

Addressing the Health-Related Causes of Chronic Absenteeism: A Toolkit for Action

Taking action to address health-related chronic absenteeism can have a powerful impact on students' academic success and well-being for a lifetime.

This document highlights key points from Healthy Schools Campaign's toolkit for addressing this critical issue. It focuses on preparing educators—particularly school district decision-makers—with knowledge and practical guidance for creating meaningful change to address health-related chronic absenteeism.

To access the full toolkit, please visit:
healthyschoolscampaign.org/chronic-absenteeism



Chronic Absenteeism and Student Health

Chronic absenteeism—or missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason, excused or unexcused—detracts from learning and is a proven early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout. Even the most thoughtful efforts to reduce dropout rates, address the achievement gap and ensure all students receive a quality education are threatened by the problem of chronic absenteeism. Nationwide, a staggering number of children are chronically absent, often at a very young age and often without attracting attention or intervention.

While the causes of chronic absenteeism are multi-fold, one stands out as especially significant: student health. The crisis of health-related chronic absenteeism is especially poignant as it primarily affects young children in ways that can shape academic outcomes for their entire school career.

The connection between student health and chronic absenteeism is clear and direct. Both chronic and acute health conditions can prevent students from attending school. Research indicates that common health conditions resulting in missed school include asthma, influenza, diabetes, obesity and related illness, seizure disorders, mental health and anxiety and vision problems. This pattern may be either exacerbated or ameliorated by a variety of factors in the school environment.

What Is the Impact of Chronic Absenteeism?

Frequent absences can be devastating for a child's school success. Consider, for example:

- Children who are chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to be reading at grade level by third grade.
- Students who are not reading at grade level by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.
- By sixth grade, chronic absenteeism becomes one of the leading indicators that a student will drop out of high school.
- By high school, attendance is a better dropout indicator than test scores.
- A student who is chronically absent for any year between eighth and twelfth grade is over seven times more likely to drop out.

Chronic absenteeism at a young age is a powerful factor in educational attainment, which affects not only adult success but also adult health outcomes.

Intervention to prevent and address health-related chronic absenteeism can have a tremendous impact on students' achievement at school and on their lifelong wellness. Addressing this issue in a successful and holistic way involves a multi-faceted approach that includes effective policy, programs and partnerships.



Who Is Most Affected by Health-Related Chronic Absenteeism?

While health-related chronic absenteeism can affect students of any background, its most devastating impact is felt by students who face health disparities, poverty and other challenges in attaining school success.

Compounding the problem, health-related chronic absenteeism rates are disproportionately high among students who benefit most from being in school: students who are raised in poverty, face significant health disparities and in many cases do not have access to resources that would allow them to catch up. In this context, addressing health-related chronic absenteeism is a key factor in closing the achievement gap and supporting learning for all students.

Learn More in the Full Report

Visit healthyschoolscampaign.org/chronic-absenteeism to download the *Understanding Chronic Absenteeism* chapter and *Connecting Chronic Absenteeism and Student Health* section for more detail, case studies and content addressing:

- *What Causes Chronic Absenteeism?*
- *What Health Conditions Contribute to Chronic Absenteeism?*
- *What Is the Impact of Health Factors in the School Environment?*

The Health-Learning Connection

Educators intuitively recognize that healthy students are better prepared to learn, and the past decade has brought an abundance of research documenting the impact of health on academic achievement.

In particular, Dr. Charles Basch of Columbia University Teachers College has pioneered research documenting the ways educationally-relevant health disparities contribute to the minority achievement gap. Chronic absence is one of the most visible and profound ways this connection manifests itself.

Dr. Basch points out that if health problems compromise students' motivation and ability to learn—as seen in part through whether they are well enough to attend school—educational efforts such as teacher preparation, financing and curriculum are jeopardized.

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Understanding Student Health Needs

Students are absent for many different reasons, and no two communities are alike. Even more so than with other issues, it is important to identify what is happening in your community and tailor your strategy to address the factors that are having the biggest impact on student attendance.

This understanding can play an important role in informing the types of services and programs you and your partners implement in schools and in the community to support better attendance. This review of health needs can focus on the prevalence of health conditions such as childhood asthma and tooth decay. It is also critical to consider social, economic and environmental factors in the community and school—such as levels of air pollution, rates of violent crime, housing trends and more—to understand the full scope of children’s health needs within your community and intervene accordingly.

Learn More in the Full Report

Visit healthyschoolscampaign.org/chronic-absenteeism to download the *Understanding Student Health Needs* section for more detail about each of these key data sources.

Key Data Sources

Key sources of public data can shed light on the issues affecting students and their health. These sources of data include:

- School health information cards
- Public health data systems
- Hospital community health needs assessments
- County health rankings
- Youth Risk Behavior Survey
- State-level surveys

Once you have developed a better understanding of student health needs, this information can be used to inform the services and programs that are implemented to address chronic absenteeism.



Addressing the Health-Related Reasons Students Are Absent

While many issues contribute to health-related chronic absenteeism, several conditions have an especially significant impact and therefore represent practical opportunities for positive change: asthma, oral health, behavioral health, food insecurity and acute illness. These conditions have high prevalence among children, disproportionately affect children of color and have a direct impact on student attendance. Research identifies proven or promising school-based programs to address each of these health conditions.

Asthma

Asthma is one of the leading causes of school absenteeism, accounting for one-third of all days of missed instruction. Best practices and proven interventions include:

- Comprehensive [asthma management programs](#)
- Programs teaching children [how to manage their own asthma](#)
- [Healthy indoor air quality](#) in your school
- [Green cleaning](#) at school

Oral Health

Children age 5-17 miss nearly two million school days in a single year due to dental health problems. Best practices and proven interventions include community-based oral health programs, including:

- Dental screening
- [Dental sealants](#)
- Dental preventive services
- Basic preventive and restorative dental services

Behavioral Health

When students' behavioral health needs are met, they are less likely to be absent and more likely to be engaged in and have a sense of connectedness to school. A total of 13-20 percent of children experience a behavioral health disorder in a given year. Best practices and proven interventions include:

- School-based behavioral health services
- [Positive behavioral interventions and supports](#)
- Wraparound services
- Trauma sensitive schools
- Social and emotional learning
- Staff self-care

Food Insecurity and Related Conditions

Food insecurity and related conditions such as obesity are closely linked to absenteeism in multiple ways. Best practices and proven interventions include:

- [Universal school breakfast](#) programs
- Backpack programs
- School pantry programs
- High quality physical activity programs

Acute Illness

Acute illnesses, such as influenza, strep throat or ear infections, have a direct and significant impact on attendance. Roughly 40 percent of school-aged children missed three or more days of school in the past year due to acute illness. Best practices and proven interventions include:

- [Green cleaning at school](#)
- Handwashing education and support
- [Influenza vaccine awareness campaign](#)

Learn More in the Full Report

Visit healthyschoolscampaign.org/chronic-absenteeism to download the *Strategies for Addressing Common Health Causes of Absenteeism* section for more detail about each of these causes, including:

- *Data on prevalence, disparities and connection to learning*
- *Best practices and proven interventions*
- *Key partners to help address the issue*
- *Case studies spotlighting a successful approach*



Building Effective Partnerships to Support Student Health

While many school leaders recognize the importance of healthy school environments for addressing chronic absenteeism, the scale of the work ahead can seem daunting—especially in the context of widespread budget cuts and a lack of resources for supporting health and wellness. However, schools do not need to take on this great challenge alone. Health and public health sectors can play a key role in supporting efforts to address chronic absenteeism.

Partners in the health and public health sectors are well-positioned to support schools in addressing the health-related causes of chronic absenteeism. This may range from technical assistance to funding for health services and many areas in between. Such partnerships represent a rapidly evolving area where communities nationwide are finding innovative ways to collaborate around shared goals for children's health.

Who Are Key Partners in the Health and Public Health Sectors?

Possible partners include:

- Local hospitals, particularly children's hospitals
- Accountable Care Organizations, Managed Care Organizations and health plans responsible for providing coverage to students in your community

- Local community benefits experts—this could be the individual responsible for overseeing community benefits or community outreach at one of the local, non-profit children's hospitals
- Community organizations dedicated to supporting children's health
- State or local advocacy organizations
- Public health agencies or public health departments
- Pediatricians, and the local chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics

These partners will vary greatly by community; the most practical partnerships will emerge from the primary causes of chronic absenteeism and opportunities for change identified in your school community.

Learn More in the Full Report

Visit healthyschoolscampaign.org/chronic-absenteeism to download the Key Partnerships section for more detail, plus case studies and content addressing:

- Why is the health sector motivated to address chronic absenteeism?
- What are key opportunities for collaboration?



Building Your Capacity

Once you decide to implement an effort to reduce chronic absenteeism, it is critical to generate support and build your long-term capacity to engage in this work.

This summary briefly highlights several key supports; please see the full report for detail about each.

Key Partners and Resources

Many partners and resources are available to support this effort, including specialized instructional support personnel; school-based health centers and community clinics; public health agencies; local hospitals and health providers; community organizations; state education agencies; Attendance Works; the U.S. Department of Education; and regional offices of the EPA and USDA.

Ensuring Sustainability

Ensuring the sustainability of efforts to address chronic absenteeism is key to their success. Key strategies for supporting sustainability include cross-sector collaboration; multi-sector data and accountability systems; multiple funding sources; and increased access to resources through Medicaid.

Learn More in the Full Report

Visit healthyschoolscampaign.org/chronic-absenteeism to download the *Building Your Capacity* section for more detail about each of these resources.

About Healthy Schools Campaign

Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) is dedicated to making schools healthier places where all children can learn and thrive. HSC advocates for children to have access to nutritious school food, physical activity, school health resources, green schoolyards and clean air. HSC has a special focus on the wellness and environmental health issues affecting low-income students of color. We start with a social justice perspective and believe this focus is especially critical in light of the vast health disparities our nation faces. HSC facilitates collaboration among parents, educators, students and policymakers to help prepare this diverse group of stakeholders to lead change for healthier schools at the school, district, state and national levels. In partnership with Trust

for America's Health, HSC co-convenes the National Collaborative on Education and Health, which is working to transform the conditions of health in schools across the country and has a key focus on chronic absenteeism.

Acknowledgements

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Stay connected!

We invite you to learn more, access resources and lend your voice to the dialogue about healthy schools.

For questions or to discuss this issue, please contact Alex Mays, National Program Director, at alex@healthyschoolscampaign.org.

Learn more and sign up for updates from HSC at healthyschoolscampaign.org.

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