



The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to gaining the academic and social skills that children need to succeed. A growing body of research reveals that chronic absence – missing 10 percent of school days – can have negative and life-long effects. When preschool and kindergarten students are chronically absent, they are less likely to read proficiently by third grade. Chronic absence in elementary school leads to a higher risk of course failure in middle school, and a lower chance of high school graduation. The prevalence and impact is greatest for students growing up in poverty, who are most likely to have multiple years of low attendance and least likely to have resources to make up for lost classroom time. When chronic absence reaches high levels in a classroom or school, the churn affects learning for all students.

Reducing absenteeism is a cost-effective, but often overlooked strategy for improving school performance. In the past, most schools and communities didn't understand the extent of their absence problem. This oversight was due to an over-reliance on monitoring average daily attendance (how many students are typically in school each day) and truancy (unexcused absences.) Both metrics can mask high levels of chronic absence and can hide the proportion and number of students who have lost so much instructional time, for any reason, that they are academically at risk.

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and the adoption of some variation of chronic absence in their accountability rubrics by 36 states plus Washington DC, will result in a change in attention paid to school attendance. Data from the US Department of Education shows that as many as 8 million students were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year. In some communities, chronic absence affected more than one out of three children. Because chronic absence is so pervasive in public education, school and district leaders are likely to find that absences are a much bigger problem than they had previously thought.

The good news is that once recognized, chronic absence can be significantly reduced. When schools, families and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture a habit of regular attendance and address hurdles that keep children from getting to school every day, student attendance improves and achievement rises.

Why we should care: Chronic absence represents both a symptom and a cause of many problems that foundations and donors are working to solve. High rates of absenteeism can:

- Flag a child or family in distress due to bullying, unstable housing, violence, illness or other healthcare needs;
- Signal a community with scarce resources and large challenges, such as high rates of asthma, violence, substance abuse or unstable housing, and lack of food stores, safety, transportation and healthcare;
- Reflect poor school climate or ineffective schools or school districts;
- Erode initiatives to improve schools and graduation rates; and
- Undermine efforts to provide post-secondary and employment opportunities and to boost local economies.

Because effective strategies to reduce chronic absence benefit entire communities, they can be attractive investments for local and national philanthropies. Local funders are well positioned to help schools and districts to uncover local challenges and identify solutions, and funders with a broader geographic reach can support state and regional policies and initiatives to address chronic absence.

Chronic absence is a problem we can solve. We can build a strong culture of attendance in every community. We can ensure that school districts are tracking the right data to identify the students and schools headed off track. And we lend our voices and devote our resources to addressing the challenges that keep too many students from getting to school.

How philanthropy can make a difference:

Build public awareness

- Support a public messaging campaign to convey that every school day counts. Posters, billboards, handouts and stickers can help communities understand the importance of reducing chronic absence, by promoting regular attendance and emphasizing the adverse impact of missing too much school. See these [key messages](#) and [promotional materials](#).
- Join with your superintendent and mayor to encourage an appropriate existing coalition with an aligned mission to help spearhead a community-wide approach to reducing chronic absence. See if your community is involved with the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#).
- Create a toolkit for your grantees and other community organizations providing [handouts](#) and tips for improving attendance.
- Recognize and appreciate good and improved attendance. Support school efforts and reward students and families who are turning the corner on attendance.

Promote data-driven solutions

- Fund an in-depth analysis of chronic absence data that shows the prevalence and patterns in your community or state.
- Publish a report card. Publicize the ESSA required-school performance reports, highlighting chronic absence rates and other data for local schools and districts. Point to bright spots and spell out strategies for turning around attendance.
- Support training for teachers and principals to understand how to use chronic absence data to uncover the issues underlying chronic absence and choose the most effective interventions.

Encourage grantees to use chronic absence as a metric

- Build chronic absence data into your grant making. High rates can tip you off to a community in distress. Use the data when deciding where to invest in childcare, early education, summer and after-school programs.
- Use chronic absence as an accountability metric. Make sure your education grants include improved attendance as an outcome. Ask grantees applying for funding to explain how they will reduce chronic absence.

Tackling chronic absence is a smart strategy for improving your community and reaching your goals. It can also be a yardstick for measuring grantee results. Attendance and chronic absence are common sense metrics, already recorded by teachers and understood by parents. It's essential to other education reforms, and it's a winnable strategy. Schools, districts and communities that work together to reduce chronic absence often see attendance increase quickly.

For more information, go to Attendance Works at www.attendanceworks.org.