Data Matters: Using Chronic Absence to Accelerate Action for Student Success

Hedy N. Chang
Lauren Bauer
Vaughan Byrnes

Over the past decade, chronic absence has gone from being a virtually unknown concept to a national education metric that provides every school with critical data revealing how many students miss so much school that their academic success is jeopardized. The inclusion of chronic absence in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was a watershed moment that made this metric an integral component of efforts to help students succeed in school and later in life.

ESSA requires all states to include chronic absence data in their school report cards, which must be posted by December 2018 for the prior school year. In addition, 36 states and the District of Columbia chose chronic absence as a metric for school accountability in their implementation plans.

Chronic absence can have adverse consequences for academic achievement throughout life, research shows. Starting as early as pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, absenteeism can affect a child's ability to read well by the end of third grade, a critical milestone. In middle school, missing valuable instruction time can lead students to fail courses. High school students who are chronically absent are more likely to drop out or, if they make it to college, to not graduate.

Especially hard hit are children who live in poverty, have chronic health conditions or disabilities, or experience homelessness or frequent moves. When chronic absence reaches high levels in a school or classroom, it can affect every student's opportunity to learn, because the resulting churn – with students cycling in and out of the classroom – is disruptive for all and hampers teacher's ability to meet students' diverse learning needs.

*UPDATE (December 2018): This report has been revised. Read more on page 5.

Download the full report at:
www.attendanceworks.org

Find Your Chronic Absence Data!

This brief – as well as the accompanying interactive data map developed by The Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution and the state chronic absence reports produced by the Everyone Graduates Center at The Johns Hopkins University – highlights the value of making chronic absence data transparent and available to families, community partners and other stakeholders outside school systems.

The Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution has created an interactive map that allows everyone to explore chronic absence at the school, district, state and country level. Comprehensive and easy to use, the map allows users to track and compare levels of chronic absence across states, school districts and schools. Users can examine the scope of chronic absence by school characteristics (grade span and location) and student characteristics (gender, race, English Language learner or students with disabilities).

The map makes it possible for everyone, including parents and community leaders, to have access to chronic absence data even if educational authorities have not yet made it easy to find or use for their schools, district or state. Although the map is based upon data from 2015-16 school year the data are still telling. Chronic absence is likely to be a problem if data show that it was a challenge several years ago. Use the interactive map to discover if there is a problem, then look into more current data.

Increasingly available, chronic absence data offer a unique tool for spotlighting where we as a country have failed to provide all students with an equal opportunity to receive a quality education. It sheds light on how our nation has not recognized that barriers to getting to school cause students to miss so much class that they fall academically behind. Pinpointing where chronic absence levels are high offers an unprecedented opportunity to anticipate which schools and students need additional support in order to ensure an equal opportunity to learn.

Aimed at motivating action, this report:

▶ Shares key findings from our analysis of the scale, scope and concentration of chronic absence in schools throughout the nation.

▶ Discusses how to use chronic absence data to anticipate and put in place effective solutions to address poor attendance that are tailored to local realities.

▶ Recommends steps that key stakeholders— at the school, district and state level—can take to support a data-driven approach to reducing chronic absence.

Examining the prevalence and concentration of chronic absence in the United States

Attendance Works partnered with the Everyone Graduates Center at The Johns Hopkins University and The Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution to analyze data for the 2015-16 and 2013-14 school years. We examined the chronic absence levels in 94,553 schools using the most current data available from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), released by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). Information about school characteristics was added from the federal education department's Common Core of Data.

Data analysis revealed the national trends that follow. These trends vary significantly by state so it is important to also examine state and local data. Chronic absence charts for all 50 states and the District of Columbia can be obtained here.

Defining Chronic Absence

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. In this brief's data analysis, however, chronic absence refers to missing 15 or more days each year because this is the data point captured in the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC).

Key Findings

1 **In 2015-16, nearly 8 million students in the nation were chronically absent, an increase of roughly 790,000 students from 2013-14.** Improved reporting accuracy appears to explain much of the growth in the number of chronically absent students.

2 **Chronic absence is a pervasive challenge affecting the entire nation.** Nationwide, 16 percent of all students – or one out of seven – is chronically absent. In six states and the District of Columbia, more than 20 percent of students were chronically absent in 2015-16. In 59 percent of schools nationwide – or roughly 55,000 schools – at least one out of 10 students was chronically absent.

3 **The percentage of schools with at least 20 percent or more students chronically absent increased between 2013-14 and 2015-16.** The proportion of schools with high (20-29 percent of students) and extreme (30 percent or more of students) levels of chronic absence increased from 11 to 13 percent and 9 to 12 percent, respectively. On average, 24 percent of all schools in a state have either high or extreme levels of chronic absence. (See Appendix A in the full report for a comparison state table.)

4 **Just over half (nearly 53 percent) of all chronically absent students are concentrated in schools with high or extreme levels of chronic absence, while over a third (34 percent) attend schools with significant levels (10-19 percent of students) of chronic absence.**

5 While nearly half (45 percent) of high schools have high and extreme levels of chronic absence, elementary schools should not be overlooked. By number, about the same number of elementary schools (8,316) and high schools (8,318) have high or extreme chronic absence.

6 Schools serving children in special education, alternative education and vocational education are much more likely to have extreme levels of chronic absence. Further analysis is needed to better understand this.

7 Schools with high levels of poverty are more likely to experience high and extreme chronic absence. But this is not always the case. Some high-poverty schools have low chronic absence because they have adopted effective, prevention-oriented approaches that motivate daily attendance and help students and their families overcome challenges to getting to class.

8 Chronic absence is found in every locale – rural, town, suburban and city. National data shows a slightly higher concentration for cities but high levels exist in every locale.

9 Data suggests that poverty, not locale, remains the driving factor for chronic absence. Levels of chronic absence are much higher, regardless of locale, in schools where a majority (75 percent or more) of students live in poverty. Low levels of chronic absence are most common in schools where a minority (less than a quarter) of students live in poverty, regardless of locale.

10 Chronic absence disproportionately affects particular student populations. Patterns, however, vary across states and locales. National data show that while the majority of students of any demographic group are NOT chronically absent, some populations are more likely to experience chronic absence than others.

Leveraging Chronic Absence Data to Anticipate Need and Develop Solutions

Chronic absence data is a powerful tool to use in improving attendance because it helps schools, districts and communities interrupt and change poor attendance patterns before students' academic performance is negatively affected. Real-time data can be used to identify students who need help immediately. States, districts and schools also can use prior-year data to anticipate which attendance supports and interventions need to be in place by the next school year. Studies show that the best predictor of students' continued chronic absence is if they were chronically absent during the prior school year and/or during the first month of school. When schools target effective interventions to students with a history of chronic absence, the students can improve their attendance and avoid falling farther behind academically due to missed instruction.

Although chronic absence data have historically been difficult to obtain, this is quickly changing. A growing number of districts now produce chronic absence reports. More states are making chronic absence data publicly available. Over time, as the ESSA requirement to include chronic absence data in school report cards is fully implemented, data will be easier to obtain. In the meantime, if data are not readily available or easy to work with, stakeholders can use The Hamilton Project's interactive data map and the accompanying state data reports to gain an initial understanding of the scale and concentration of chronic absence.

When chronic absence affects many students from a particular sub-population or place, schools and communities should invest in determining the underlying causes, as well as the solutions. Attendance Works has found it helpful to group the causes in four categories: barriers, negative school experiences, lack of engagement and misconceptions. Whether the issue is a student with a chronic absence history or a school with high chronic absence, understanding the contributing factors (i.e. a chronic illness, unreliable transportation, bullying, etc.) helps determine the best supports or interventions. High levels of absenteeism typically signify multiple and more systemic attendance barriers.

A working group can be formed to help a school or district better understand the barriers that keep students from getting to school as well as the resources and assets that can be used to support attendance. The working group should involve leadership from the school, district and community partners and engage teachers, students and families.

A variety of quantitative and qualitative tools and strategies can be used to unpack what affects attendance. They can be grouped into the following categories:

1. Student and Family Perspectives – gained through efforts including surveys, studying reasons for absences, phone banking, professional assessments, success mentors and a scan of environment and attendance.
2. Relevant District Data – including suspension and school discipline data, attendance patterns over time, chronic health conditions and school climate surveys.
3. Community and Agency Data – including transit routes, health data, participation in early childhood programming and integrated interagency data systems.

Recommendations for Action

Stakeholders at multiple levels play critical roles in reviewing chronic absence data for accuracy, helping to understand the scale and size of the chronic absence challenge, and developing solutions based on a clear understanding of attendance barriers. This brief offers recommendations for students and families, community agencies and partners, state education departments, school leaders and administrators, district leaders and administrators, as well as school board members, research institutions and schools of education.

Conclusion

Chronic absence data is a powerful tool for organizing and accelerating efforts to improve outcomes for children. Most people understand from common sense as well as research that children need to be present in the classroom to gain from what is offered at school. As a result, key stakeholders quickly and easily understand that high levels of chronic absence in their school or community is a challenge worth working together to address.

Equally helpful, chronic absence data is highly responsive to community efforts to improve attendance. When barriers to attendance persist, the data show that students don't show up to class. When communities put the right supports and solutions in place, the data confirm that students are getting to school. Attendance rises!

Chronic absence data, alone, however, is insufficient to produce change. A major danger with the growing availability of chronic absence data is that it will be used to blame and penalize children and families. Everyone using chronic absence data, from administrators to teachers to elected officials and community organizations, needs to make sure that data are used to activate positive problem-solving.

To leverage the policy win achieved through ESSA, we must all use this new educational metric—chronic absence—to interrupt patterns of inequity and improve outcomes for all children, particularly our most vulnerable students who deserve an equal opportunity to learn and thrive.

*UPDATE (December, 2018): This report has been revised to reflect updated data from Prince George's County for the 2015-16 school year. The incorrect data was the result of an honest error on the part of Prince George's County and not an attempt to manipulate the statistics. Because of the large size of the Prince George's County, the error changed national figures for African-American youth and had an impact on Maryland's overall ranking.

Attendance Works
(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) at The Johns Hopkins University, 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.

Citation:
Chang, Hedy N., Bauer, Lauren and Vaughan Byrnes, *Data Matters: Using Chronic Absence to Accelerate Action for Student Success*, Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center, September 2018.