

# CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

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Educators and policymakers have become increasingly concerned about the issue of student absenteeism in general and, in particular, chronic absenteeism.<sup>1</sup> This is because chronic absenteeism can have lasting effects on students' economic and social development. Children who are chronically absent have lower levels of school readiness upon entering kindergarten, are less likely to read at grade level by the third grade, show lower levels of social engagement, are more likely to drop of school, and are less likely to graduate from high school or attend college.<sup>2</sup> All of these negative outcomes limit the long-term success of students in school and into adulthood.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, dropping out of high school not only limits a person's long-term earning potential and career advancement, but can also significantly reduce potential tax revenues. From a systems perspective, chronic absenteeism disrupts the effective delivery of instruction, widens the achievement gap, and reduces state funding to schools.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it places an added burden on school counselors who, in urban areas, already have high caseloads. The American School Counselors Association reported that, with few exceptions, the counselor/student ratio in most states exceeds (> 350 to 1) the ratio recommended by the ASCA (250 to 1).<sup>5</sup> This is important because a high counselor/student ratio is related to increased disciplinary occurrences at the school level.<sup>6</sup>

Although absenteeism is an old problem, there is now a new impetus for addressing it. The newly enacted ESSA law requires the reporting of chronic absenteeism at school and district levels, and it allows the use of federal funds for preventive measures and training to reduce chronic absence. In addition, chronic absenteeism can be included as a school-quality indicator in state-level ESSA accountability systems. States will now have to establish data systems for tracking student absenteeism and report the information collected. According to a recent *EdWeek* article, nearly three-quarters of all states are including an indicator (or metric) of chronic absenteeism in their state accountability plans.<sup>7</sup> School systems are therefore more likely to intensify efforts at implementing solutions to chronic absenteeism.

NEA acknowledged the importance of regular school attendance in its 2013 Resolution (B-5 of the 2017 *Handbook*), in which the Association stated its support for "on-going efforts to minimize tardiness and other attendance issues."<sup>8</sup> In addition, *NEA Today* has published articles highlighting the change in definition of chronic absenteeism, the impact of absenteeism on a students' school success, and initiatives regarding this issue at the federal level.<sup>9</sup> This Research Brief goes beyond previous NEA work by identifying and highlighting best practices aimed at reducing the problem of chronic absenteeism.

### EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

Historically, definitions of absenteeism or chronic absenteeism have varied across states and districts.<sup>10</sup> However, analysis of the drawbacks of previous definitions,<sup>11</sup> the implementation of new reporting requirements, and advances in technology have encouraged some states and the federal government to adopt a standard definition of chronic absenteeism: "The number of students absent 10% or more of school days during the year for any reason excused or unexcused."<sup>12</sup> More recently, researchers have further specified "10% or more" (or 10% to 100%) in order to show the gravity of the problem, depending on the percentage of students absent at the school level and the category of "chronic absenteeism" into which they fall. For example, a school in which 5% of the students have an absenteeism rate of 20% (36 days) is in greater need of support than one in which the same number of students have an absentee rate of 10% (18 days) or less.<sup>13</sup> Other characteristics that affect the severity of the problem and urgency of the response include type of school, poverty level, grade level, and locale.

Regardless of the definition, chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among students of color, students with disabilities, students enrolled in urban school districts,<sup>14</sup> and students in high-poverty schools regardless of jurisdiction. Not surprisingly, there is often an overlap among characteristics such as poverty, ethnicity, and

locale. This overlap adds to the severity of the challenge faced by educators because multiple root causes necessitate diverse, often more complex solutions.

- ★ **Nationally, over six million students were chronically absent from school during the 2013–2014 school year, representing 14% of all students.** In line with the ‘absent for 10% or more days’ guideline described above, chronically absent means absent for 18 or more school days.<sup>15</sup> Rates are higher for Black (17%) and Hispanic (14%) than for White (12%) and Asian (7%) students.<sup>16</sup> Native American (22%) and Pacific Islander (21%) students have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. However, these students represent (combined) six percent of the total elementary and secondary school enrollment.<sup>17</sup> English language learners (ELL) are less likely (11%) than non-ELLs (14%) to be chronically absent, while students with disabilities (SWD) are 50% more likely than non-SWD to be chronically absent.<sup>18</sup>
- ★ **Although absentee rates vary across states by district, school, and grade level, there is a general pattern of chronic absenteeism across the Pk–12 grade continuum.** The highest rates of student absenteeism occur at the pre-school/kindergarten level and in high schools.<sup>19</sup> As noted previously, absenteeism at the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten levels has negative consequences as children move up the grade ladder. Specifically, research evidence shows that kindergarteners who miss 10% or more school days have lower academic performance when they reach first grade.<sup>20</sup> At this level, high absenteeism is typically attributed to student health problems (mostly asthma), challenges faced by caregivers that prevent them from getting children to school (poverty, adult mental illness), transportation-related difficulties, or lack of parent awareness about negative consequences of pre-school absences and school readiness.<sup>21</sup> Health problems and transportation challenges account for two-thirds of absences at the pre-school level.<sup>22</sup>
- ★ **At the upper elementary level (4–6 grades), chronic absenteeism declines, but then increases as students move into the middle and high school grades.** Several factors contribute to chronic absenteeism at these levels, among them fear of violence on the way to school, alienation from school, bullying, need to care for younger siblings, and strict discipline policies that push students out of school.<sup>23</sup> At all levels of schooling, students who are homeless or move often also exhibit a pattern of high absenteeism.<sup>24</sup>

- ★ **Schools with a large proportion of students in poverty, regardless of region of the country (or state), are more likely to have high absentee rates.** A recent state-by-state analysis shows that schools with poverty levels of 50% and above had the highest percentage of “extreme and high chronic absences” rates compared with schools in which the poverty level was below 50%.<sup>25</sup>

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## RESOURCES

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### PROMISING INTERVENTIONS

**R**esearchers examined the effects of multiple interventions designed to produce positive outcomes such as increasing student attendance, reducing the dropout rate, and increasing high school graduation rates. They found that, when the intended outcome is to reduce absenteeism the interventions produce positive results. However, when the measures of success are long-term outcomes—such as increasing student graduation rates, reducing dropout rates, or college graduation—then the evidence for success is mixed.<sup>26</sup> In addition, analysts assert that punitive approaches such as fines, suspensions, or jail time for parents/guardians are ineffective.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, across the country, districts are attending to the problem of chronic absenteeism at multiple levels, in collaboration with community partners and through a variety of targeted activities. Analysts have noted that many of these activities lack rigorous evaluation to ascertain effectiveness. The practices (and programs) described below are those for which evidence of success has been reported. They represent a variety of efforts of different scope, populations, and grade-level span.

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### EARLY WARNING AND MONITORING SYSTEMS (multiple districts use this tool)

School attendance data are a critical means by which school officials raise awareness and take action to address chronic absenteeism. The use of a common definition and advances in technology allows researchers to more efficiently collect, analyze, and report data at all jurisdictional levels (state, district, and school). Moreover, such measures and advances facilitate comparisons by demographic and performance factors.

An approach in which data collection, reporting, and intervention has been instrumental in producing positive outcomes (reduced chronic absenteeism) is that of early warning systems. The U.S. department of education defines an early warning system as “a system based on student data to identify students who exhibit behavior or academic performance that puts them at risk of

dropping out of school.” In 2014–15, 52% of all high schools across the country had an early warning system that could identify students who were at risk of educational failure.<sup>28</sup>

Early warning and monitoring systems allow schools to use data (*i.e.*, attendance, grades, truancy/chronic absenteeism, disciplinary incidents, suspensions or expulsions) to track student attendance, behavior, and course performance. It is a system of verified indicators that triggers interventions depending on school poverty level and other demographic characteristics. Once the students are identified by the system, the most common services provided to students are meeting of teachers and administrators, meeting with parents, and development of a student-level intervention plan.<sup>29</sup> Researchers tested a version of early warning system—the Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System (EWIMS)—in 73 high schools located in three Midwestern states. They reported that, in schools using the EWIMs approach the percentage of students who were chronically late declined, the percentage of students who failed one or more courses was lower, and the percentage of students who had a low GPA (2.0 or lower) was lower (17%) than for non-EWIMS-participating schools.<sup>30</sup>

## COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Chronic absenteeism is a community-wide concern, and therefore must be addressed by the child’s surrounding community. Schools can collaborate with community agencies, organizations, businesses, and local citizens to provide supports that can help reduce absences.<sup>31</sup> To understand how community resources can reduce absences, schools must first understand the individual needs of chronically absent students. For instance, a student from a low socioeconomic family setting may lack essential supports—nutrition, clothing, stable housing situation, healthcare—that contribute to attendance. Family resource organizations, health departments, and charitable centers are community-based support systems that can help address such needs.<sup>32</sup>

Integrated Student Supports (ISS) is a type of community collaboration that improves student outcomes by bringing together school, district, and community resources. ISS programs can appear in many forms and are utilized in schools across the United States. These programs include a comprehensive needs assessment at the community, school, and individual student levels that identifies and measures the most pressing challenges needing attention.<sup>33</sup> Once needs are assessed, ISS programs coordinate the necessary supports—community organizations, local businesses, religious groups, municipal government, law enforcement, and school resources—to reduce educational barriers for students. Subsequently, the supports are centralized

within schools providing students, parents, and educators with a number of resources aimed at decreasing chronic absenteeism.

Another example of an ISS is Communities in Schools (CIS), a network of organizations working in over 2,300 schools across the United States.<sup>34</sup> The program targets PK–12 students and places trained coordinators within school systems to develop a comprehensive plan to decrease absenteeism. One program in particular began operation in Memphis, TN, in 2015. Within one school year, chronic absenteeism dropped from 32% to 23%.<sup>35</sup> Other cities and school districts that have had success with a community approach to reducing chronic absenteeism include Grand Rapids, MI, Long Beach Unified School District in Long Beach, CA, Pittsburgh Public Schools in Pittsburgh, PA, and Covina Valley Unified School District in Los Angeles, CA.<sup>36</sup>

## PARENT/GUARDIAN ENGAGEMENT AND HOME VISITS

Communicating with parents/guardians and involving them in their child’s education is a valuable and effective method in reducing chronic absenteeism. Maintaining consistent lines of communication through personal contact allows schools to help families understand the significance of regular attendance to overall student success.<sup>37</sup> Through outreach, schools encourage parents/guardians to not only send their children to school, but also provide helpful supports to ensure a reduction in absences. Home visits in conjunction with open communication and parent/guardian involvement have successfully reduced chronic absenteeism.<sup>38</sup>

Multiple examples of communication and home visits are being used throughout the United States. New Britain, CT, implemented home visits in which administrators and teachers directly engaged parents/guardians and students in their home as a means of addressing absences. During the 2012 school year, 30% of kindergartners were chronically absent. After implementing home visits and parental outreach, this rate dropped to 13% after two years.<sup>39</sup> In the District of Columbia, teachers from 27 elementary schools visited their students’ homes to engage parents/guardians in conversation about their children’s progress and activities for learning at home. Students whose families received visits had 24% fewer absences than those who did not receive a visit.<sup>40</sup>

The School District of Philadelphia, PA, in collaboration with Mid Atlantic Regional Lab, tested the “nudge” approach to improve school attendance by sending postcards to parents and guardians of students who had been absent during the prior year.<sup>41</sup> Improved attendance is a major goal of the school system and, prior to implementation of new initiatives, school leadership sought evidence of effectiveness. The experiment was based

on a behavioral science theory and prior empirical work that reported positive outcomes (*i.e.*, increased attendance) when parents/guardians become more involved. The expectation was that greater parent/guardian awareness would lead to greater involvement and, consequently, improve student attendance.

Two different types of postcard messages were sent to parents and guardians. One postcard merely encouraged the parents/guardians to improve student attendance. The other added specific information about the student's attendance history. Researchers tested which of the two messages had greater effect on improved attendance and found that communicating with households about attendance reduced student absences. Specifically, a single postcard reduced absences by 2.4 percent. However, there was no significant difference based on the type of postcard sent (limited information vs. more information). Thus, it appears, receiving the postcard was sufficient to elicit the desired action. Another school district using the nudge letter approach is Tacoma, WA, where student absence improved for 62% of students whose families received the letter.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, as part of a broader dropout prevention effort, Richmond, VA, public school district conducted home visits at both elementary and secondary school levels in partnership with community organizations, institutions of higher education, and local government officials. Recovery specialists conducted door-to-door visits with the aim of getting high school students to return to school. At the elementary level, school-based teams met with parents/guardians of absentee students. As the Initiative evolved, the program expanded by targeting students who had already dropped out. Other components of the initiative included teacher training, individual learning plans for students, and mentoring for recovered students. An *EdWeek* article highlighting Richmond's dropout prevention and recovery effort noted that the door-to-door component reduced the dropout rate from 26% (2003–04) to 8% (2011–12).<sup>43</sup>

## MENTORING

Mentoring has potential in reducing chronic absenteeism. Used to address many social and educational concerns, mentorships pair a caring adult or older student with an at-risk youth.<sup>44</sup> Programs promote relationships in which the mentor provides guidance and support to improve school performance while acting as an advocate for the student's overall academic achievement. Moreover, mentorships act as an intervention to guide students on a more productive path with the intention, in this case, to decrease absences.<sup>45</sup>

The key component in all mentorships is fostering a positive and meaningful relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Successful programs provide effective training in problem solving and relationship building, allow for continuous supervision and guidance for mentors, and utilize inquiry-based evaluation and data collection to track student progress.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, mentorships are most effective when the mentor has previous experience with children, has knowledge of the student's background, has a sense of efficacy, acts as a role model, and focuses specifically on the mentee's individual needs; they are also most effective when implemented consistently for an extended period.<sup>47</sup>

Researchers have reported mixed results concerning the use of mentorships to reduce chronic absenteeism. A 2017 study found little to no evidence showing that participating in a mentor program had any impact on chronic absenteeism.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, a 2013 study conducted on New York City's Success Mentor program reported that chronically absent students assigned mentors gained an additional two weeks of school and that, in 25% of schools implementing mentorships students gained nearly a month of school.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, a 1995 study on the Big Brothers Big Sisters school-based mentoring program found that mentored students were absent from school and class less often than students not in the program.<sup>50</sup>

Despite mixed results among studies, positive effects such as those reported in New York City and elsewhere provide evidence that a well-implemented mentorship program shows promise in reducing chronic absenteeism, but that further study is needed.<sup>51</sup> School programs that have had success with mentorships include Fulton County Truancy Intervention Project in Fulton County, GA, Kern County Truancy Reduction Program in Bakersfield, CA, Pablo Elementary School in Ronan, MT, and Wilson High School in Tacoma, WA.<sup>52</sup>

## SAFE PASSAGE PROGRAM

Research has shown that, in certain neighborhoods the daily commute to school can be dangerous for students and their families. Consequently, neighborhoods in which crime occurs in the vicinity of the schools have higher rates of chronic absenteeism, as parents keep young children at home and adolescents stay away from school for fear of harm. In an attempt to reduce crime around the schools, Chicago Public Schools developed the Safe Passage Program, which consisted of hiring adult monitors and placing them along the streets and paths around select high schools and elementary schools. Patrolling of the school vicinity is supported online through a program website that provides tips to parent and students regarding safe ways of getting

to school when walking or driving and by bus and bicycle. In addition, supplementary information is available on the website about safety measures in the home, responding to unexpected situations, and creating safe environments for students in their communities. An impact evaluation of the program showed that, over a one-year period (SY 2013–14) there was a significant difference in the reduction of crime between schools with “Safe Schools” programs and those without.<sup>53</sup> Other school districts that participate in Safe Passage Programs include Springfield, MA, and Baltimore, MD.<sup>54</sup>

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### EXTENDED LEARNING PROGRAMS/SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM

Extended learning includes any educational program for students that occurs outside of regular school operations. Extracurricular activities and clubs, before and after school programs, and summer learning are examples of extended learning that can aid in reducing chronic absenteeism by “creating a sense of belonging, expanding connections to caring adults and offering engaging academic enrichment.”<sup>55</sup> Also, extended programs can occupy students’ time before and after regular school hours, giving parents and guardians the peace of mind that their child is in a safe and enriching environment.<sup>56</sup>

One example of a successful extended learning effort is The Beacon Initiative in San Francisco, CA. Researchers reported positive outcomes such as improved academic performance and a decrease in student absences from school.<sup>57</sup> For instance, the Beacon Initiative has established several Teen Centers at participating schools. At these Centers, students receive academic support in the form of tutoring and homework assistance, participate in cultural, artistic, and recreational activities, and engage in youth leadership development, job training, and civic organizing. A 2012 study found that “high-level Beacon participants as a group had 43% fewer school absences than low-level participants.” Furthermore, 73% of students surveyed indicated that they planned to attend school daily as a result of the Beacon Initiative.<sup>58</sup> From these examples, it is evident that extended learning is a promising practice that reduces chronic absenteeism rates. Similar programs that have yielded positive results include the Voyager Program in Dallas, TX, the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods program in Multnomah County, OR, and the Lighted Schools program in Waco, TX.<sup>59</sup>

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### INCENTIVES

Offering incentives is another promising practice that can reduce chronic absenteeism. This method is based on operant conditioning theories—namely, positive reinforcement—in which students are offered rewards to encourage a desired behavioral change.<sup>60</sup> In this case, attendance is incentivized to decrease chronic absenteeism. Incentives can range from praise and public recognition to material or monetary rewards.<sup>61</sup>

Incentive programs can be implemented in various ways. One study recommends that, along with providing material rewards such as gift certificates schools should promote a consistent message that daily attendance is important, students are wanted, and absences are noticed.<sup>62</sup> Another study finds that successful programs are coordinated efforts among students, parents/guardians, teachers, and administrators in which schools continuously monitor student progress.<sup>63</sup> Schools may also make contracts with students in which students agree to attend school for a set number of days consecutively and are rewarded once the contract is fulfilled.<sup>64</sup> Regardless of the method, policies must be outlined and communicated clearly to students, parents/guardians, teachers, and support staff.<sup>65</sup>

Findings on incentive programs are mixed. One study reports that 17 out of 21 students participating in an incentive program in Marion County, FL, successfully decreased absences from 45 days to 24 days over a two-year period.<sup>66</sup> However, other studies report only slight reductions in chronic absenteeism.<sup>67</sup> Despite mixed findings, researchers agree that incentives were most successful when used in combination with other strategies aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism.<sup>68</sup> For example, Cleveland’s “Get 2 School. You Can Make It” campaign found positive results in using various incentives—giveaways, scholarship opportunities, and recognition—alongside awareness initiatives, mentoring, and community partnerships.<sup>69</sup> In 2015, Cleveland schools decreased their chronic absence from 35% to 29% within a single school year.<sup>70</sup> Other cities and school districts that have had promising results from incentive programs include Washington, DC, the Opportunity NYC program in New York, NY, Corona-Norco Unified School District in Riverside County, CA, and the Be There Campaign in Pittsburgh Public Schools in Pittsburgh, PA.<sup>71</sup>

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## CONCLUSION

Student absenteeism is an old problem that is now receiving renewed attention due to new ESSA requirements, the development of a shared definition of chronic absenteeism, and advances in technology that have facilitated data collection and interpretation. The negative consequences of absenteeism affect individual students, school systems, and, eventually, society, when absenteeism results in students dropping out of school. The profile of students with high levels of chronic absenteeism has not changed over the years—they are students of color, students with disabilities, and homeless students. It is also the case that absenteeism is highest in the early grades and at the high school level. Under Title II of ESSA, districts have the flexibility to use Title II funds to address chronic absenteeism. As a result, they are identifying research-based interventions aimed at reducing absenteeism. While the findings in the research literature are mixed, there are examples of interventions with evidence of success in reducing absenteeism. A select number are described briefly in this Research Brief. Several program features are common across programs, including tracking student absences, engaging parents and guardians, cross-sector community collaboration, and individual attention and services to students at risk. The interventions described here and those documented in the broader best practices literature should serve as a point of departure for districts and schools as they address the challenge of chronic absenteeism.

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All links are current as of April 2, 2018.

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