mean Number of Days Absent	Means Days Absent Per Year
<b>Top 20%</b>	13	3
<b>Upper Middle 20%</b>	35	6
<b>Middle 20%</b>	58	9
<b>Lower Middle 20%</b>	90	15
<b>Bottom 20%</b>	171	28

Baltimore data, possibly because it represents a higher concentration of students living not only in poverty, but in severe multi-generational poverty, is even more extreme. At the elementary level over a five-year period the 20 percent of students who missed the most school, on average missed 125 days of school, or 70 percent of a year. The 20 percent of students with the fewest days missed, by contrast, were absent, on average, only two days of school per year. Among the sixth-grade cohort, the 20 percent of students who missed the most school, missed on average 282 days or a year and half of school. The next 20 percent of students missed on average 162 days or nearly a year of school. This says that 40 percent of students in the cohort missed nearly a year of school or more over a five-year period. The best attending 20 percent of students by contrast, missed on average, less than 5 days per year and 23 days total over five years (Balfanz, Durham, and Plank 2008).

### **Summing Up: How Big is the Nation's Absenteeism Challenge?**

From the data available it is possible to make no more than an educated guess on the size of the nation's absenteeism challenge. The first question to address is how many students are chronically absent, missing either 10 percent, or more than a month, of school? We have data from six states that speak to this. On first glance the state data indicate a wide range – 6 percent to 23 percent. But in looking more closely at how chronic absenteeism is defined and measured in these states, as well as how the characteristics of the state match the nation at large, we can make some deductions about a national rate:

- Florida and Maryland combined, in many ways, are representative of the student body in the nation's public schools, or where it is headed in terms of diversity and income. Florida reports that 10 percent of its students miss 21 days or more of school, and Maryland reports 11 percent. We know, however, that this is a conservative rate, because it measures only students who were enrolled for the full year, and does not capture the absentee rate of students who move in and out of the public schools. Given that school mobility has itself been linked to increased absenteeism, it seems clear that these are undercounts.
- When Oregon and Rhode Island measure students who have missed 18 or more days and at least some of the transfer students, rates of 18 and 23 percent, respectively, are reported.
- This is counter-balanced by the 6 percent rate reported in Nebraska for students missing at least 21 days, and the 9 percent rate in Georgia for students missing more than 15 days. In Nebraska, though, we know 12 percent of students are missing more than 15 days.

- Altogether this suggests a 10 percent estimated national rate for students missing 21 days, or more than a month, of school, assuming transfer students are counted. This is a relatively conservative estimate.
- An argument can also be made for a higher estimate. If chronic absenteeism is defined as missing at least 10 percent of the school year (i.e. 18 or more days instead of 21 or more) and transfers are counted, then the national rate for public school students could approach 14 to 15 percent.

***If we apply these metrics to the roughly 50 million students enrolled in grades pre-k to 12 in America's public schools, we estimate that from 5 to 7.5 million students each year are not attending school regularly.***

We also know from national, state, and local longitudinal data, that half or more of the students who are chronically absent may be so for multiple years. The available evidence also indicates that about one-quarter of chronically absent students are severely chronically absent, which means missing two months or more of school. This tells us that there are millions of public school students who are missing huge amounts of school.

## Locating Chronic Absenteeism

Having established that far too many students are missing far too much school, the next step is to understand when students are not attending, who is not attending, and where they are absent from.

### *When are Students Chronically Absent?*

**Chart 3** combines available data on chronic absentee rates from several states and one national survey to reveal consistent patterns across the different grade levels<sup>1</sup>. After initially high rates of absenteeism in kindergarten where many children are not yet attending school regularly, rates of chronic absenteeism decrease through the third and fourth grades before rising again in the middle grades, especially the sixth through eighth grades<sup>2</sup>. Chronic absenteeism continues to increase through high school, often reaching its highest rate in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

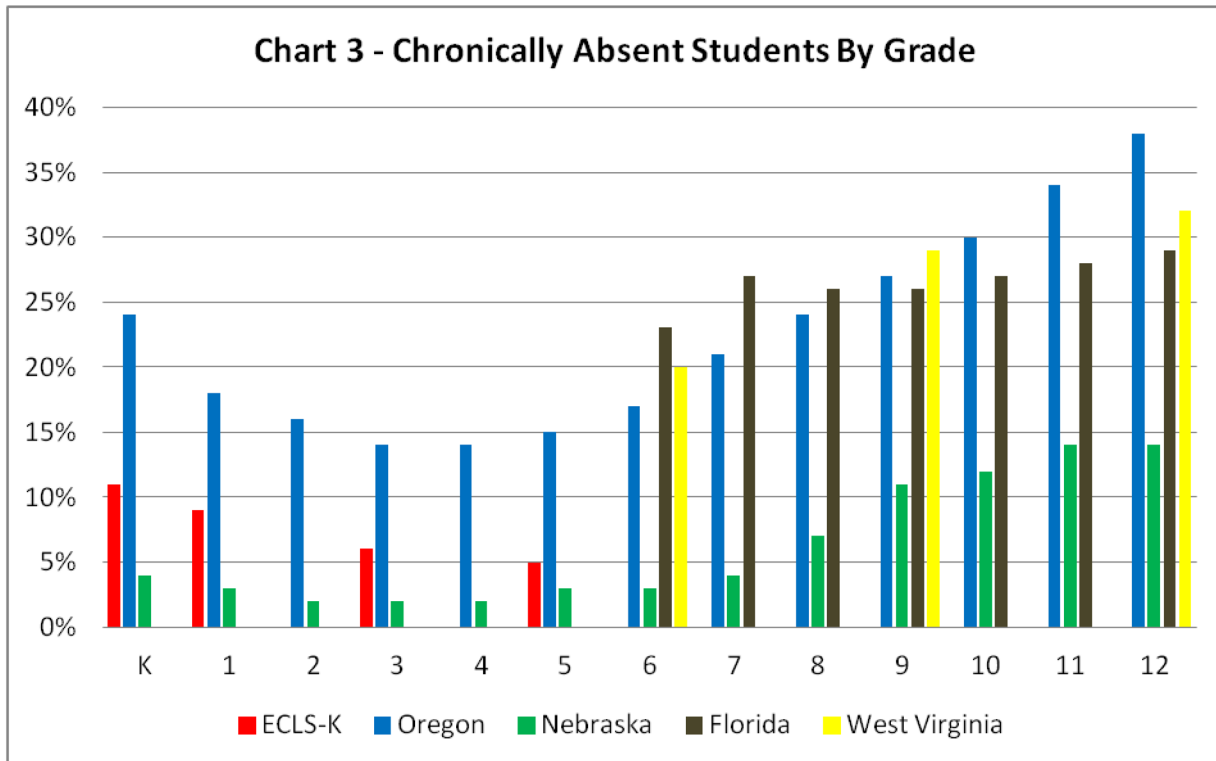
Several key points can be inferred from this pattern:

1. First, chronic absenteeism starts early in kindergarten.
2. Second, the fact that absenteeism rates improve over the elementary grades, consistently hitting their lowest levels in third and fourth grades suggests there is a period of adjustment for some families to having their children attend school regularly, but that over time, many do make this adjustment and attendance improves.
3. That the rate of chronic absenteeism then reverses course in the middle grades and steadily and substantially increases throughout high school indicates that new factors arise by the middle grades, leading more students to miss more school.
4. Finally, the fact that the highest rate is often observed in 12<sup>th</sup> grade indicates that while students who drop out often are chronically absent before they do so, graduating students are not immune from missing significant amounts of school.

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<sup>1</sup> Data on chronic absentee rates vary by source, including years available and measurement of absenteeism. ECLS-K data are longitudinal and come from the cohort of students who were in kindergarten in 1998-99. ECLS-K data define chronic absenteeism as missing 18 or more days (roughly 10% of the school year). The four state sources define chronic absenteeism as students who missed 20 or more school days during the year. Data from Oregon are from the 2009-10 school year, Nebraska from 2010-11, West Virginia from 2008-09, and for Florida data are longitudinal and track a cohort of students who were in 6<sup>th</sup> grade in 1997-98.

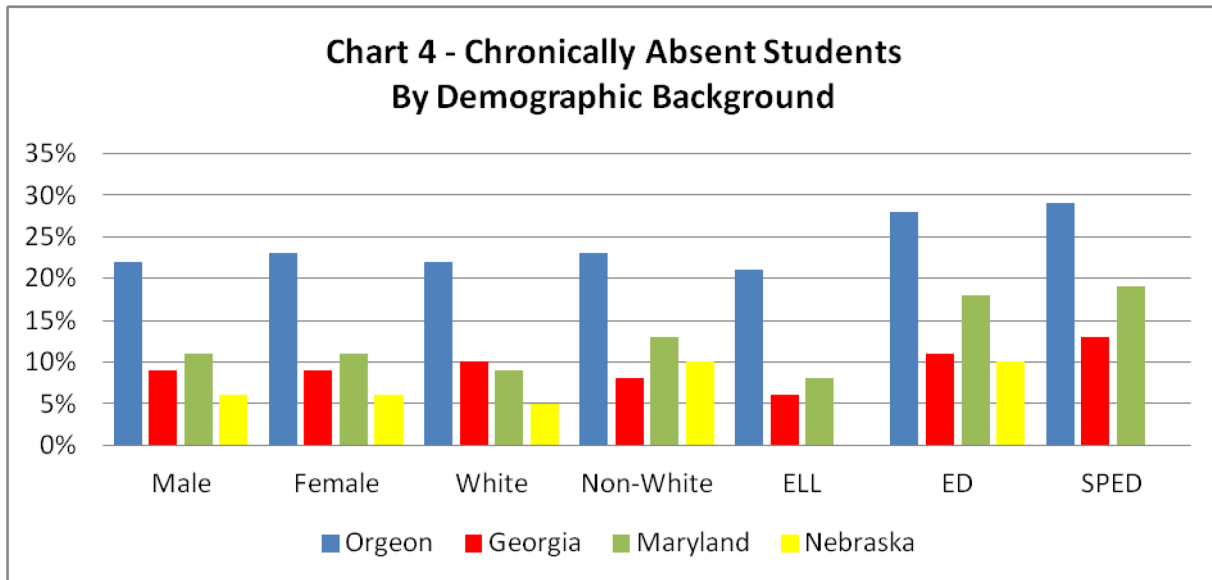
<sup>2</sup> ECLS-K data found that while chronic absentee rates declined from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade for the national sample, they increased in 5<sup>th</sup> grade for economically disadvantaged students (Romero & Lee, 2007).



### *Who is Missing School?*

As seen in **Chart 4**, rates of chronic absenteeism are similar across gender and ethnic background, but consistently higher among economically disadvantaged students and those in special education classes, across all states for which data were available.<sup>3</sup> Data from the ECLS-K survey and from Georgia, Nebraska and Maryland also found that chronic absentee rates were substantially higher for Native American students than for students of other minority and ethnic backgrounds.

<sup>3</sup> Data from Georgia, Nebraska and Maryland come from the 2010-11 school-year while data from Oregon are from the 2009-10 school-year. For the state of Georgia, chronic absenteeism is defined as having missed 15 or more days of schools as opposed to 20 or more.

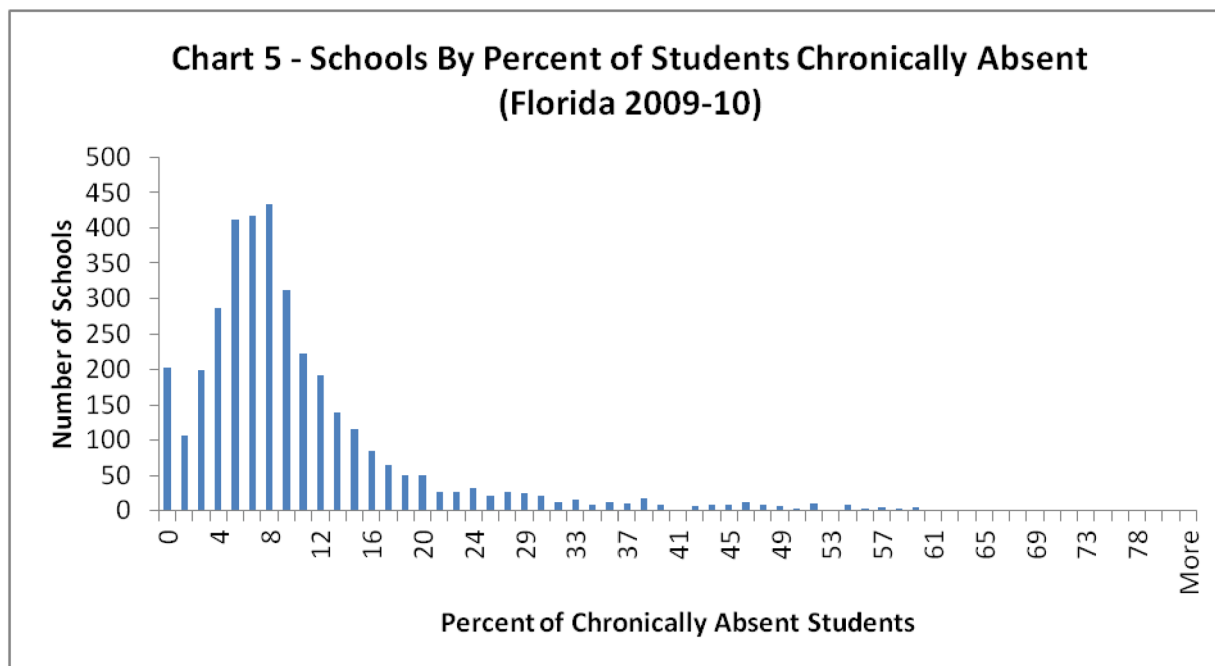


It is notable that at the state level, there does not appear to be a significant difference in the rate at which males and females attend school. The few states that have data also suggest that there may not be large differences across urban, suburban, town and rural areas. In both Oregon and Florida, for example, chronic absentee rates are broadly similar across geographic regions.

One clear relationship that does emerge is a strong correlation between poverty and chronic absenteeism. For Maryland in 2011, chronic absentee rates for students eligible for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program were 10.9 percent in elementary schools, 15.8 percent in middle schools, and 30.8 percent in high schools. Conversely, for student not eligible for the lunch program, the comparable rates were less than 5 percent in elementary and middle schools and 11.8 percent at the high school level. Thus, chronic absentee rates were three times higher among economically disadvantaged students in middle and high schools and at least twice as high in elementary schools. Similar, though somewhat smaller, differences were also found for economically disadvantaged students in Oregon, across all grade levels. In Nebraska, two-thirds of chronically absent students are economically disadvantaged and in Georgia it is 70 percent. In sum, students who live in poverty attend school less frequently than those who do not.

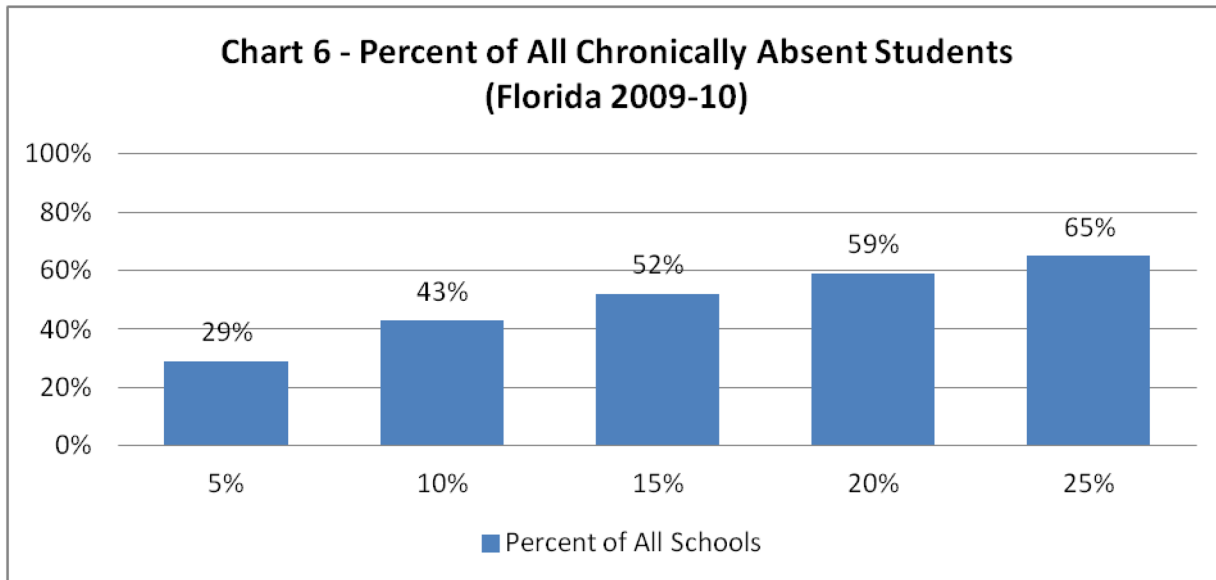
### *Chronically Absent Students are Concentrated in a Sub-Set of Schools*

Looking at data from a recent year in Florida, we see that the numbers of chronically absent students are not distributed evenly across all schools.<sup>4</sup> **Chart 5** shows the distribution of schools by the percentage of chronically absent students. The large proportion of Florida schools is concentrated toward the bottom with low percentages of chronically absent students. While only 6 percent of all Florida schools had no students who were chronically absent, most schools had low percentages. The state average for all schools was 10 percent of students, with one-quarter of all schools having fewer than 5 percent of their students chronically absent and half of all schools with fewer than 7 percent chronic absentees. There were, however, many schools where chronic absenteeism was a large problem. The top third of all Florida schools with the highest percentages of chronically absent students had 10 percent or more of their students chronically absent, and the top one-tenth of schools had 20 percent or more chronically absent students.



**Chart 6** clarifies this concentration of chronically absent students among a smaller proportion of schools where the problem is most pronounced. **Half of all chronically absent students in Florida (52%) were concentrated in only 15 percent of the schools, and between one-quarter and one-third of all chronically absent students (29 percent) were concentrated in only 5 percent of schools.**

<sup>4</sup> Data exclude schools where fewer than 30 students were enrolled, home education programs, migrant non-enrolled student programs, virtual schools, superintendents' offices, and schools for the deaf or blind.



The concentration of chronically absent students in a sub-set of schools can also be seen in the distribution of Rhode Island students in grades K-3 who miss 10 percent or more of school. In four of the state’s 34 school districts, no more than 4 percent of K-3 students are chronically absent. At the opposite end of the spectrum are four districts where the percentage of chronically absent students in grades K-3 runs from 19 to 23 percent.

***Summing Up: Who Does Not Attend School***

The data indicate that chronic absenteeism cuts across gender and geographic location. It is not a male or female, or urban or rural issue. What is still unknown, however, is if the causes of absenteeism vary by gender and region even if the end result is largely the same. The primary characteristic of students who miss lots of school is that they live in or near poverty. It is important to remember, though, that not all students who are chronically absent are from low-income homes. There is also evidence that chronic absenteeism interacts with the rhythms of schooling. Student absenteeism increases at key transitions – the start of formal education, in kindergarten and first grade, the moves into middle and high schools, and senior year. Finally, the detailed data from Florida suggest that chronic absenteeism is concentrated in a sub-set of schools – just 15% of schools account for more than half of the chronically absent students.

## Why Does Missing School Matter?

It may seem obvious that missing school is not a good thing. But given the extent to which schooling is sometimes disparaged as ineffective, failing, repetitive, or beside the point (i.e. “I learned more from a 2-minute record than I ever learned in school”), it is not uncommon for many people to wonder if missing some school is such a big deal.

Also there is the issue of for whom does it matter. As the research on summer learning loss has shown, students who live in high-poverty communities benefit the most from going to school. As a result, it stands to reason that these same students might be hurt the most by absenteeism (Ready 2010).

In the following sections we both review existing research on the relationship between absenteeism and academic achievement, high school graduation and post-secondary enrollment - - much of it quite recent and done with high levels of statistical sophistication -- and report on the results of some original analysis for this report, using state and national data sets. The result is an overwhelming case that absenteeism substantially lowers the nation’s educational outcomes.

### *Early Schooling—Pre-School, Kindergarten, and First Grade*

- In a nationally representative data set, chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade. The impact is two times greater for students from low-income families. Children from low-income families who were also chronically absent in kindergarten had the lowest levels of achievement in fifth grade (Chang and Romero 2008).
- Compared to children with average attendance, chronically absent students gained 14 percent fewer literacy skills in kindergarten, and 15 percent fewer literacy skills and 12 percent fewer mathematics skills in first grade, based on analysis of a nationally representative data set (Ready 2010).
- Children from low-income families with good attendance also gained more literacy skills than peers from higher-income families during kindergarten and first grade (Ready 2010).
- In Baltimore, students who were chronically absent in both pre-k and kindergarten often continued to be chronically absent in later years, and are more likely to be retained and have lower achievement (Connolly and Olson 2012).
- In Oregon, chronic absence in one early grade is linked with lower test scores throughout elementary school; but being chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade is linked to the lowest scores (ECONorthwest, 2011).

- In San Mateo and Santa Clara counties in California, students who arrived at school academically ready to learn but were then chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade scored 60 points below good attenders on third grade reading tests and close to 100 points below on mathematics tests (Applied Survey Research 2011).

### ***Elementary Achievement***

- A sophisticated statistical study that followed multiple cohorts of students through the elementary and middle grades in Philadelphia finds “. . . because the statistical significance of . . . days present is pervasive in all models and across multiple measures of achievement, the results imply that attendance is a robust predictor of student achievement.” (Gottfried 2010).
- A methodologically advanced study using data from New York City suggests that in schools with high chronic absence, the achievement of all students, not just those who are absent, is affected. The study also finds that the predicted effect on fourth-grade English achievement for a student moving from chronic absence to average attendance is greater than gains attributed to attending a high-quality charter school and equal to 17 percent of the achievement gap between white and minority students. In mathematics the predicted gain is equal to 26 percent of the achievement gap (Musser 2011).
- A statistical analysis by the Georgia Department of Education found that just a 3 percent improvement in attendance – five additional days -- would have led more than 55,000 students to pass end-of-year standardized tests in reading, English, or mathematics in grades 3 to 8. The biggest impact was for students who missed between five and 10 days of school, suggesting that missing even a week to two weeks can have a significant negative impact on achievement (Barge, 2011).

### ***Middle Grades Achievement and Its Relation to High School Graduation***

- A study of New York City data finds that “While relative improvements or declines in students’ test scores are predictive of students’ progress towards graduation, changes in attendance during the middle grades are also equally, if not more, predictive of the likelihood that students will be on-track in ninth grade to graduate from high school within four years” (Kieffer, Marinell, and Stephenson, 2011).
- A study in Baltimore finds a strong relationship between sixth-grade attendance and the percent of students graduating within one year of expected on-time graduation. Approximately 70 percent of the students missing 0 to 10 days graduated; 51 percent of students missing more than 10, but fewer than 20, days graduated; 36 percent of students missing 20 to 39 days, and just 13 percent of students missing 40 or more days graduated (BERC, 2011).

- A study in Philadelphia finds that only 17 percent of sixth-graders who were severely chronically absent and attend school less than 80 percent of time graduated within one extra year of on-time graduation (Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver 2007).
- A study that followed four cohorts of students through high-poverty middle schools in Philadelphia found that controlling for teacher quality, prior achievement, behavior, effort, and demographics, students who were chronically absent had significantly lower odds of closing their mathematics achievement gap, than students who were equal in all other respects but attended school regularly (Balfanz & Byrnes 2006).

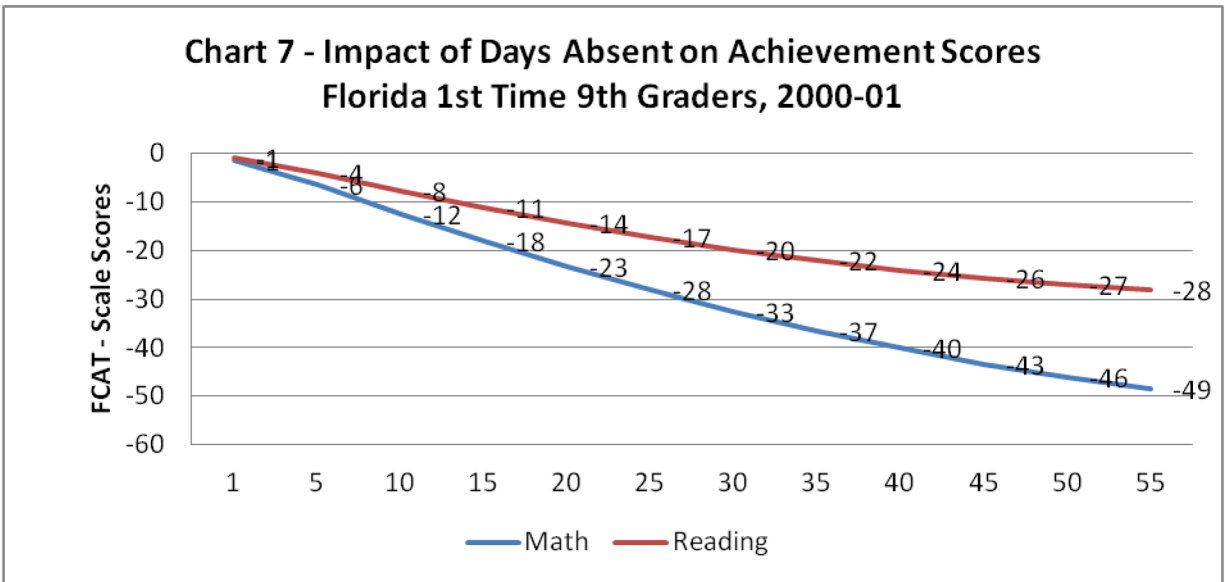
### ***High School Achievement and Paths to Dropping Out***

- Analyses of data from Chicago show that course performance in the ninth grade was the strongest predictor of the likelihood that students would graduate, and the school attendance was by far the strongest predictor of course performance. The study found that even moderate amounts of absenteeism had strong impacts. Students with high test scores who missed two or more weeks of school per semester were more likely to fail than students with low test scores who missed a week or less of school (Allensworth & Easton 2007).
- Analyses of data from multiple states and school districts, many conducted in partnership between the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and the National Governors Association, have consistently found chronic absenteeism to be among the strongest predictor of dropping out of high school, stronger even than suspensions, test scores, and being overage for grade, after having controlled for student demographics and backgrounds (Byrnes & Reyna 2012).
- The Georgia State Department of Education found a strong relationship between attendance in the eighth, ninth and tenth grades and graduation rates, controlling for student demographics. It found that moving from missing up to 5 days to missing 6 to 10 days was associated with 7 to 10 percentage-point drops in graduation rates. Moving from missing 6 to 10 days to missing 11 to 14 days resulted in 11 to 14 point declines in graduation rates. Finally, there was as much as a 50 percentage-point difference in the graduation rates of students who missed 0 to 5 days of school compared to those who were absent 15 or more days (Barge 2011).

Using data from Florida, **Chart 7** also displays the relationship between student absences and academic achievement in ninth grade using regression modeling and models controlling for student ethnicity, special education and English language learner status, free/reduced lunch program status, and overage-for-grade status. The results are significant on several levels.

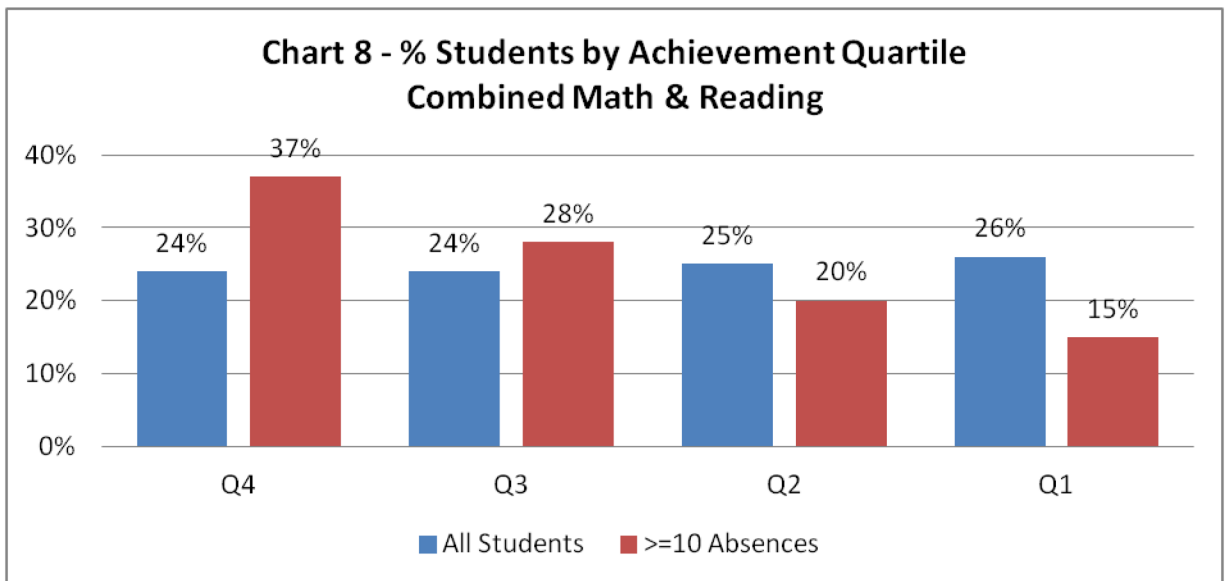
First, they show an essentially linear relationship where each missed day is associated with a further decline in test scores, at least through the first 20 days missed. For math this association continues through missing two months of school, which is associated with a 40-point decline in test scores.

Second, mathematics performance in the ninth grade is more sensitive to missed days than are reading test scores. Through 20 missed days there is a greater than 1 point decline in mathematics performance per day, compared to three-fourths of a point in reading. Absenteeism still has significant negative impacts on ninth-grade reading performance.



The Florida data are supported by data from several other states that we analyzed but do not highlight for brevity’s sake. They, too, show an essentially linear relationship between each missed day and lower test performance. They also show impacts for science and English achievement, as well as math and reading. Additional Florida analyses show that there is a strong relationship between eighth-grade attendance and ninth-grade achievement, in part because students with poor attendance in eighth grade tend not to attend school regularly in the ninth grade. The relationship between middle and high school attendance and achievement can be explored first hand at the Rhode Island Data Hub site ([www.ridatahub.org](http://www.ridatahub.org) )

Poor attendance in high school not only impacts initial achievement levels in the ninth grade, but also impacts upper grade performance and post-secondary enrollment. The following chart is based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics ELS 2002 national survey and is representative of the roughly 3,410,873 tenth-graders enrolled across the nation during the 2001-02 school-year<sup>5</sup>. It shows the relationship between modest to high levels of absenteeism and academic achievement. Students who missed 10 or more days of schools scored disproportionately in the bottom quartile on both math and reading assessments, and were less likely to score in the top half of the student population<sup>6</sup>. Regression models using the ELS2002 data confirmed that the negative relationship between modest to high levels of absenteeism and student achievement outcomes was statistically significant even when controlling for student demographics such as gender, ethnicity, English language learner status, overage-for-grade status, and family income.



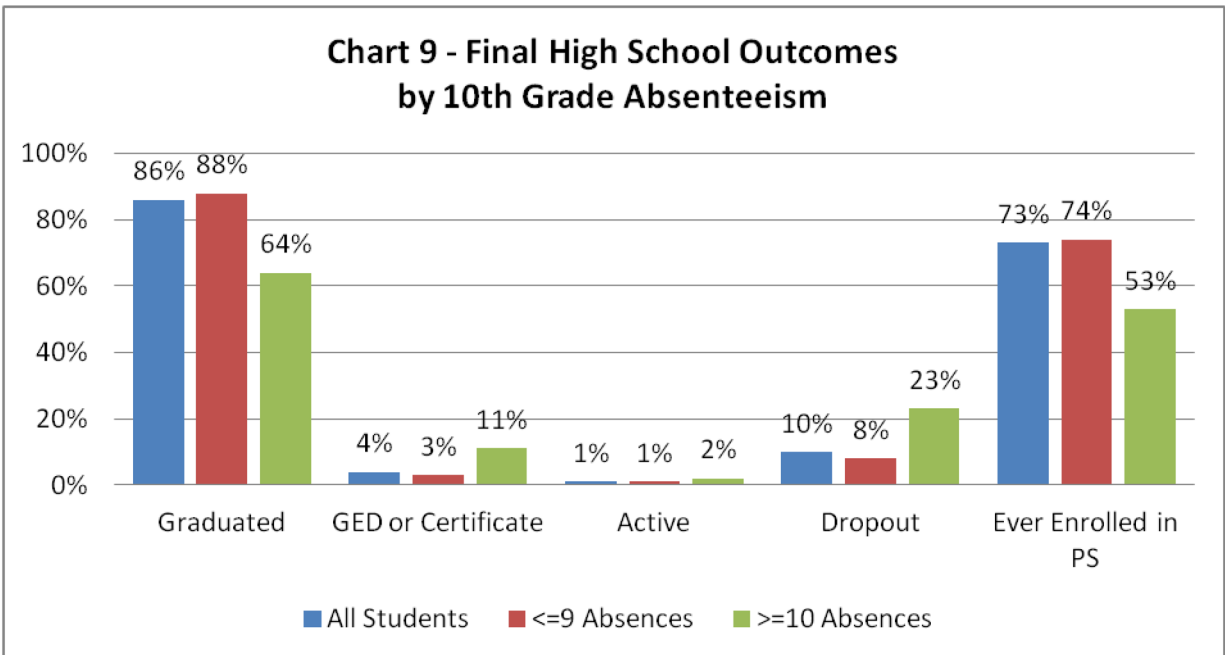
***Post-Secondary Enrollment***

Also based on data from the ELS2002 survey, **Chart 9** exemplifies the limiting effects that modest to high absenteeism can have on students’ high school graduation and post-secondary outcomes. While nine out of every 10 students in the cohort managed to graduate high school, only six of every 10 students with 10 or more absences in the tenth grade ended up successfully completing high school. Students with 10 or more absences were also three times more likely to drop out of high school, with one in four doing so, even after having made it successfully to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

<sup>5</sup> ELS2002 attendance data come from a categorical student survey question asking students about their absences during the past school year. The most extreme category asked of students was if they had missed 10 or more days, as opposed to the standard definition of chronic absenteeism as 20 or more days.

<sup>6</sup> Separate results for math and reading achievement are similar to those for the combined scores.

Finally, while roughly three-quarters of students in the cohort enrolled in post-secondary schooling at some point, only half of those students who had missed 10 or more days in tenth grade did so. In other words, among students who make it to tenth grade and ultimately graduate, those who missed 10 or more days of school during the tenth grade had a 25 percentage-point difference in their post-secondary schooling enrollment rates, compared to students with better attendance, controlling for student demographics and family income. This shows that while some students may be able to manage relatively high rates of absenteeism and still graduate from high school, they ultimately pay a price in post-secondary enrollments.



***School to Prison Pipeline***

- Data from Rhode Island and New York City, among other locales, show that at least three-fourths of the students who become involved with the juvenile justice system have histories of chronic absenteeism ([www.ridatahub.org](http://www.ridatahub.org)).

***Summing Up: Why Attending School Matters***

The existing evidence could not be clearer. Academic achievement from kindergarten forward, high school graduation, and post-secondary enrollment are all highly sensitive to absenteeism. Missing even some school can have negative impacts, especially for students who live in or near poverty. Missing a lot of school, at any time, throws students completely off track to educational success.

Given the strong connection among absenteeism, academic achievement, and poverty, the findings indicate that one of the most effective strategies for closing the achievement gap will be a concerted effort to enable and ensure that high-poverty students attend school regularly from pre-k to grade 12. By the same token, the data are clear that given the strong relationship between attendance and achievement, and the extremely high rates of absenteeism in some high-poverty schools, strong academic performance cannot be achieved in all schools when chronic absenteeism rates of 20, 35, and 50 percent are found, respectively, in the most affected elementary, middle, and high schools.

The emerging data on absenteeism and achievement also suggest that we may need to re-examine our assumptions about what has and has not worked to close the achievement, graduation, and post-secondary enrollment gaps. Efforts that have appeared to have been only modestly successful, or not at all successful, may well be shown to have greater potential if the negative impacts of student absenteeism are taken into account and mitigated. Finally, the strong relationship between achievement and absenteeism needs to be factored into on-going efforts to develop next generation accountability systems for schools and teachers.

### **Why Do Students Miss School?**

Students miss school for a variety of reasons. By and large, however, these reasons fall into three broad categories:

1. Sometimes students cannot come to school because circumstances or obligations compel them to be somewhere else during the school day.
2. On other occasions, students will not attend school because they are actively avoiding interactions or events in school or on the way to or from school.
3. Finally, sometimes students just do not go to school, not because there is something preventing or compelling them to stay away, but because they (or their parents or guardians) decide not to attend because they would prefer to be elsewhere, or just do not want to make the effort required to get to school.

What follows are some examples of each category. Considerably more detail on the underlying reasons behind absenteeism, as well as strategies and tools to combat it, can be found at the Everyone Graduates Center ([www.every1graduates.org](http://www.every1graduates.org)), Attendance Works ([www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)), and National Center for School Engagement ([www.schoolengagement.org](http://www.schoolengagement.org)) websites.

### ***Why Students Cannot Go to School***

Illness is the first and foremost reason students can't attend school. Annual colds, flu, and assorted other childhood ailments clearly contribute to school absenteeism, but they are not the genesis of chronic absenteeism. The most recent federal survey indicates fewer than 6 percent of children miss more than 11 days due to illness or injury. Acute health conditions are fortunately rare, and there are few chronic conditions that cannot be appropriately managed to enable school attendance. In practice, however, particularly in high-poverty areas, the medical care needed to enable students with chronic conditions, such as asthma, to attend school regularly are not always available at the scale and intensity required.

A second reason students can't attend school is housing instability. Homelessness, movement between foster care placements, and the temporary dislocation associated with home foreclosure or inability to pay rent can cause students to miss days, as parents or guardians work to re-establish living quarters and enroll students in new schools. Family obligations are another reason some students cannot go to school. As children enter early adolescence, family responsibilities can keep them from school. In high-poverty environments, young adolescent girls sometimes provide emergency day care for younger siblings or are responsible for getting younger children to school. There is also growing evidence of even young adolescents taking on elder-care responsibilities in single parent, multi-generational households. Adolescents, moreover, are sometimes pulled into helping with the family business or working to enable family or personal survival. In other cases, they are compelled or lured into illegal activities. Students who become involved in the juvenile justice system then often miss additional days of schools while being detained, going to court, and transitioning back into school.

### ***Why Students Will Not Go to School***

It is likely that nearly everyone at one time or another has wanted to miss a day of school to avoid an unpleasant situation or because an assignment was not completed. For some students, however, the desire is much more constant. Students stay away from school to avoid harassment, bullying, and unsafe situations on the way to and from school. They also stay away to avoid real and perceived embarrassment. For example, some students report avoiding school because they knew they would be asked to read out loud in class, and feared this would reveal either speech impediments or poor reading ability. Others avoid school for lack of clean or appropriate clothes. Sometimes it is rain, snow or cold combined with the lack of the necessary clothing, especially for students who take public transportation with multiple connections. In some cases, poor planning, family needs, or unpredictable transportation lead to students being late, and they stay away from school altogether to avoid the hassle and sometimes the sanctions associated with tardiness. Finally, there is the uncertainty of new environments. It does not seem coincidental that chronic absence spikes in kindergarten, sixth grade, and ninth grade. Those are the years that students typically attend a new school and may face adjustment issues or experience a less welcoming or more unfriendly or even upsetting environment.

### ***Why Students Do Not Go to School***

The final category is students who could go to school, and are not being deterred by anything specific. Instead they are choosing not to attend, either because they or their parents or guardian do not see the value in school attendance or they have something else they would rather be doing, and they have the agency and ability to skip school to do it. Choosing not to attend school on a regular basis begins early in a child's formal education when some parents do not yet see the importance of their child being in school every day. Some parents consider pre-k and kindergarten extensions of day care with its optional drop-in nature. For others, it takes a while to establish a family routine that enables regular school attendance (Chang & Romero 2008).

By early adolescence students develop the wherewithal to skip school. Parents may see them off, but students soon learn, especially in urban areas where they take mass transit to school, that no one at the school is checking to see if they arrive. In one survey, more than half of students reported they did not believe that any of their teachers miss them or notice when they are not there. Students report missing school because they “felt like it,” “overslept” or “wanted to hang with friends.” They also report that they miss school because not much is going on and they can pass the course only attending sporadically. Others talk of needing a “mental health” day or taking a day off after a busy weekend. In many cases, the students return to an empty home while their parents are at work. Although we are not aware of any studies that have examined it directly, our experience in high-poverty schools with high chronic absenteeism leads us to surmise that attending school irregularly almost becomes a norm passed on to each ninth-grade class. The spike in the senior year is also revealing, as it is clear that once some students believe they have the credits they need to graduate, their diligence in attending school wanes.

Separating the reasons students miss school into the three categories of can't, won't, or don't helps illustrate the range and diversity of why students are not in school, and helps organize a response. But in working with high-poverty students, in particular, it becomes clear in many cases that a student's absenteeism is often driven by all three on different days and in different situations. Especially by the time they are adolescents, students who live in poverty have complex lives and must make trade-offs among competing demands, often without effective adult guidance or complete information.

## What Can Be Done?

While at national and state levels chronic absenteeism is largely an overlooked phenomenon, at the local or school level its impact, at least in some cases, has been appreciated and has led to a response. These efforts, in turn, have shown that chronic absenteeism is not a demographic imperative or unalterable by-product of poverty. Rather, vigorous and comprehensive efforts to get more students to attend school regularly pay off. Several reports have documented the existence of beat-the-odds schools, that is, schools that serve similar populations in the same geographic locale as schools with very high chronic absenteeism rates, yet manage through concentrated and systematic efforts to have much higher proportions of students attending school regularly. (ECONorthwest 2011, Nauer, White & Yerneni 2008, Chang & Romero 2008).

There is also evidence that school districts can see broad systematic improvement over time. In Baltimore, for example, the chronic absenteeism rate for middle grade students has declined dramatically from 34 percent in 2007 to 16 percent in 2011. This coincided with the acceleration of efforts to replace large dysfunctional middle schools with either K-8 or 6-12 opportunities, much more aggressive tracking, monitoring, and responding to chronic absenteeism by the school district, and the launching of partnerships among the school system, city hall, and non-profit organizations to mount a community-wide campaign against absenteeism. The challenge of poverty and its impacts on attendance, though, continues to be seen. Dislocations caused by the foreclosure crisis likely are contributing to a recent uptick in chronic absenteeism in elementary schools, and the continued persistence of high absenteeism in high schools.

What follows are some examples of progress and the efforts behind them at the national, non-profit, local, and school levels. What all these efforts have in common are a) close, often weekly, measurement and tracking of absenteeism, b) the development of a diagnostic capacity to understand why students are missing school, c) a problem-solving capacity to help address those reasons, d) building and sustaining relationships with the students who are experiencing absenteeism, and often their families, e) the development of a multi-sector and community response that often involves a second shift of adults in the schools with the highest levels of chronic absenteeism to meet the scale of the challenge, f) efforts to recognize and reward good attendance, and g) a commitment to learn what works, and then to replicate and expand effective programs to modify what is not working.

## What's Working?

### *Diplomas Now*

Students are dancing their way to better attendance and a more positive school climate at Dever-McCormack K-8 School in Boston.

Dever-McCormack's teachers, administrators and staff boosted students' enthusiasm for being at school by sponsoring the AttenDANCE as an incentive for attending at least 95 percent of the 45 days in the second quarter. More than 200 sixth-graders attended the first AttenDANCE in January at a hall across from the school.

Dever-McCormack is part of Diplomas Now, a network of middle and high schools using a proven approach to school improvement that ensures students graduate ready for college or career. It is based on research showing that a sixth-grader with even one of the early warning signs of poor attendance, poor behavior or failure in English or math is 75 percent more likely to drop out of high school than other students.

Attendance is the critical first step because students must be in school to learn.

"Most kids love incentives," said Katie Grassa, Diplomas Now coordinator at the school. "Many of them were excited about the dance and were getting more interested in being at school."

One student, who was under a court mandate to attend school, earned perfect attendance so he could be included in the first AttenDANCE.

Efforts such as AttenDANCE have helped Dever-McCormack achieve double-digit attendance gains. Last year, one-third of the students attended less than 92 percent of the time. This year, just 23 percent fall into that category. "Our improvement in attendance is due to better use of attendance data, improved coordination of a team of adults working to support students and families, and creative incentives (such as the AttenDANCE) that have captured students' attention," said Michael Sabin, principal of Dever-McCormack. "We have learned that steady pressure, teamwork and an ongoing focus on attendance will produce positive results."

AttenDANCE was so popular and effective that the Diplomas Now team and the school staff scheduled a second dance. In anticipation, students began regularly tracking their own attendance rates to be sure they would be invited.

Diplomas Now is a collaboration of three non-profits – City Year, Communities In Schools and Talent Development Secondary at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education – that works to improve the whole school, create a positive teaching and learning environment, and brings extra adults who use an early warning data system to identify students falling off the graduation path. Diplomas Now strives to bring the right intervention to the right student at the right time. It provides curriculum, teacher coaching and student support from the Talent Development model.

City Year corps members, young adults working full-time in the school, welcome students, call them if they don't show up, provide tutoring and celebrate positive behavior. For the neediest

students, Diplomas Now provides case management by Communities In Schools site coordinators and connects students with community resources, such as counseling, health care, and housing.

Dever-McCormack is not the only Diplomas Now school where attendance improved. Here are the declines in students identified as chronically absent at the beginning of the 2010 school year, but who were on-track by the end of the school year.

- 83 percent decrease in absenteeism at Browne Education Campus in Washington, DC.
- 45 percent decrease in absenteeism at Miami (Fla.) Jackson High School.
- 31 percent decrease in absenteeism at John Liechty Middle School in Los Angeles.

### ***New York Mayor Bloomberg's Chronic Absenteeism Task Force***

More than 30,000 students in New York get wake-up and get-to-school calls from Michael Jordan, Whoopi Goldberg or one of the Yankees.

More than 4,000 students have Success Mentors who interact with them in school on an on-going and consistent basis to talk about coming to school on time every day and help them solve some of the problems that get in the way of their showing up.

In 50 pilot schools, weekly principal-led attendance meetings are held, where teams of adults including school staff and external partners examine current data on absenteeism, devise solutions to get more students to attend regularly, and monitor progress.

On Metro bus and subway signs, New Yorkers are being prodded: "It's 9 a.m. Do You Know Where Your Children Are?"

These and other activities aimed at reducing and eventually ending chronic absenteeism in the city's public schools are the results of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism and School Engagement. Over the last two years, the task force has clearly moved absenteeism prevention to the head of the class.

With more than 1.1 million students in 1,700 schools, New York is the nation's largest school system – and the task force effort is the nation's most comprehensive campaign against absenteeism. Though still young, the effort has significantly reduced chronic absenteeism in the 50 schools participating in the pilot program. Last year, for instance, students in these schools with Success Mentors racked up an additional 7,000 days in class. And the city's Homeless Services helped bring the be-in-school campaign to youngsters living in 15 homeless shelters, often allowing these students to stay in their "home" schools.

The task force is a huge effort, combining a dozen city agencies and many other public-private partners, to spread the word about how pervasive chronic absenteeism is, how it affects student achievement, and what can be done about it. Next year it will expand to an additional 50 schools.

The campaign began with an acknowledgement of the problem and a commitment to getting and using data. When the task force realized that the data existed, but were not used because the system was too complicated, it worked with the city's education department to create a "data dashboard" that enabled mentors, school personnel and community partners to see real-time data on student attendance. From this it became possible to flag students who were at risk of being chronically absent, missing 10 percent, or at least 20 days, of a school year.

Besides helping the pilot schools, the system-wide database can now flag all students who have missed 20 days or more of school – an early indicator of students most likely to drop out.

Underpinning the work of the task force is a significant infrastructure that manages not only data, but also training and technical assistance, weekly principal-led student success meetings in each pilot school, a strong connection between the mayor's office and the education department, and extensive strategies for sending and receiving information. The expectations are high for Success Mentors, who are required to spend approximately 15 hours a week at a school, with 80 percent of that time devoted to students. Mentors greet students, call the homes of absentees, meet individually and in groups with the students, identify the underlying causes of absences, celebrate students' talents and successes, and work with the school and its partners to connect students and their families with local resources to address the absentee problem.

Additional programs include:

- An Asthma-Friendly Schools Campaign to address the large number of elementary school students who miss school frequently because of this condition
- Homework centers established in all city family shelters to help create a culture of school attendance and success
- Large scale public information ad campaign on the importance of regular school attendance
- Web-based parental access to their students' attendance data and an "ask for help getting my child to school" feature
- Quarterly in-person attendance help desks in the city's public libraries

## *Attendance Works*

Nearly every state has attendance information sitting in its longitudinal student data base, but few ever look to see what it shows about absences and academic performance. Attendance Works decided to change that.

[Attendance Works](#) is a national and state initiative that advances school success by reducing chronic absence. Its goal is to ensure that every district monitors this often-overlooked attendance indicator beginning in kindergarten or pre-kindergarten, and partners with families and communities to intervene when poor attendance is a problem for children or particular schools. Attendance Works builds public awareness and political will about the need to address chronic absence, fosters state campaigns to advance better attendance policies and encourages local innovation, data use and accountability through accessible tools, peer learning communities and targeted technical assistance.

Attendance Works believes a key starting point is using the attendance data found in most states' longitudinal student data bases to identify how many students are academically at risk because they have missed too much school and then determine which districts, schools and student populations are most affected.

When Attendance Works became a partner with EcoNorthwest, The Children's Institute and The Chalkboard Project to analyze data for Oregon, the findings surprised many people. More than one-fifth of Oregon's students were chronically absent, missing 10 percent or more of the school year. Chronic absence affected every part of the state, every grade level and children from every ethnic and racial background. As in national studies, absentee rates were highest among low-income children and highest in kindergarten and high school.

Using six years of data, Oregon's analysis by the EcoNorthwest consulting firm tracked two cohorts of students to see the effects of absenteeism over time. In both cases, absences in the earlier grades correlated with lower attendance and achievement later on.

The report, released in February 2012, prompted the governor's office to add chronic absence as an indicator in its newly created [achievement compacts](#) that districts will make with the state. Specifically, districts must report the percentage of sixth-grade students missing 18 days or more, or 10 percent of the school year.

In May 2012, The Chalkboard Project then made chronic absence data available on-line for every district in Oregon. Such public reporting is key to ensuring the public is aware of which communities are most troubled by absenteeism so that community stakeholders can begin partnering with schools to identify and address barriers to school attendance.

## What are the Policy Implications?

These three illustrative examples of progress in combating chronic absenteeism show that chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools and communities use data to inform action, build a culture of regular attendance, and help families and students overcome barriers to getting to school. In order for these efforts to be brought to scale and for the nation as a whole to significantly reduce the number of students who are excessively missing school, and in so doing improve the life outcomes of millions of students per year, policy changes are needed at the federal, state, and local level.

The good news is that in a time of tight federal, state, and local budgets there are a number of low cost, high impact actions that can be taken - which have the potential to improve lives, as well as the health and wealth of communities. At the simplest level, the federal government, states, local communities, school districts, and schools need to measure, monitor, and act to limit absenteeism. For example:

### *At the Federal Level*

- Add questions about the extent of chronic absenteeism (i.e. number of students missing 10% or more of school) and regular attendance (i.e. number of students missing 5 or fewer days in a year) to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights annual school survey. This is the quickest and most efficient route in getting data on chronic absenteeism at the school level, nationwide. This in turn will provide communities with the information they need to target support efforts to the most impacted schools.
- Add measuring, monitoring, and responding with evidence-based strategies to chronic absenteeism, as part of a broader early warning system, to the list of required elements in the school turnaround model that states seeking flexibility waivers from ESEA need to employ in their lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, and to the required activities for school districts and schools receiving school improvement grants.
- Add state level efforts to measure, monitor, and respond with evidence-based strategies to reduce absenteeism as a requirement for Race to the Top competitions and as a priority goal in Investing In Innovation (i3) competitions.
- When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is re-authorized include the measuring, monitoring, and responding to absenteeism as a required school improvement activity for states, districts and schools receiving Title 1 funds, and link it to early warning systems keyed to post-secondary success indicators.

- As part of the ESEA re-authorization, create a dedicated funding stream or specifically target a portion of existing Title 1 funds to support comprehensive and evidence-based, multi-partner efforts to reduce absenteeism including support for a second shift of adults, who can work with teachers in school on an on-going basis, to form the relationships with students and parents that are needed to solve the underlying issues keeping students from school.

### *At the State Level*

- Measure and monitor absenteeism, include measures of chronic absenteeism and regular attendance on state, district, and school report cards (see [www.mdreportcard.org](http://www.mdreportcard.org) for an example)
- Add reporting on chronic absenteeism and regular attendance to the new school accountability systems being developed through flexibility waivers from ESEA (see [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org) for some guidance)
- Join the growing number of states that are implementing or championing early warning systems that provide schools, teachers, and parents with on-going real time data on absenteeism and flag students for intervention and support who reach the 10% threshold or are on the path to missing a month or more of school (see [www.every1graduates.org](http://www.every1graduates.org) for more information)
- In states receiving flexibility waivers from ESEA target some of the funds previously reserved for supplemental education services to district level evidence-based efforts to provide targeted supports to students who exhibit off track indicators, including chronic absenteeism.
- Create a governor’s inter-agency task force to examine how multiple state agencies can help students attend school more regularly in a coordinated fashion. For example, how public health efforts can be targeted at some of the underlying health issues like asthma that keep students from school, how efforts for homeless families can include support in getting their children to school each day, how the juvenile justice system can work to reduce the number of days of school missed as students interact with it. Also conduct pilot programs to examine the efficacy of using funds allocated for health, juvenile justice, foster care, the court system etc. to support efforts to improve the regular school attendance of students under their care or most likely to be so in the future, as an effective means of increasing the positive outcomes they seek for these youth
- Examine state policies that involve school attendance, student behavior, and academic performance to insure that they are not counter-productive. For example, suspending students who are chronically absent, or having students who miss a certain amount of school automatically fail a class (and in so doing in both cases encourage the students to miss more school)

### *At the Local Level*

- Make real-time data on student absenteeism available to schools, teachers, and parents. Flag students who are chronically absent or on the path to becoming so. Once a month, publically report on school level chronic and regular attendance rates. This will enable the more effective and efficient targeting of resources, enable the examination of attendance patterns over time and across schools, to identify, for example, both the times of year when extra community attention is required, and schools that are beating the odds, that others can learn from.
- Implement Early Warning Systems and form community partnerships with organizations like the United Way, national service organizations, and other student support providers to target additional adult supports to the schools with large numbers of chronically absent students. Integrate them into on-going school-led data review and student/school response meetings in which solutions to prevent, combat, and mitigate the impacts of absenteeism are devised, assigned, and monitored, in a coordinated fashion.
- Establish a mayor's office or joint mayor's office/school superintendent's inter-agency task force to prevent and combat absenteeism. See governor's task force above for details. See Baltimore and New York City for models. Use the task force to make absenteeism a high profile community-wide issue, involve the business, community action, and faith-based sectors.
- Conduct a school policy audit to make sure school policies support and encourage regular school attendance. For example, that lateness policies and penalties are not so onerous that they encourage students who will be late, to skip the whole day of school. Have monitoring of school-level absenteeism and the strategies schools use to respond to it as one of the elements principals are reviewed on by their supervisors

## In Conclusion

Attending school on a regular basis matters. It matters the most for our most vulnerable students who live in or near poverty. Millions of students are currently missing far too much school, with multiple detrimental effects. Chronic absenteeism is a key driver of the nation's achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment gaps. A major reason this occurs, is because few schools, districts, or states routinely measure absenteeism. Because chronic absenteeism is not measured, it cannot be monitored or acted upon. The good news is if we do measure and monitor absenteeism there is quite a bit that can be done to improve it with existing resources. Thus, as a nation we must act, to ensure that our students are ready, willing and able to attend school every day. Their future, and hence our future, depends on it.

## Data Sources

Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (**ECLS-K**), were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), specifically from a licensed copy of the restricted use data files obtained by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University.

<http://nces.ed.gov/ecls/kindergarten.asp>

Data for the state of **Florida** come from the state's department of education website, and from a longitudinal data set obtained from the state's K20 Education Data Warehouse.

<http://www.fl DOE.org/>

<http://edwapp.doe.state.fl.us/>

Data for the state of **Georgia** come from the state's department of education website.

<http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/Pages/Home.aspx>

Data for the state of **Maryland** come from the state's department of education website and from the Maryland State Report card.

<http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE>

<http://www.mdreportcard.org/>

Data for the state of **Nebraska** come from the state's department of education website and from data provided by the state upon request for this report.

<http://www.education.ne.gov/>

Data for the state of **Oregon** come from the paper "*Chronic Absenteeism in Oregon: Data Exploration*" by ECONorthwest.

Data for the state of **Rhode Island** come from the state's department of education website.

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/>

Data for the state of **West Virginia** come from data sets received by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins as part of a project studying high school dropouts conducted in partnership with the state and the National Governors Association.

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