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SPOTLIGHT: CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

EDUCATION REFORM INITIATIVE

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CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

“At the end of the day, no education reform initiative will work if kids aren’t in school.”

Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst, Advocates for Children of New Jersey

THE PROBLEM

Each school year, approximately 6.8 million students miss at least 15 days of school, putting their academic success at risk and making them chronically absent as defined by the federal government.¹ And in too many cases, school, district, and city leaders are unaware of the true scope and impact of chronic absenteeism in their communities. For example, missing just two days of school per month may seem inconsequential, but those absences add up to 18-20 days and over 100 hours of missed instruction over the course of the school year. That’s the equivalent of missing a full month of school. It is nearly impossible for these students to stay on track.

While different definitions of chronic absenteeism exist across states, most commonly, a student is considered chronically absent if s/he misses at least 10% of the school year. States and districts also maintain different definitions of what it means to be absent: some may mark an absence if a student is 30 minutes late; others for missing a half-day; and still others do not count suspensions as absences.

Most schools measure and rely on something called Average Daily Attendance (ADA) for both funding purposes and to understand how often their students are attending school. ADA simply measures the percentage of students who come to school each day. Unlike ADA, chronic absenteeism measures a student’s absences for any reason – excused or unexcused – and also covers truancy and suspensions, making it a much more accurate indicator of how much instruction a child misses. Chronic absenteeism also helps us to see which and how many students are absent most often, a number that is obscured in ADA.

City and school leaders are often shocked when confronted with data comparing ADA and chronic absenteeism. A school with a 90% ADA rate can have 25% or more of its students chronically absent in a given year, since ADA may miss students who are suspended or excused from school.² If the problem remains hidden in plain sight, students and schools suffer.

THE IMPACT

Chronically absent students are less likely to attain reading proficiency by third grade, to graduate high school, and to succeed in college.³ And as with many education challenges, vulnerable populations of students are often at a greater risk. In 2013-14, chronic absenteeism rates were higher than those of white peers by:

65% for American Indian and Pacific Islander students.

36% for African American students.

11% for Hispanic students.

Students with disabilities also missed almost 1.5 times more school than their general education peers.⁴

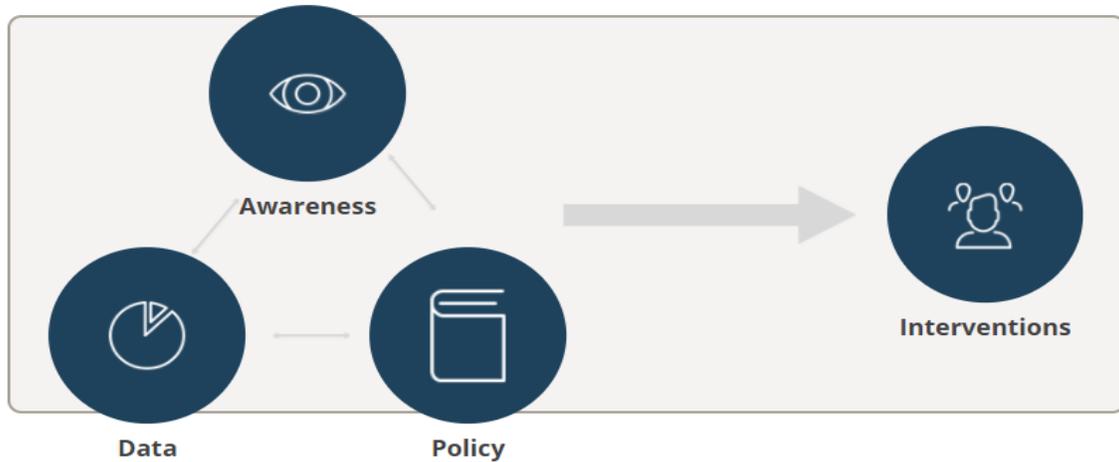
Chronic absenteeism is most prevalent in the early and later school grades with peaks at the high school level, where about 25% of all schools serving 9th-12th graders are chronically absent at extreme levels.⁵

THE OPPORTUNITY

City leaders – including mayors, school district administrators and teachers, and advocacy and community influencers - have a critical role to play in combatting chronic absenteeism. This is because the issues that underlie absenteeism are best addressed at the local level with input and support from the community.⁶

Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 36 states plus DC are now planning to include chronic absenteeism in their new accountability systems.⁷ This means that a local effort to understand and effectively address the issue is more important than ever. While clear state

policies and guidance are essential for guiding local efforts, strong local leadership is at the core of this work: **city leaders must embrace the challenge of owning the issue at home.**



 **AWARENESS**

Leaders must be acutely aware of the impact of chronic absenteeism and must implement thoughtful and effective data mechanisms and policies that account for every student absence, starting in Pre-K. City leaders also have a particularly apt vantage point for recognizing the issues outside the education system that contribute to chronic absenteeism, such as transportation, housing, and health and safety. They have the political and convening power to bring community leaders across these sectors together to align strategies that can benefit kids and families. Specifically, these leaders can:

- Create and/or participate in a community task force dedicated to working with schools and the district to understand and combat student attendance problems.
- Include transportation and housing officials as well as community health and safety professionals in examining systemic causes for student absenteeism.
- Demonstrate a meaningful commitment to the issue by designating a key staff member responsible for monitoring actions and supporting progress across the school district and individual schools.



DATA

Access to reliable, real-time data is essential to understand and address chronic absenteeism. While school districts control data collection and management, other city leaders can help by supporting data infrastructure and tools that make it easier for school leaders to understand what the data shows. Districts and schools need to:

- Count all absences (unexcused and excused), including suspensions and truancy.
- Work with state education agencies to collect attendance data from Pre-K to 12 and separate it by grade level, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, disability status, and English language learner status.
- Identify and track three major categories of chronic absenteeism: students entering a school or grade level already identified as chronically absent; students trending toward chronic absenteeism over time; and students suddenly trending toward chronic absenteeism in a short period of time.
- Compare chronic absenteeism data to other related factors, such as academic proficiency and high school graduation rates.
- Take ownership of absenteeism data at the local level, rather than waiting for the state or federal government to step in, creating systems for analyzing school-level data regularly (ideally weekly and at least monthly) in addition to state analyses that might occur yearly.
- Clearly assign school and district-level employees responsible for data analysis.
- Examine district attendance tracking software systems and potentials for improvement with collecting, reporting, and analyzing absenteeism data.

Resources:

- [Attendance Works Data Guidance and Tools](#)

- [US Department of Education: 2013-14 Chronic Absenteeism Data Story](#)



POLICY

City and school leaders must understand the policies in place at the state and local level that govern chronic absenteeism. Where possible and necessary, leaders should clarify policies and ensure they align to local goals for student attendance and school success. This includes:

- Outlining a clear definition for chronic absenteeism and reasons for absenteeism that align with research as well as specific policies for which absences are excused, how tardiness and suspensions factor into absenteeism, etc.
- Explaining district absence policies clearly for students and parents.
- Establishing collaborative relationships with state education agencies around data collection and reporting as well as training and support for intervention strategies.
- Creating a plan for implementing the use of chronic absenteeism as an accountability indicator under ESSA, emphasizing shared accountability across schools, the district and community, etc.
- Recognizing other systemic issues related to transportation, housing, and health and safety and align related local and state policies.
- Addressing potential unintended consequences of absenteeism policies, such as encouraging a focus on students close to but not yet over the line for chronic absenteeism versus those with significantly higher absence rates.
- Inviting researchers into the district to study the success of interventions.
- Emphasizing the importance of teacher absenteeism as a corollary element of this issue that results in additional lost instructional time for students.

Resources:

- FutureEd (Georgetown University): [Who's In: Chronic Absenteeism Under the Every Student Succeeds Act](#)
- Attendance Works: [Chronic Absence: Our Top Pick for the ESSA School Quality or Student Success Indicator](#)
- Brookings Hamilton Project [Lessons for Broadening School Accountability under ESSA: Chapter 3: CA as the 5th Indicator](#)
- Education Commission of the States: [Chronic Absenteeism: A key indicator of student success](#)
- National Association of State Boards of Education: [Policy Update: Chronic Absenteeism](#)
- Education Commission of the States: [Chronic Absenteeism: A key indicator of student success](#)



INTERVENTIONS

With the foundation of awareness of the issue and attention to data and policy in place, city and school district leaders can identify appropriate interventions for schools and students. [Attendance Works](#), the leading national initiative to address chronic absenteeism, outlines [tiered strategies](#) for interventions based on the level of student absence. In order to employ these strategies most effectively, approaches at both the school and community level must align. Effective messaging strategies and partnerships are also necessary for student, parent, teacher, administrator, and policymaker engagement. Leaders should consider the following high-level strategies:

- Involve community organizations in grassroots campaigns and events to help spread the word about the importance of students' presence at school. These might include phone and mail campaigns as well as home visits led by recognized community leaders; research has shown sending parents useful information about attendance can result in significant decreases in chronic absenteeism.⁸ Employ proactive communications

strategies with parents and families over the summer and in the early months of the school year.

- Identify school-based staff members responsible for attendance data and awareness of chronic absenteeism. Ensure these individuals have the data and support they need to lead conversations about interventions.
- Differentiate strategies for early grade chronic absenteeism, where parental involvement is a much more prevalent factor, and later grade absenteeism, where students have more autonomy over their own attendance. Involve school nurses, counselors, and other personnel who handle related student and family issues in absenteeism strategies.
- Establish early warning systems to intervene in early education and to target specific populations who display heightened chronic absenteeism rates.
- Consider mentorship, before- and after-school, and other programs to assign at-risk students the appropriate supports.
- Incorporate ongoing training and professional development for educators and administrators to provide the tools and resources necessary to effectively address absenteeism.
- Consider adding attendance goals to student education plans and to teacher evaluation measures.
- Include the chronic absenteeism measure as part of the Response to Intervention (RTI) process and use evidence-based interventions for students with attendance problems.

Resources:

- Attendance Works: [Preventing Missed Opportunity, Mapping the Early Attendance Gap](#)
- Johns Hopkins Every Student Graduates Center: [It Takes Two: Adding Early Intervention Strategies to Address Chronic Absence](#)

- Get Schooled: [Motivate Students to Boost Attendance](#)
- Healthy Schools Campaign: [Chronic Absenteeism](#)
- Hechinger Report: [Impacts of Sending Parents Information About Attendance](#)

CASE STUDIES

Chronic Absenteeism Spotlight Case Study: Baltimore, MD

Awareness

As an urban school district of over 80,000 students, Baltimore City serves a population that is:

80% African American

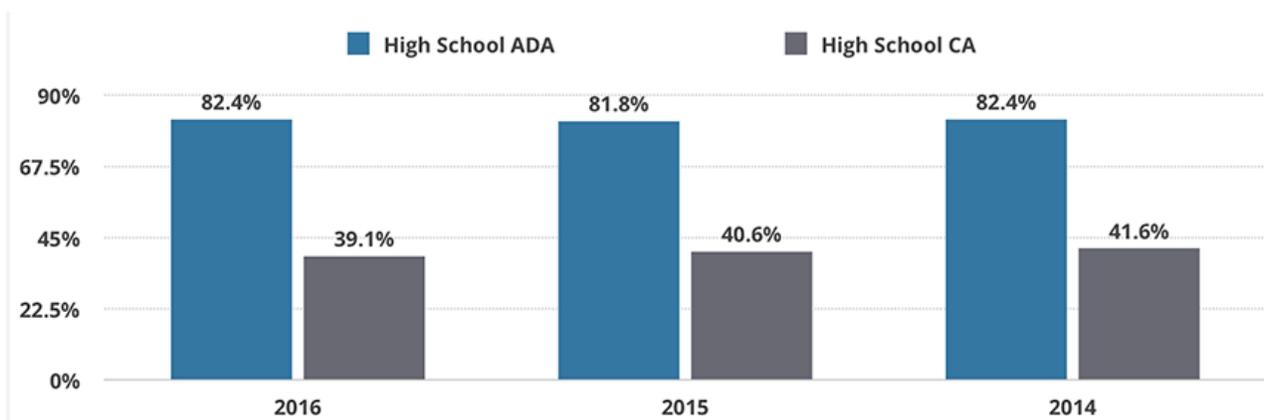
10% Hispanic/Latino

9% white

“Everyone in the system has priorities and we all see the barriers in our cities – but it is now a national priority to get kids to school and it requires awareness and partnerships.”

- Jane Sundius, Senior Fellow, Attendance Works

In 2016, over 39% of Baltimore City high school students were chronically absent, compared to a statewide rate of 19%. And yet, the average high school attendance rate in 2016 was over 82% for Baltimore City and over 92% statewide.¹⁰ This emphasizes how looking simply at average daily attendance across the student population significantly masks chronic absenteeism rates for individual students.



[Maryland State Report Card \(http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/\)](http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/)

Understanding the importance of student attendance, several organizations have been working for many years to elevate the issue and train educators and community leaders to address it.

Groups like the [Baltimore Education Research Consortium](#) have shared compelling facts, such as the finding that students who missed 2-4 days during the first month of school were 5 times more likely to be chronically absent that year – a finding that encourages early identification and intervention.¹¹

The Baltimore City Public Schools Website [dedicates a comprehensive page to attendance](#), including school policies as well as what's at stake for kids who miss class. The page points out that students who go to school each day do better academically and are more likely to graduate on time, while chronically absent students struggle with school work and are more likely to be held back or drop out.¹² Resources are provided for students and parents to emphasize and encourage good attendance habits.

Data

The Maryland State Education Report Card provides comprehensive, interactive data for each school, county and the state covering daily attendance plus chronic absenteeism rates going back to 2005. What varies greatly is the way data is used locally. In order to identify students and populations most at risk for missing school, those tracking absenteeism data must know what questions to ask for a given community. Further, school leaders need user-friendly data reports in order to see patterns and problems. Too often, data is kept locally in formats difficult to decipher and time-consuming to alter. Fortunately, more and more attention is being paid to this challenge. With the use of chronic absenteeism for accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), schools and districts are making data use a bigger priority.

Policy

The Maryland Department of Education defines chronic absenteeism as missing more than 20 days in a school year, no matter the reason.¹³ This definition follows the advice of Attendance Works in ensuring absenteeism rates reflect an accurate picture of how much school kids are missing.

Under ESSA, Maryland will use chronic absenteeism as one indicator for accountability, weighted at 15%.¹⁴ This means it is imperative for districts like Baltimore City to continue building resources and training for educators, parents, and community members to understand the importance of attendance. One challenge districts confront is turning the absenteeism conversation into a positive intervention that can be achieved locally. Instead of viewing student absence as an area where schools can be punished by the system, principals and district leaders are trying to encourage the kind of culture and practice shifts needed to increase attendance and improve student and school success.

“When you have a 60% chronic absenteeism rate, you can’t do anything else in the school until you fix that. You can’t instruct students with a constantly shifting population.”

*- Faith Connolly, Executive Director,
Johns Hopkins University Baltimore
Education Research Consortium*



Interventions

The good news is that absenteeism is actionable.

Patterson High School’s Assistant Principal, Christian Licier, experienced an “aha” moment when he was able to examine clear and useful absenteeism data. Thanks to a partnership with the Baltimore Education Research Consortium, Licier was able to use Improvement Science to think differently about attendance data at his school. As a result, Licier was able to illuminate patterns—such as seeing chronic absenteeism rates by grade levels or student demographic groups.

Located at the southeastern end of Baltimore City, Patterson serves a population of 1,100 9th – 12th graders, including a large immigrant population where almost 40% of students have limited English proficiency.¹⁵ The team collaborated on a project to dig deeper than simple percentages used to identify attendance and absenteeism rates. Instead, they collaboratively created tools that allowed Licier to transform standard reports into easier-to-read data displays which could allow him to examine individual student patterns.

The lightbulb moment that resulted from this better data was the realization that most of Patterson's chronically absent students were present at school most days, but were either tardy or cutting certain classes. The next step was to examine individual patterns of attendance at the class – not just the school day – level. A student with a generally high daily attendance rate but a low individual class attendance rate could then be counseled to examine reasons for skipping that one class. Licier points out that in some cases, students were missing class after lunch because it took too long to heat up their food. "We got them access to the microwave and got them to class," he says.

Patterson High School is beginning to see results from these tailored efforts. In 2013-14, almost 60% of students were chronically absent. This dropped to 54% the following year and 49.4% in 2015-16.¹⁶ In a few years, Patterson switched from being a majority chronically absent school to a minority one – a significant accomplishment and boost for maintaining forward momentum. And these improvements in attendance are seen across vulnerable populations, such as students receiving special education and English Language services, and across demographic groups.

This is the type of one-on-one support so many schools need to devise better data displays, examine the data to identify patterns, then work with individual students to examine root causes and create interventions. City, state and philanthropic leaders can help prioritize such supports.

Licier offers recommendations that can inform local interventions:

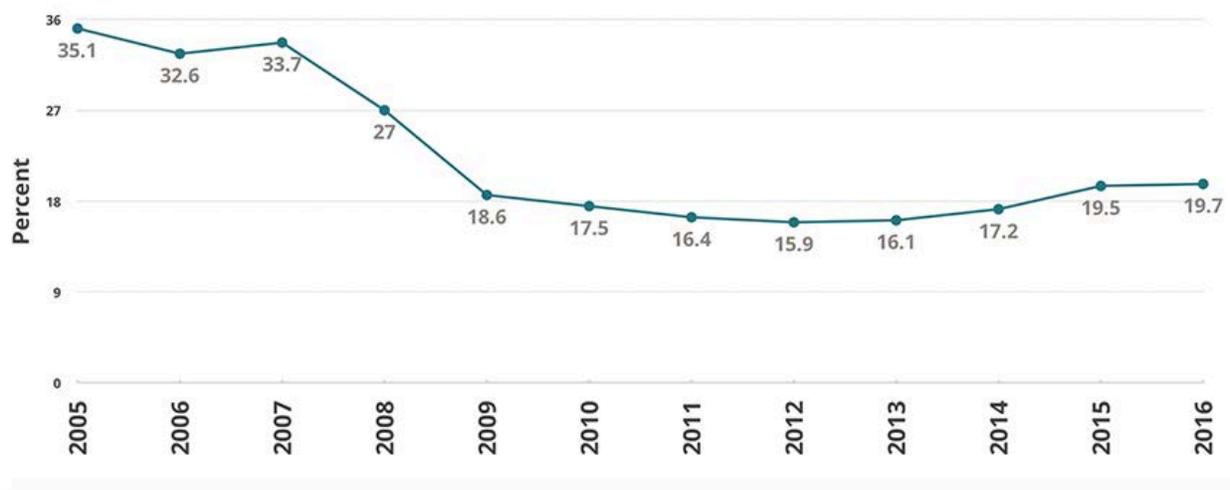
- Start documenting students with attendance issues in summer instead of fall to get a head start on interventions.
- Put a plan in place from the first day of school for identifying and addressing absenteeism for individual students.
- Chart data by month to look for trends where a majority of students cross over the line for chronic absenteeism during a certain time of the year. Target interventions before that "cross over" time.

- Visit schools in other districts and states with similar situations to study their interventions and seek ideas for successful strategies.
- Compare school-level data year over year; for example, the end of September 2017 to end of September 2016 for individual students and the whole school to identify trends and issues. Use this type of data to set ambitious but achievable goals for reductions over time.
- Consider ways to scale absenteeism data and intervention approaches to related areas like suspension so that school-based initiatives align across issues.

Another district-wide intervention improved chronic absenteeism at the middle school level. In 2008, Baltimore City closed middle schools and moved to a K-8 building approach to confront a variety of issues with the middle school population, which faces particular challenges. While parents are engaged with young elementary students, they tend to step back as their children grow and seek more independence. As these students move to a larger school with many more teachers and students, parents are less engaged and thus often less aware of attendance issues.

City school leaders felt that a K-8 building would offer more support to middle school kids, and a district analysis showed attendance and grades improving and behavioral incidents decreasing under such a structure.

Chronic absenteeism rates fell from over 33% to around 18% over the time that transition took place and these rates have remained under 20% since 2008-9, as shown on the Maryland State Report Card:



[Maryland State Report Card \(http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/\)](http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/)

For Baltimore, moving to the K-8 model made sense. This is not the type of intervention all cities or districts can pursue, but is one worth examining in areas where building or school consolidation is already under consideration.

Chronic Absenteeism Spotlight Case Study: Grand Rapids, MI

Awareness

Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) serves a population of almost 17,000 students, over 75% of whom are economically disadvantaged. In addition, almost a quarter receive special education services. The 2016-17 student population was 37% Hispanic/ Latino, 32% African American and 23% white.¹⁷

GRPS has made combatting chronic absenteeism a priority since the 2012-2013 school year when the district implemented its first initiative to

“When so many students are chronically absent, you can’t do it alone. You need a community-wide approach: bring partners to the table, be open and honest and develop achievable strategies.”

-Mel Atkins II, Executive Director of Community & Student Affairs, Grand Rapids Public Schools

encourage increased attendance, called Make Every Day Count. This community-wide initiative sought to reduce chronic absenteeism by 10% each year by encouraging students to come to school every day, training principals in each building and launching a billboard campaign. Since its inception, state and local leaders, the superintendent, community organizations, parents, and families have all become involved in promoting the importance of student attendance.

The foundational element of Grand Rapids' success in combatting chronic absenteeism is data transparency. Accessible, transparent, and consistently updated data has been the key to keeping the community, school and district leaders, parents and families involved in the effort:

- The first step GRPS took when analyzing the district's data was to input attendance numbers into [Attendance Works' District Attendance Tracking Tool](#) (DATT). The district also employed the School Attendance Tracking Tool (SATT) to mine student-level data. This exercise revealed that 36.4% of students in Grand Rapids were chronically absent. By sharing and discussing the fact that the district needed serious improvement in student attendance, the team got attention and cooperation across the community.
- GRPS set up attendance teams in each school building throughout the district to monitor daily student attendance. The attendance teams establish building-level goals and challenges and displayed a leaderboard in the lobby of each building to display monthly attendance patterns. Attendance teams meet at least biweekly to update strategies for increased attendance on a student-by-student basis.
- GRPS distributes attendance reports on a weekly and monthly basis to attendance teams. The idea behind this frequency of data dissemination is to intervene before a student's attendance trend becomes a problem.

Policy

Grand Rapids defines chronic absenteeism as missing 18 or more days (10%), including all excused and unexcused absences as well as suspensions, over the course of one school year. The district has also created the following specific notification policy for parents:¹⁸

- When a student has accumulated 3 days of absence, the principal determines if the absences are excused. If there is a concern about absences, a letter of concern must be mailed to the student's parent/guardian with a copy forwarded to the office of Community and Student Affairs for monitoring and support.
- If attendance does not improve, the principal must complete a Attendance Referral form to be delivered by a district official to Public Safety. The assigned GRPS Public Safety Officer and/or Grand Rapids Police Department will then conduct a home-call or visit to discuss needed support services.
- Within 6 days, the office of Community and Student Affairs must contact the principal to determine if attendance is satisfactory.
- If attendance does not improve, after 10 unexcused absences, the GRPS Public Safety Officer must present reports and documents to the Kent County Prosecutor's Office/Grand Rapids City Attorney for possible prosecution.

The state of Michigan will use chronic absenteeism as one indicator of SQSS; weighted at 4%, which means districts will have an even greater incentive to prioritize student attendance.¹⁹



Interventions

Burton Elementary school is a stand-out in Grand Rapids for reducing chronic absenteeism among its students. According to Carol Paine-McGovern, executive director of Kent School Services Network (KSSN), Burton's success is a result of consistently strong leadership that understands the importance of data and its long-time partnership with KSSN, a community school initiative that organizes supports and services for students and families in Kent County, Michigan.

- In partnership with Burton, KSSN provides a community school coordinator, site team clinician and a Kent County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) success coach who collaboratively support the principal in the attendance work. The community school coordinator provides coordinated access to health and human services and

facilitates strategic community partnerships. The site team clinician provides on-site strengths-based, child-centered and family-focused mental health services. The DHHS success coach provides social services and helps identify and develop plans for self-sufficiency.

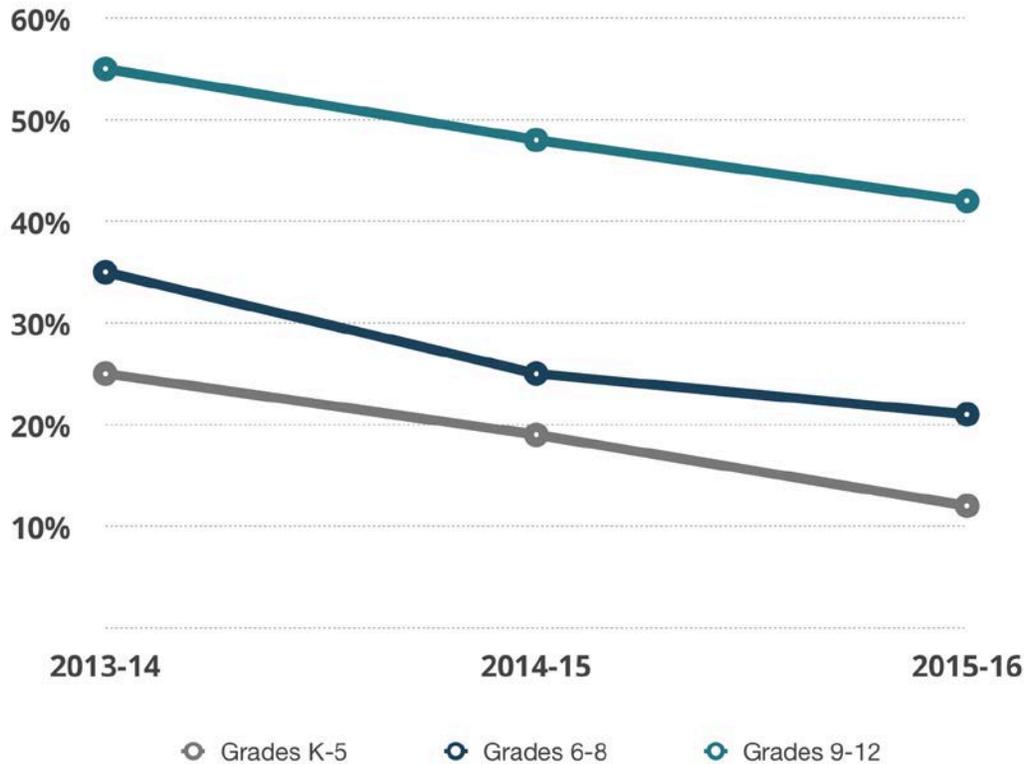
- The principal leads a weekly attendance team with school staff, the DHHS success coach and community school coordinator monitoring data and assessing the need for intervention and outreach. A three-tiered approach provides universal messaging, addressing barriers to attendance and timely interventions. All three KSSN staff are instrumental in the attendance success at Burton. Community partnerships support Burton's attendance celebrations. KSSN models this approach in its other partner schools.

In the 2013-14 school year, GRPS developed a goal of reducing chronic absenteeism by 10% (from 36.4% to 26.4%). To reach the goal, Superintendent Teresa Weatherall Neal put Mel Atkins II, Executive Director of Community & Student Affairs, in charge of developing a plan.

- Atkins partnered with Believe 2 Become (B2B), gained the support of Attendance Works and launched the "Make Every Day Count" campaign. Make Every Day Count, a community-wide initiative, encouraged students to strive for daily attendance. At the end of the school year, the chronic absenteeism rate dropped to 35.1%, 8.7 percentage points away from the GRPS goal.
- Atkins understood that to reach the goal, the initiative needed to be re-vamped to include teacher, staff, administrator and parent training; increased community partnerships; frequent and transparent data dissemination; effective messaging; and attendance teams in each building.
- The next school year, GRPS launched a new initiative called [Challenge 5](#), which encourages students to strive for less than five days absent each school year. The leading approach to Challenge 5 was to be open and honest among the greater community, policymakers, and media with data that showed a high chronic absence rate.

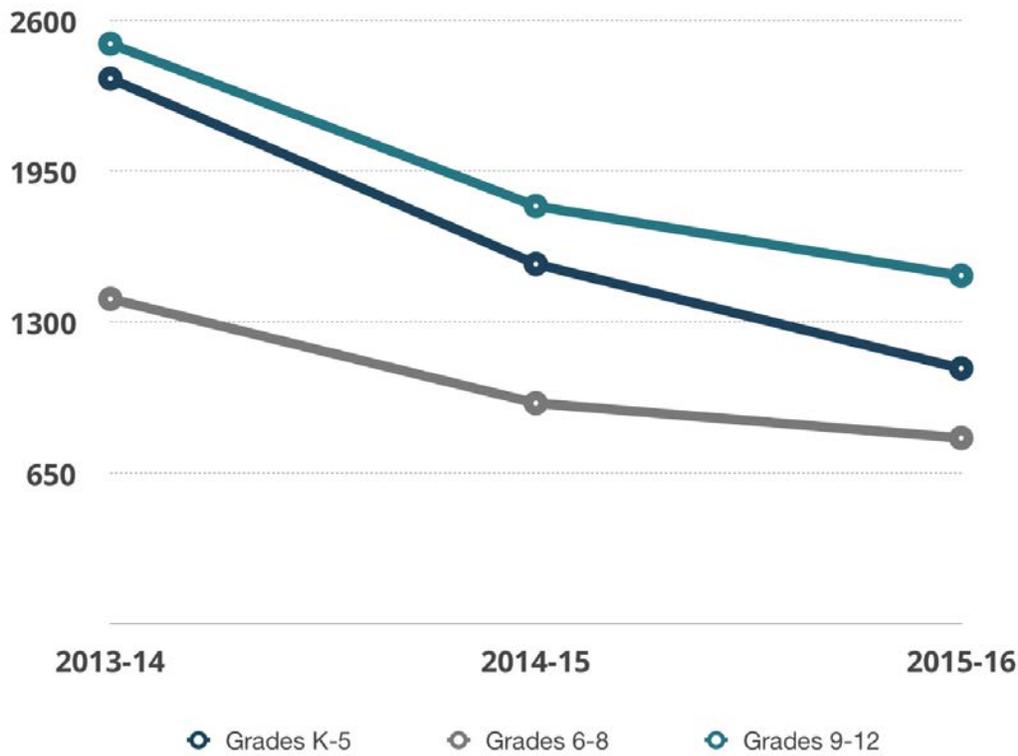
- GRPS was confident in sharing this data because of four primary strategies employed to reduce the bad numbers: recognizing good and improved attendance, engaging students and parents to talk about the importance of attendance, monitoring attendance data and practice through attendance teams and weekly reports, and providing early personalized outreach for students who displayed patterns of absence.²⁰
- Superintendent Weatherall Neal took the lead in bringing this issue to the forefront and, to emphasize her commitment to the issue, made reducing chronic absenteeism an element of her annual evaluation and those of principals and administrators in the district.

Percentage of Students Chronically Absent by Level



Believe to Become: Disruptive Strategies for Change Making

Number of Students Chronically Absent by Level



Believe to Become: Disruptive Strategies for Change Making

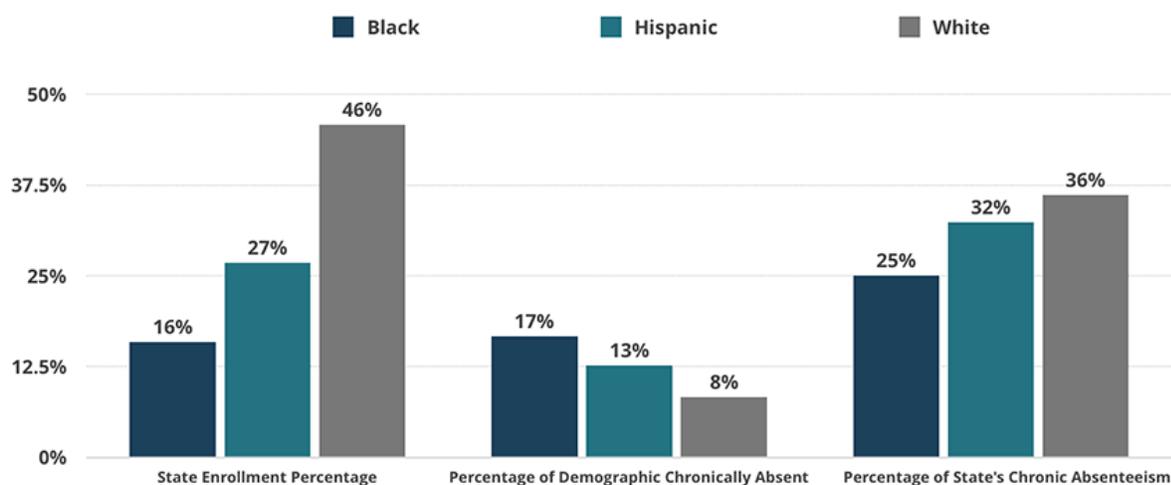
Chronic Absenteeism Spotlight Case Study: State of New Jersey and Paterson City

Awareness

For 2015-16 (the most recent state-level data year available), New Jersey recorded a 10.51% statewide Pre-K-12 chronic absenteeism rate. This means over 147,000 students missed 10% or more of all school days. Of these:

- More than 50% were of low socioeconomic status.
- 26% received special education services.
- Black and Hispanic students comprised a disproportionate percentage of the statewide absenteeism rate, as shown in the chart below:²¹

2015-16 New Jersey Chronic Absenteeism Demographic Comparison



New Jersey Department of Education Chronic Absenteeism Data 2015-16 (obtained through OPRA request 9/8/17)

 **Data**

New Jersey's state data quality and transparency efforts are many:

- The NJDOE convened Department officials and representatives of community and advocacy organizations, to collaborate around challenges and potential solutions.
- State officials engaged an advocacy organization, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), as a critical partner in spreading the word about the importance of this issue. ACNJ started publishing [a yearly report](#) on chronic absenteeism data and related intervention strategies in 2015, and regularly participates in professional development and other training sessions to promote ways to address the issue.
- Peter Chen, Staff Attorney for ACNJ, describes meetings with district leaders to discuss the difference between average daily attendance (ADA) and chronic absenteeism rates: "Often we would ask the school leader what their ADA was, which they could cite off the top of their heads...but when we told them their chronic absence rate they were floored. I think the disconnect is that ADA is necessarily high and they compared it in their heads to school grades ("well, I've got 88% ADA, that's a B+!"). But that 88% often disguised the 30-40% of students chronically absent."

- The state has streamlined data collection procedures and guidance, including a comprehensive, step-by-step [technical assistance guide](#) for district data submissions. This guidance clarifies what “counts” as an absence for chronic absenteeism data and what does not (certain religious holidays and other state-approved exceptions).
- The state collects data and reports it back to districts annually, as well as publishing [a full spreadsheet](#) on statewide chronic absenteeism data at the school level. However, in order to effectively combat chronic absenteeism, districts must be examining their data much more frequently – especially in the initial months of the school year. Training school and district data leads in how to use state data as well as their locally collected attendance data to better monitor chronic absenteeism is key and NJDOE continues to explore such training opportunities.

Policy

For initial implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), New Jersey will use chronic absenteeism as the only School Quality and Student Success (SQSS) measure for K-12 school accountability, weighted at 10%.²² Only a handful of other states have proposed using only this measure for SQSS, though most states are including it as one of several metrics.

- Of all SQSS metrics studied, state leaders and stakeholders in New Jersey identified chronic absenteeism as the one with the most robust data that both reflects school culture and presents opportunities for successful local interventions. New Jersey first incorporated chronic absenteeism into its accountability system in its 2012 No Child Left Behind waiver, so this is not brand new to districts.²³
- Under ESSA, New Jersey will calculate Average Standards Scores for schools and districts according to their chronic absenteeism rates, including for student subgroups (socioeconomic, minority/ethnicity, special education and English learner status), and will convert those scores into percentile rankings for SQSS reflective of the performance relative to schools statewide.

- To support districts in addressing chronic absenteeism, the state has designated a staff person to lead development of guidance and resources around best practices and strategies for combatting chronic absenteeism, data collection and reporting procedures, and early warning criteria.²⁴
- In the past legislative session, [State Senate Bill S447](#) was passed unanimously by the New Jersey Assembly and would have created a common definition for chronic absenteeism, required related data on school report cards, and mandated the development of action plans for schools with chronic absenteeism rates at or above 10%. Support for this effort came from a wide variety of stakeholders, such as ACNJ, organizations representing school nurses, after school programs, PTA, United Way, League of Women Voters, and more.

Resources:

- [New Jersey ESSA Plan](#)
- [New Jersey Department of Education Attendance & Absenteeism Page](#)



Interventions

Districts and schools showing recent improvements in combatting chronic absenteeism all share one thing in common: a strong leadership commitment. Paterson School District has shown exceptional leadership with this issue in recent years at both the school and community levels. Paterson’s leaders serve a diverse population of over 25,000 K-12 students, all of whom receive free breakfast and lunch, and nearly 50% of whom speak a primary language other than English at home.²⁵ Chronic absenteeism has been a challenge for this district for many years and improving attendance

This is about leadership and relationships. You have a building or district leader with a vision who is committed to improving the numbers and they build relationships with kids and families. That’s where we see the biggest gain. And this is far beyond compliance.

Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst, Advocates for Children of New Jersey

has been a top strategic goal for the district since 2012.²⁶

Sandra Diodonet was principal of Paterson's K-6 School 5 in 2013-14, when they reduced chronic absenteeism by 76% from the previous school year. Realizing this type of dramatic improvement in student attendance requires all hands on deck. School 5 employed school staff members as "Success Mentors" from February to June to work directly with at-risk students and emphasize the importance of coming to school.

The model evolved to have Success Mentors adopt an entire classroom for a sense of shared purpose. Leaders like Diodonet also addressed transportation and safety concerns and created incentives for improved and perfect attendance at both the student and classroom levels.²⁷ In addition, School 5's designation as a full-service community school provided additional support from community organizations such as AmeriCorps.

Now Assistant Superintendent of Paterson School District, Diodonet knows how to frame the issue for a variety of audiences. "Ten days is 55 hours of lost instruction," she says, "That resonates with parents. And when you talk to kids, you explain that if you were being paid \$10/hour to come to work, you've lost over \$500. This makes the antennae go up. You have to make the issue relatable to real life."

In her role as Assistant Superintendent, Diodonet continues to emphasize the importance of addressing chronic absenteeism, expanding the Success Mentors program to other schools. She works in close partnership with community organizations like the Paterson Education Fund, which has played a leading role in identifying and addressing student absence problems.

In May 2017, the Paterson Education Fund analyzed school progress reports and pulled attendance and discipline data to look for trends. Leaders now share and discuss [this data](#) to draw attention to notable issues.

Rosie Grant, Executive Director of the Fund, explains that data is not always clean. "We have to ask, how are you suspending 30% of kids but only have a 6% chronic absenteeism rate? If you have high suspension and absenteeism rates, is discipline part of your problem? Are kids out of school because you are sending them home? And where you see schools doing well with both attendance and discipline rates, we ask them to share strategies."

Some of the many other community and school-level strategies employed by Paterson are listed below:

- The Paterson Chronic Absenteeism Task Force, which includes Grant and Diodonet, studies and reports on attendance trends and works with school and community leaders to spread messages about attendance. The group draws on materials from the national [Attendance Works](#) initiative and tailors resources for the Paterson context.
- The district holds a Superintendent Institute before school starts to provide training and resources and increase awareness across all schools. Now that chronic absenteeism will be used for accountability under ESSA, district leaders want to ensure school leaders and teachers understand what the issue is and how absences impact schools and students.
- To encourage teachers to focus on the issue, district leaders have suggested they document improvements in attendance as a form of evidence for teacher performance evaluations, framing the work to adopt a student or classroom as a leadership opportunity that helps kids.
- In September 2016, a new state law went into effect prohibiting Pre-K to grade 2 students from being suspended out of school or being expelled. Paterson leaders have supported and built off this legislation, clarifying suspension and other attendance-impacting discipline policies.²⁸
- Once each month, the district chief accountability officer provides each school with absenteeism data; this reinforces that district administrators are aware of the issue and encourages ongoing attention at the school level.
- Individual schools have created Attendance Review Committees to analyze daily attendance and employ incentives for students and grade levels, such as sharing class attendance with students at lunch and encouraging them to be present and urge their peers to do the same.

- When schools wish to include parents in attendance teams, leaders must address confidentiality concerns. To do this, they have engaged parents who are also staff members, such as lunch monitors or security guards.
- In the summer, principals send a letter to parents of all chronically absent students from the previous school year, then follow up with another in September.
- The district partnered with Attendance Works to build a preschool tool kit based on focus groups with parents of diverse populations to explore barriers and issues related to attendance. Training was then implemented in 6 preschools.
- A public service announcement highlighting chronic absenteeism was included in local movie theater previews, with over 40,000 views.

Partnerships with the community are essential, and sustaining the work is a continued effort. “Once we correct the situation with certain kids, they get it,” Diodonet explains, “but then there are new kids and parents. We need ongoing forums for parents, students, teachers, community members. People across the community need to ask kids why they’re not in school. These are fierce conversations,” she says, “and they’re critical.”

Chronic Absenteeism Spotlight Case Study: Tacoma, WA

Awareness

Tacoma Public Schools serves a population of almost 30,000 K-12 students, of which:

19% are African American

18% Hispanic

42% White

64% are eligible for free/reduced lunch.²⁹

Both the city of Tacoma and state of Washington have been increasingly aware of challenges with chronic absenteeism in public schools. Washington was ranked second highest out of all

states – with nearly 17% statewide chronic absenteeism –according to the most recent national data. And Tacoma’s rate of 23% surpasses the already high state average. This is why both state and local leaders are engaged in comprehensive efforts to understand and address the issues causing high rates of absence from school.

 *Data*

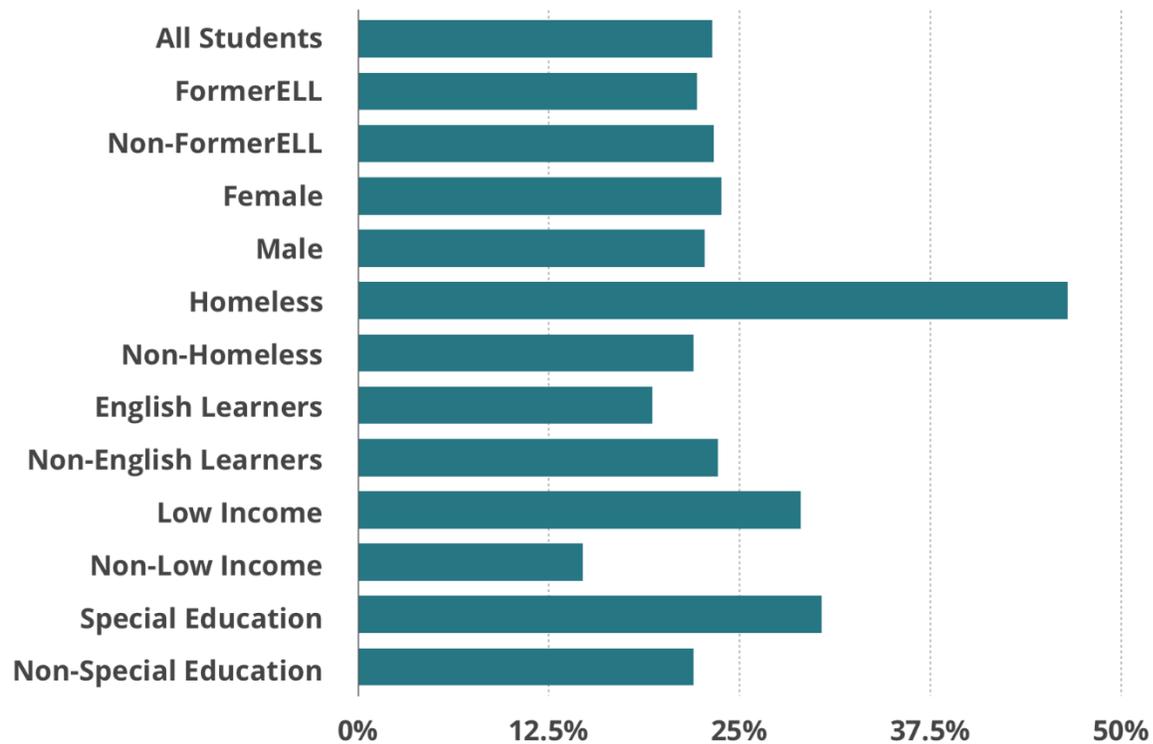
The Washington State Office of Public Instruction (OSPI) collects and reports on annual chronic absenteeism using an interactive data interface. The following state data display shows the 2015-16 chronic absenteeism rates for Tacoma as compared to statewide averages:³⁰

2015-16 Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Tacoma as Compared to Statewide Averages

	Number Chronically Absent	Total Students	Percent Chronically Absent	Percent Chronic State
All Students	8,072	34,736	23.2%	16.7%
FormerELL	517	2,326	22.2%	17%
Non-FormerELL	7,555	32,410	23.3%	16.6%
Female	4,064	17,102	23.8%	17.1%
Male	4,008	17,634	22.7%	16.3%
Homeless	812	1,746	46.5%	32.6%
Non-Homeless	7,259	32,995	22%	16%
English Learners	616	3,200	19.3%	16%
Non-English Learners	7,457	31,627	23.6%	16.7%
Low Income	5,842	20,163	29%	21.9%
Non-Low Income	2,228	15,131	14.7%	11.1%
Special Education	1,549	5,100	30.4%	22%
Non-Special Education	6,523	29,636	22%	15.7%

[*State of Washington Office of Public Instruction Chronic Absenteeism Data 2015-16*](#)

Percent Chronically Absent



State of Washington Office of Public Instruction Chronic Absenteeism Data 2015-16

 Policy

The state of Washington and city of Tacoma are using two state policy levers to address chronic absenteeism.

A recent [state law change](#) is better aligning truancy concerns with strategies to combat chronic absenteeism. The law requires schools and districts to take the following actions that support parental understanding and involvement:

- After one unexcused absence in a month, inform the parent in writing or by phone.
- After three unexcused absences, the school is required to initiate a parent conference to improve the student’s attendance.³¹

- After five unexcused absences in a month, the parent and school must enter a contract to improve the student’s attendance.

The state’s inclusion of chronic absenteeism as one indicator under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) means districts and schools are now being held accountable for absenteeism rates. This elevates the priority level and motivates school and district leaders to improve data practices around and interventions to help improve student attendance.



Interventions

In 2012, Tacoma Public Schools, in partnership with the University of Washington Tacoma, launched The Whole Child Initiative (TWCI) to address student social emotional learning. The project started when a professor from the University of Washington Tacoma took a particular interest in integrating social emotional learning into the curriculum and everyday practices in schools. The professor then partnered with the superintendent of Tacoma Public Schools to develop and roll-out TWCI in schools across the district.

“The Whole Child Initiative is not just an effort to make kids smarter, it’s an effort to make sure they are very well prepared for life after school. We want them to be resilient, we want them to be persistent, we want them to have grit and those are all the things that...this effort is proposing to do for our students.”

Carla Santorno, Superintendent of Tacoma Public Schools

Over the course of just two school years with TWCI, participating Tacoma schools have seen a ten- percentage-point improvement in chronic absenteeism – from 14% of students missing 15.5 days or more in 2014-15 to just 4% in 2015-16.³³

TWCI effort supports students to encourage daily attendance (among other priorities) by providing a safe and productive learning environment.³⁴Currently, the program consists of 44 schools, with plans to integrate all 57 schools in the district.³⁵

- The Tacoma Public Schools director of data and analytics helped build and launch school-based data dashboards that are updated in real time with student-level data.

- A TWCI team in each school building identifies students in need of additional support—academic and/or behavioral—and determines the most appropriate interventions.
- TWCI teams are composed of teachers, administrators, and staff members – but every single school staff member receives TWCI training. The district takes this approach so that the structures of the initiative are well-known and sustainable to ensure students may get to and stay in school safely.
- Supports are tiered based on the student’s age and the severity of the issue and each is informed by student data that is available in real time to school staff members.
- The Tacoma Housing Authority is involved in interventions in the case of a homeless student or a family in an unstable living environment, for example.
- TWCI teachers and administrators model “positive and predictable” behavior so that they may expect the same in return from their students. This culture translates to reduction in student expulsions and suspensions and improved behavior in the classrooms and hallways, creating a safe learning environment that helps to facilitate consistent attendance in each building.

Another initiative that having a positive effect on attendance in Tacoma is “nudge letters.” When a student has missed an excessive amount of days over the course of a quarter, a nudge letter will go home to the student’s family outlining the amount of days missed in comparison to the average days missed in that school and across the district.

The first school in the Tacoma school district to employ these letters was Lister Elementary. Once implemented, Lister saw 62% improvement on attendance for those students who received the letters.³⁶ Lister continued to see success as other schools in the district began to use the nudge letter strategy as well. Throughout the district, these letters are helping students and families realize the importance of consistent attendance and contributing to the success Tacoma is seeing in getting kids to school every day.³⁴

Tacoma Public Schools has partnered with the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) for the past four years in an effort to provide wrap-around services for its elementary school students and

families. The partnership started as a way to stabilize families in a specific high-poverty area of the city.

- For the families with students enrolled in the elementary school in this area, THA provided housing vouchers to relocate closer to the school and made additional efforts to ensure they stayed in their new locations year after year. This approach acknowledged that a number of learning gaps can be attributed to housing—if a student moves around frequently, he is more likely to miss school, to be late because he has to learn a new route or take one that is longer or safer and to be distracted with all of the stress associated with moving from place to place.
- With THA's help, families could relocate to and stay in housing close to school and, in turn, remove those barriers associated with moving from place to place.
- This collaboration with THA—a partnership supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—is now in the process of shifting its focus beyond just elementary schools.

DIG DEEPER

The following sections provide more detail around tools, data and policy areas critical for addressing chronic absenteeism. They can be used by individuals and groups in charge of collecting and analyzing absenteeism data and setting attendance policies at the local level.

Tools

A variety of tools are available for immediate use in addressing chronic absenteeism.

Attendance Works' [data tools page](#) includes a large variety of tools that span a range of purposes and audiences. The tools are available free of charge and are accompanied by guidance materials on how to use and customize them. In particular, the [School and District Attendance Tracking Tools](#) are useful for building data collection capacity. In addition, a series of [toolkits](#) provide practical guidance, information, and resources to put to immediate use.

The Healthy School Campaign offers a [toolkit for Addressing the Health-Related Causes of Chronic Absenteeism](#).

Get Schooled, a non-profit organization that engages directly with students through digital platforms, partnered with the Johns Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center to create a [student-level attendance tracker](#).

Chronic Absenteeism Data Displays

Data is the key to understanding and addressing chronic absenteeism at the local level. Examining absenteeism rates by student subgroup (race, family income, special education, etc.) helps identify trends and target interventions, especially for vulnerable populations. For example, subgroup data may reveal that students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than their higher income peers, or that special education students are absent at much higher rates than students who don't receive those services.

The following are suggested categories for school- and district-level chronic absenteeism data displays based on recommendations from experts.¹ Because school-level data reveals confidential student information, such displays cannot be fully populated for a specific school for public sharing. However, experts strongly encourage local district and city policymakers to prioritize this type of data use to inform strategies that support the students who need it most.

School- and District-level:

Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Subgroup: Schools and districts should track the rates of chronic absenteeism across the following categories:

1. Grade level and grade-to-grade transitions
 - Chronic absenteeism tends to peak in the early (K-2) and later (10-12) grades and issues often arise in the transitions between grades. Schools and districts should be aware of grade levels with absenteeism issues to tailor strategies to the appropriate audience and related root causes. Parents are much more involved with early grade absence decisions than later grades, for example.

2. Race/ethnicity
 - Leaders must be aware of any racial or ethnic group that is disproportionately impacted by absenteeism. Working with community organizations on strategies to address such groups can help tailor approaches that work best for a given population.

3. Socioeconomic/free and reduced-price lunch status
 - Where data shows students in poverty with greater rates of absenteeism, leaders must discuss how financial issues impact student absence, parental awareness and the ability of the community to support effective strategies. This will help make the case for more philanthropic support where needed.

4. Special education designation
 - Local leaders must work with special education teachers and related community organizations to encourage strategies that can help learners with special needs. One example is including attendance goals in a student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP).

5. English language learner (ELL) designation
 - Leaders should be aware of absenteeism rates in the of students who are designated as ELL to determine whether resources and strategies are needed in other languages, as well as to work with the appropriate community organizations affiliated with ELL groups.

School-level Only:

Individual Student Chronic Absenteeism Status: Experts recommend schools and/or districts develop common criteria for identifying the chronic absenteeism status of a student, such as the number of absences required to be considered as trending toward chronically absent and whether those absences accumulate over a longer or shorter period of time. The criteria can then be applied at the school level to identify at-risk students and employ support strategies across the following three categories:

1. Student already identified as chronically absent (from previous year)
2. Student gradually trending toward chronic absenteeism (over many months or a year)
3. Student suddenly trending toward chronic absenteeism (over weeks or a month)

District-level Only:

School Chronic Absenteeism Trends: Districts should have a picture of individual school chronic absenteeism rates to identify schools with inconsistent data or negative attendance trends in need of support.

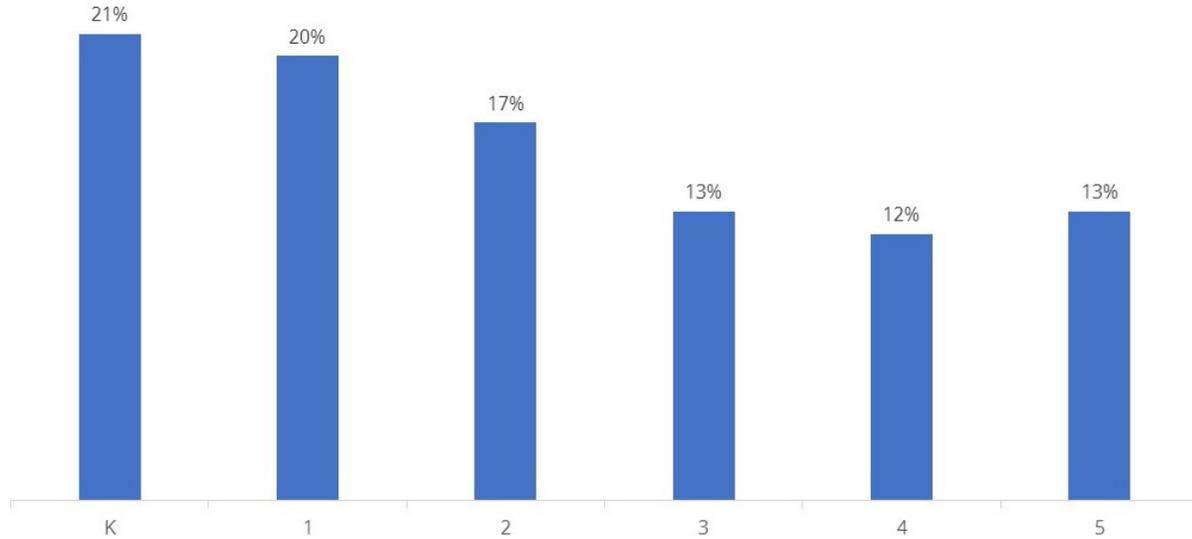
- This can be done by creating a chart that lists each school and its absenteeism rates by month(s) and year(s).

The following is a sample template for tracking important chronic absenteeism (CA) data at either the school or district level, factoring in several considerations:

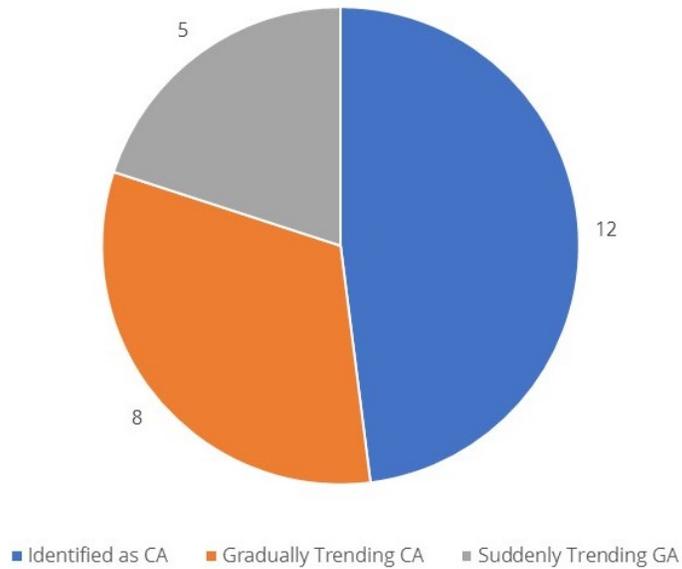
- Timeframe: This snapshot could cover multiple timespans such as weekly, monthly, or yearly.
- Historical Trends: Using multiple timespans as mentioned above allows districts to track historical trends for specific students or demographics. Each data point could be displayed separately over a longer period of time, such as several months or years.
- Percentages Versus Counts: Displaying both the numbers of students **and** percentages within a given category can be helpful. For example, 63 students are absent and 33 of these (or 59%) receive special education services.
- Special Student Designation: Special designation and demographic status can also be compared together to determine which individual students fall into more than one category. For example, it would be helpful to see that low-income special education 2 students are more likely to be chronically absent in a given school than low-income general education students.
- Confidentiality: The individual students in the At-Risk Student Counts should be confidentially identified at the local level to ensure appropriate interventions are taking place. This could be a part of a district or school's Response to Intervention process.

The template has been populated for an example K-5 elementary school of approximately 350 students.

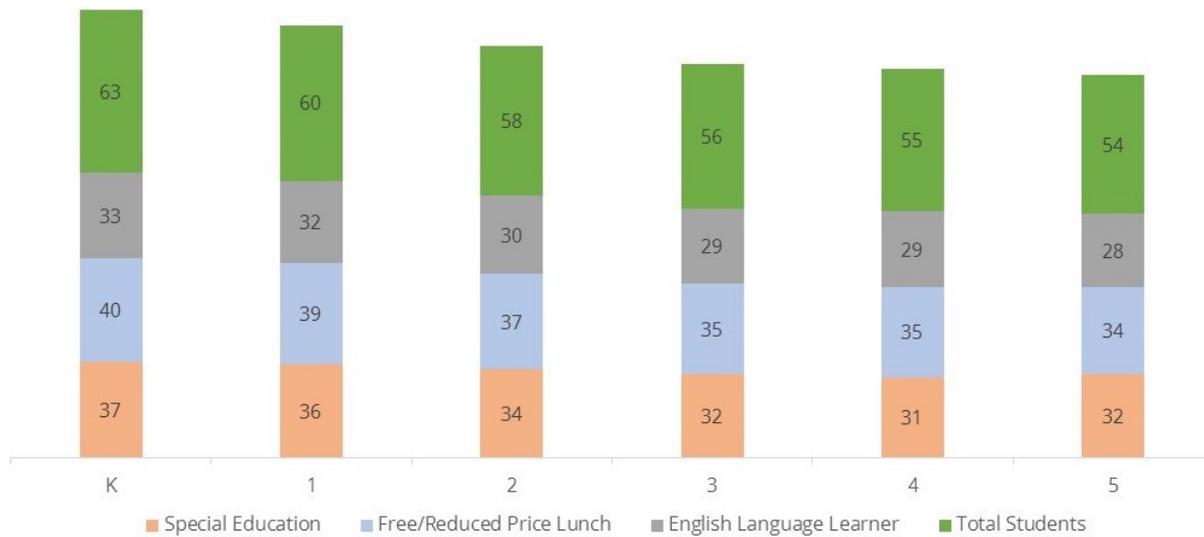
Percentage of All Student CA by Grade Level



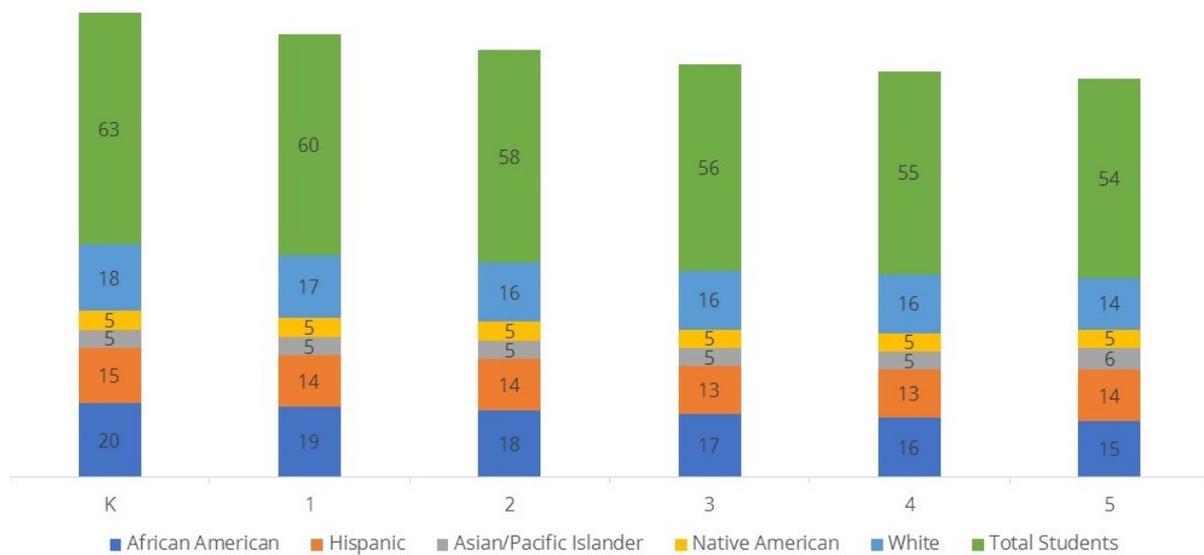
At-Risk Student Counts



Number of CA Students by Grade Level and Special Designation



Number of CA Students by Grade Level and Demographic



Data Usage Recommendations

1. Each school should identify the individual in charge of collecting and analyzing their school chronic absenteeism data (a principal, vice principal, or other administrator). If help is needed to make data more accessible and understandable, school leaders should know where to turn for that support and city leaders should prioritize such assistance. Data should be reviewed at least weekly and reviews should include a check

for accuracy and identify any need for additional quality control. Where possible, schools should form attendance committees including administrator(s), teacher(s), health care professional(s), and parent(s).

2. Districts should identify the central administrator in charge of collecting and analyzing the school-level data. Where possible, the district should form an attendance committee including school-level data coordinators; teachers; health care, transportation and safety officials; parents; and community organization as well as city leaders. This committee should meet at least quarterly during the school year to review data and identify aligned intervention strategies.
3. All data should be considered in context of the given school and district. For example, when examining absence trends for a certain population of students, it is important to note the total percentage of those students in the school or district to understand the scope of potential problems. If 20% of the student population receives special education services, and that 20% makes up 50% of all chronic absenteeism, this is a clear problem to be addressed.

Other Data to Examine

Many factors contribute to and are impacted by chronic absenteeism. While such data should be available at the local level, schools' and districts' abilities to track and analyze them accurately and in a timely way varies dramatically. Strong leadership is critical to emphasize the importance of high-quality data practices, including regular analysis of these factors.

Analyzing other indicators such as the following along with chronic absenteeism data can help illuminate bigger trends (note this must be done using appropriate caution with comparability of data sets across time, for various groups of students, etc.):

1. Academic outcomes, such as proficiency in math and reading by grade level and high school graduation rate
 - Chronically absent students are less likely to attain reading proficiency by third grade, to graduate high school, and to succeed in college.ⁱⁱ Using specific data to illuminate these types of trends at the local level can help convince parents and other stakeholders of the importance of attendance.

2. Discipline and suspensions
 - Schools and districts must examine trends where suspensions and other disciplinary measures impact attendance. When Paterson, NJ shared data illuminating these trends, district and school leaders could analyze patterns, seek out effective strategies in schools trending positively across discipline and attendance rates, and identify potential policy or data quality issues in schools with negative or inconsistent trends.
3. Teacher absenteeism
 - When teachers are absent, students often miss key instructional time. Schools and districts with high teacher and student absenteeism rates must face the challenge of lost instructional time for both of these reasons. One strategy to improve teacher absenteeism is to incorporate teacher attendance goals into individual performance evaluations.

Resources:

- Attendance Works [Portraits of Change](#), September 2017
- Fordham Institute: [Teacher Absenteeism in Charter and Traditional Public Schools](#)

Cross Case Study Analysis

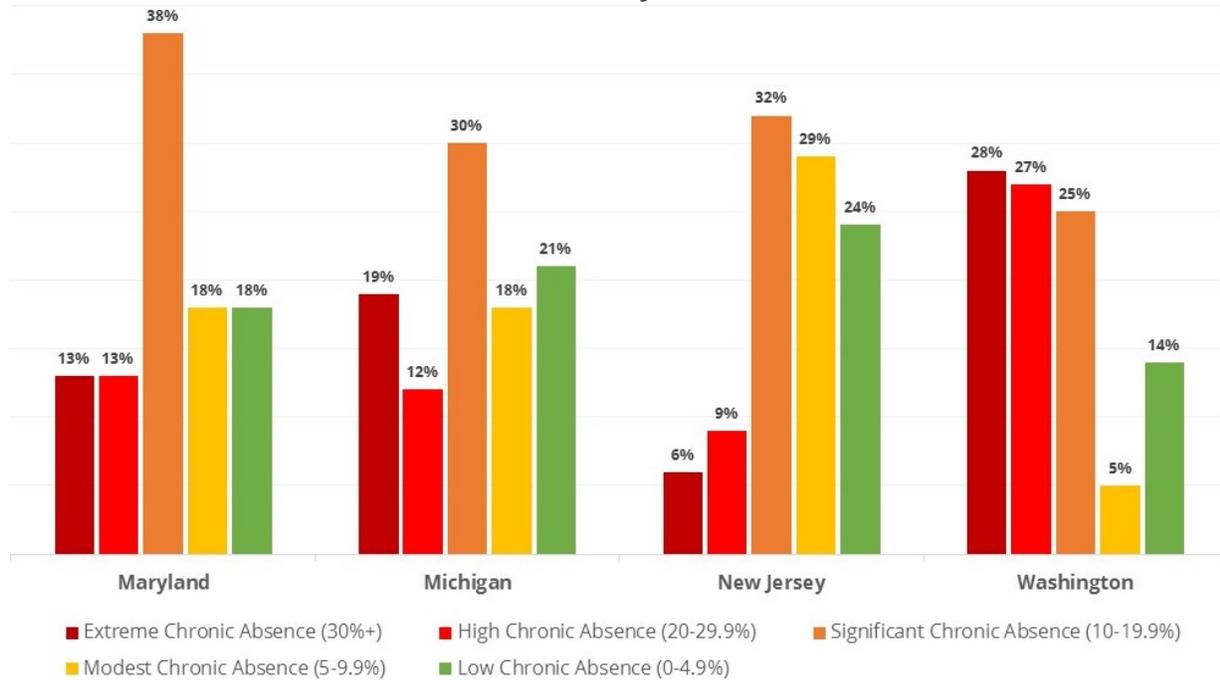
One challenge in understanding and confronting chronic absenteeism is the significant variance in policies and procedures at the local level. Looking across the four case study sites in this spotlight, we see several differences in definitions, data collection procedures, and strategies for addressing absenteeism. Examining these differences can help local leaders determine the structures and interventions most appropriate for their own context.

Case Study Site Data Comparisons

In September 2017, Attendance Works released its annual report on chronic absenteeism. Under the leadership of Executive Director Hedy Chang and research scientist Bob Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University, [Portraits of Change](#) was designed to provide an analysis of levels of absenteeism – from extreme (30%+) to low (0-4.9%) across and within states.

For the states that are home to the four case study cities in this spotlight, Attendance Works data shows Washington with the greatest rates of Extreme and High chronic absence, and the three other states each with more than 30% rates of Significant chronic absenteeism.

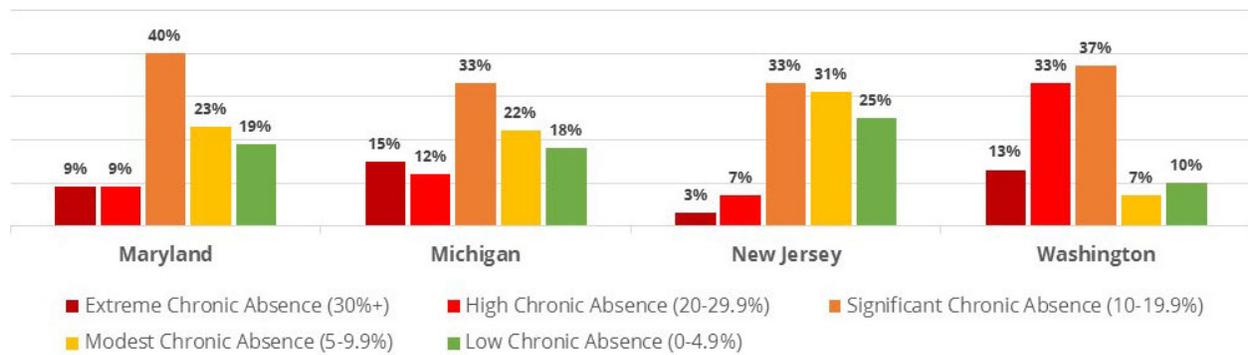
Chronic Absenteeism Levels Across Case Study Site States



Attendance Works Portraits of Change 2017, Robert Balfanz and Hedy Chang

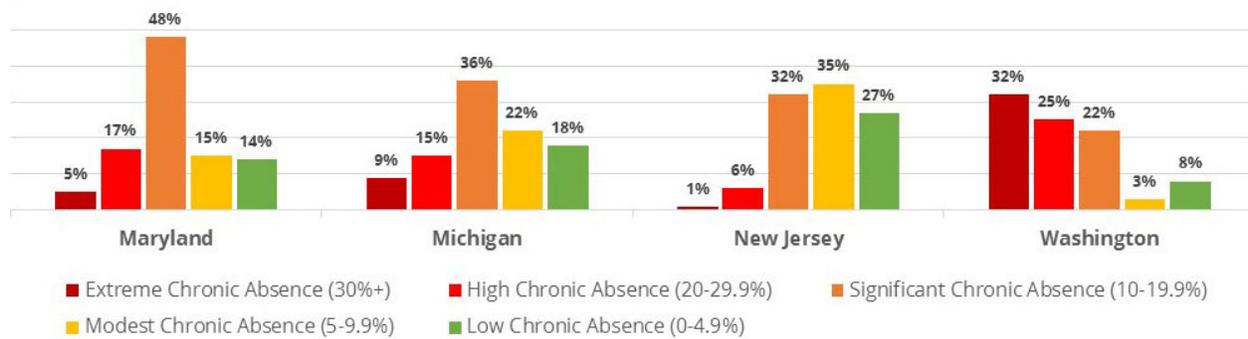
Looking across grade levels for each of these states, high school students show the greatest rates of High and Extreme chronic absenteeism, but all grade levels have concerning rates of Significant absenteeism.

Elementary School Level Comparison



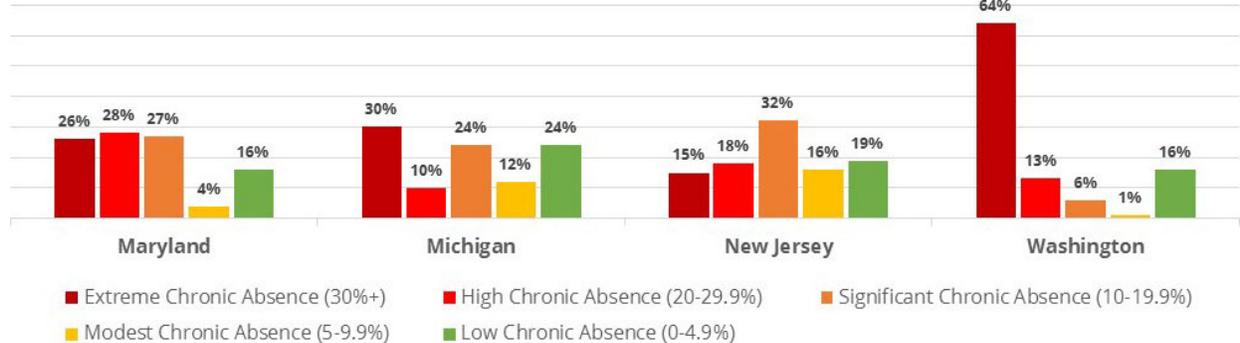
Attendance Works Portraits of Change 2017, Robert Balfanz and Hedy Chang

Middle School Level Comparison



Attendance Works Portraits of Change 2017, Robert Balfanz and Hedy Chang

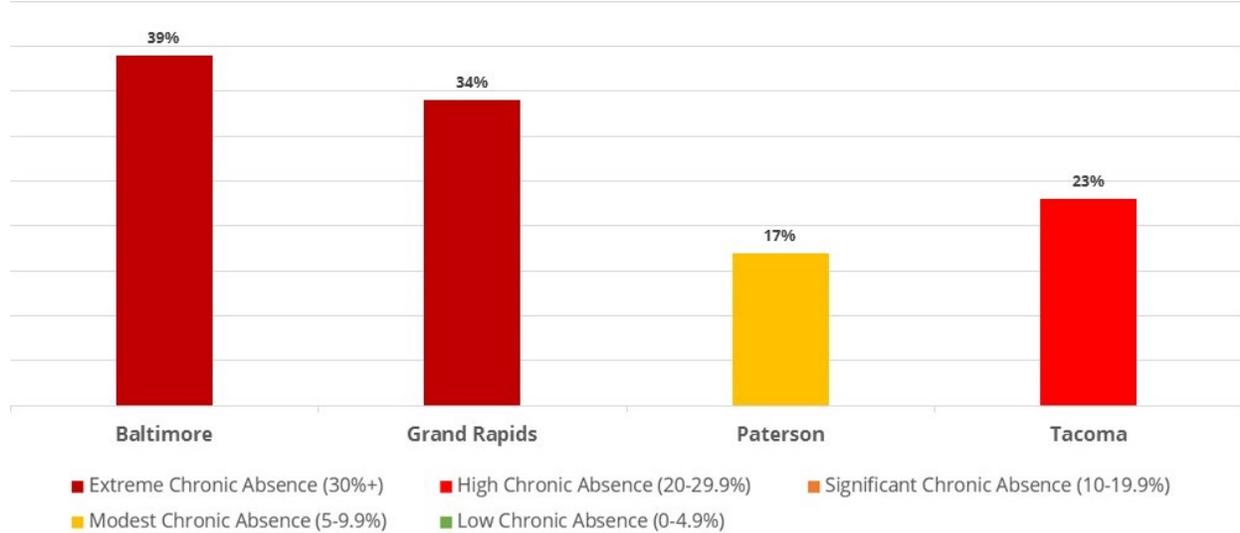
High School Level Comparison



Attendance Works Portraits of Change 2017, Robert Balfanz and Hedy Chang

All four case study cities also show Significant or higher city-wide chronic absenteeism rates for 2015-16. Although Paterson’s average rate is lower than the others at the “Significant” level, ten of the city’s high schools had chronic absenteeism rates over 25% in 2015-16.ⁱⁱⁱ This further emphasizes the need to examine data at all levels. Using state and city-wide averages is a helpful starting point, but individual schools and grade levels often have particular problems that must be addressed locally.

2015-16 Chronic Absence Levels in Case Study Cities



Attendance Works Portraits of Change 2017, Robert Balfanz and Hedy Chang

Definitions

All of the case study sites follow national experts’ general recommendations for defining chronic absenteeism; however, only New Jersey allows exceptions for some excused absences to be excluded from absenteeism counts (a practice not recommended by experts at Attendance Works^v). Also, the four sites have different definitions for what counts as a full day of attendance.

	Baltimore (MD) ^v	Grand Rapids (MI) ^{vi}	Paterson (NJ) ^{vii}	Tacoma (WA) ^{vi}
Chronic Absenteeism (CA) Definition	Missing more than 20 school days	Missing 18 days or 10% or more of school days	Missing 10% or more of school days	Missing 18 days or 10% or more of school days
Absences Not Counting Toward CA	None	None	Several on state approved list	None
Full-day Policy	Present at least 4 hours	Student must arrive or depart no more than 30 minutes late or early to count as present the full day	Present at least 1 hour in morning and 1 hour in afternoon	Present 50% or more ^{ix}

Data Procedures

The ways in which chronic absenteeism data are collected and shared also vary across case study sites. Some, like Grand Rapids and certain schools in Baltimore, are supported by external partners. City leaders can explore such supports for districts in need of help with managing and analyzing data.

	Baltimore (MD)	Grand Rapids (MI)	Paterson (NJ)	Tacoma (WA)
Chronic Absenteeism Data Collection	Schools report up to district and state; state shares data at school level in interactive interface	School- and district-level data reports generated by Attendance Works tracking tools and Grand Rapids Office of Data and Evaluation are distributed to school principals and attendance teams on a weekly basis ^x	School reports absences to district, who reports to state annually; state calculates CA by school and district annually	State collects data on half and full-day attendance plus excused and unexcused absences; reports on students who miss 18 days or more(excused or not) ^{xi}
Local Practices	Schools identify Attendance Monitors and work with Instructional Leadership Teams on interventions and supports ^{xii}	Daily attendance monitored by attendance teams present in each school building	School-based Attendance Review Committee checks attendance on daily basis	Data dashboards provided to principals and teachers ^{xiii}
Responsible Parties	School Attendance Monitor	Office of Community and Student Affairs; Office of Data and Evaluation	State data coordinator, district data coordinator, school-level varies	State data coordinator, District director of data analytics
Chronic Absenteeism in ESSA ^{xiv}	CA one SQSS indicator, weighted at 15% ^{xv}	CA one SQSS indicator, weighted at 4% ^{xvi}	CA is only SQSS indicator, weighted at 10% ^{xvii}	CA one SQSS indicator, given 1-10 points in rating system broken into deciles ^{xviii}

Practical Strategies and Problem-Solving

Each case study details specific ways cities are leading efforts to get students to school each day. A look at parent notification policies shows the importance of having specific procedures in place, accompanied by tailored supports for vulnerable students. Just a few examples of the innovative strategies being used in these cities should inspire other city leaders that this work can and must be done.

	Baltimore (MD)	Grand Rapids (MI)	Paterson (NJ)	Tacoma (WA)
Parent Notification Systems	<p>Parents are notified of any absence. School staff works with families to identify reasons for absences and determine what additional supports are needed.</p> <p>The district has outlined tiered strategies that correspond to the level of absence for a given student. For example, 5-10 absences may result in a call or letter home; 11-14 call for in-person meetings with a support team.^{xix}</p> <p>If these efforts do not lead to improvement in attendance, the case may be referred to the Office of the State’s Attorney for Baltimore City.^{xx}</p>	<p>When a student has 3 days of absence, the principal evaluates absences and send a letter of concern home with a copy forwarded to the Office of Community and Student Affairs for monitoring and support.</p> <p>If attendance does not improve, the principal completes an Attendance Referral form. A Public Safety Officer will then conduct a home call/visit.</p> <p>Within 6 days, the Office of Community and Student Affairs must contact the principal check attendance.</p> <p>If attendance does not improve after 10 unexcused absences, the Public Safety Officer must present documents for possible prosecution.^{xxi}</p>	<p>For each unexcused absence, the student’s parent receives an automated call and may be asked to explain the reason.</p> <p>Students who are chronically absent or late are referred to the school Intervention and Referral Team to determine appropriate interventions and to the school attendance officer.</p> <p>Students who reach 20 or more unexcused absences in any one class may lose course credit or credit for the school year and grade retention.^{xxii}</p>	<p>Washington state law requires schools to^{xxiii}</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Notify parents of attendance rules and get a signature of receipt. ▪ Notify parents every time a student is absent (in Tacoma, a letter is sent home after the first unexcused absence). ▪ Meet with parents and students to discuss reasons for absence (in Tacoma, this occurs after 2 unexcused absences). ▪ After 5 unexcused absences in a month, the parent and school must enter a contract to improve the student’s attendance. Or, the case can be referred to a Community Truancy Board.^{xxiv}

	Baltimore (MD)	Grand Rapids (MI)	Paterson (NJ)	Tacoma (WA)
Examples of Successful Local Interventions	<p>Thanks to data analysis using Improvement Science in partnership with Johns Hopkins, leaders can learn whether chronically absent students are present at school most days, but are either tardy or cutting certain classes. The next step is to examine individual patterns of attendance at the class – not just the school day – level. A student with a generally high daily attendance rate but a low individual class attendance rate can then be counseled to examine reasons for skipping that one class.</p>	<p>With the help of Kent School Services Network (KSSN), GRPS works with schools to identify chronically absent students who struggle with mental and physical health issues and homelessness. For example, in one school, 31.9% of such students had asthma. KSSN worked with the school to connect effective interventions and health supports for these students so that they could safely and consistently attend school.</p>	<p>Paterson solved a local confidentiality problem: there was a desire to include parents on school-based Attendance Review Committees; however, teams needed to address confidentiality policies. Therefore, the district sought out parents employed by the school (lunch aides, custodians, etc.) who had the proper clearance to participate on the committees.</p>	<p>When a student has excessive absences over the course of a quarter, a nudge letter goes home to the family showing days missed in comparison to average days missed in the school and district. When Lister Elementary reported a 62% improvement in attendance for those students who received the letters.^{xv}</p>

EXPERTS INTERVIEWED FOR CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM SPOTLIGHT

- Thu Ament, Director, Tacoma Public Schools
- Mel Atkins II, Executive Director of Community and Student Affairs, Grand Rapids Public Schools
- Bob Balfanz Ph.D., Professor, Johns Hopkins University
- Peter Chen, Staff Attorney, Advocates for Children of New Jersey
- Bridget Cheney, Director of Elementary and K-8 Leadership Development and Priority Schools, Grand Rapids Public Schools
- Faith Connolly, Executive Director, Johns Hopkins University Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC)
- Elizabeth Dabney, Director, Research and Policy Analysis, Data Quality Campaign
- Sandra Diodonet, Assistant Superintendent, Paterson School District, NJ
- Nancy Curry, Director, Office of Student Support Services, NJ Department of Education
- Stacy Ehrlich, Managing Director and Senior Research Scientist, University of Chicago Consortium on School Research
- Sue Fothergill, Associate Director for Policy, Attendance Works
- Marques Gittens, Director of Postsecondary Systems, Puget Sound Educational Service District
- Rosie Grant, Executive Director, Paterson Education Fund
- Marie Groark, Executive Director, GetSchooled
- Jill Hulnick, Deputy Chief Talent and Performance Officer, NJ Department of Education
- Cecilia Leong, Associate Director of Programs, Attendance Works

- Christian Licier, Assistant Principal of Patterson High School, Baltimore City Public Schools
- Carol Paine-McGovern, Executive Director, Kent School Services Network
- Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst, Advocates for Children of New Jersey
- James Riddlesperger, NJ Department of Education
- Peter Shulman, Deputy Commissioner, NJ Department of Education
- Marc L. Stein, Research Co-Director of BERC and Associate Professor, Johns Hopkins University School of Education
- Jane Sundius, Senior Fellow, Attendance Works

Note: Data for this report was collected in the summer of 2017.

ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.ecs.org/chronic-absenteeism-a-key-indicator-of-student-success/>
2. <http://awareness.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/Secret-Formula-8-8-17-ver-9.pdf>
3. http://www.ecs.org/ec-content/uploads/Chronic_Absenteeism_-_A_key_indicator_of_student_success.pdf
4. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#one>
5. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Attendance-Works-Portraits-of-Change-Main-Document-Final-Sept.-1.pdf>
6. Interviews with experts, July-September 2017.
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11. <http://baltimore-berc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/SeptemberAttendanceBriefJuly2014.pdf>
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13. <http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/Page/27088>; note the state has updated this definition to "number of students absent 10 percent or more school days during the school year in membership at least days" in its [12/27/17 ESSA](#) plan but city/state guidance has not been updated.
14. <http://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/ESSA/MarylandsESSAConsolidatedStatePlan-DRAFT2.pdf>
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16. <http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/AttendanceRate.aspx?PV=183:H:30:0405:1:N:0:13:1:1:0:1:1:1:3>
17. <https://www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles/StudentInformation/StudentCounts/StudentCount.aspx>
18. <http://www.grps.org/images/departments/csa/pdfs/StudentPolicyHandbook.pdf>
19. http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Mich-ESSA-Revised-Plan-2017-08-17_598370_7.pdf
20. 2015-16 state chronic absenteeism data obtained from the New Jersey Department of Education through OPRA request.
21. Schools with fewer than 20 English learners will have chronic absenteeism weighted at 15%. In addition, NJDOE will collect preschool chronic absenteeism data for reporting purposes, but will not use it for accountability at this time. <http://www.state.nj.us/education/ESSA/plan/plan.pdf>
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 35. <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/absent-students-schools-attendance-nudge-letters/>
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- i. See complete list of experts consulted to inform this project.
 - ii. http://www.ecs.org/ec-content/uploads/Chronic_Absenteeism_-_A_key_indicator_of_student_success.pdf
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 - vii. <http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/safety/behavior/attendance/ChronicAbsenteeismGuidance.pdf>
 - viii. <http://www.k12.wa.us/attendance/>
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 - x. Atkins, Mel and Chaná Edmond-Verley, "Challenge 5: Disruptive Strategies for Change Making, the Grand Rapids Story of Reducing Chronic Absenteeism." September 2016.

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