



# Making ESSA's Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap

## *Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism*

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### Abstract

This policy brief is part of a larger research report, *Making ESSA's Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap*, that describes how states are using opportunities in ESSA to better support historically underserved students through the thoughtful selection of specific equity measures in their accountability and improvement systems. To this end, the full report suggests focusing attention on students furthest from opportunity by taking steps to

- reduce rates of student suspension;
- build a positive school climate;
- reduce rates of chronic absenteeism;
- implement an extended-year graduation rate; and
- expand access to a college- and career-ready curriculum.

This brief focuses on state efforts to **eliminate chronic absenteeism**.

For the full report, go to <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/essa-equity-promise>.

### Acknowledgments

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### Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in December 2015, gives states the opportunity to create new approaches to school accountability and continuous improvement. These approaches, if informed by well-chosen indicators of school opportunity and performance, have the potential to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for historically underserved students.

Along with measures of academic achievement (student performance on state assessments in English language arts and mathematics, which may include growth in proficiency), graduation rates, and English language proficiency, ESSA requires states to include at least one indicator of school quality or student success (SQSS).

All indicators must provide valid, reliable, and comparable information within each state's accountability system. States then use school performance on these indicators to **identify** schools for either comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) or targeted support and improvement (TSI). Districts with such schools can use data from statewide indicators to inform the needs assessments and school improvement plans required under ESSA. States can also select additional indicators to use as part of their **broader continuous school improvement efforts** across all schools, regardless of identification status.

Now that all states have received approval from the U.S. Department of Education for their plans for statewide accountability and improvement systems, a number of states are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by ESSA to measure the extent to which their students are supported and provided with equitable educational opportunities.

This brief specifies which states are making efforts to eliminate chronic absenteeism in their ESSA plans and describes how some states intend to measure and use information from this indicator to create more equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students.

## Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism

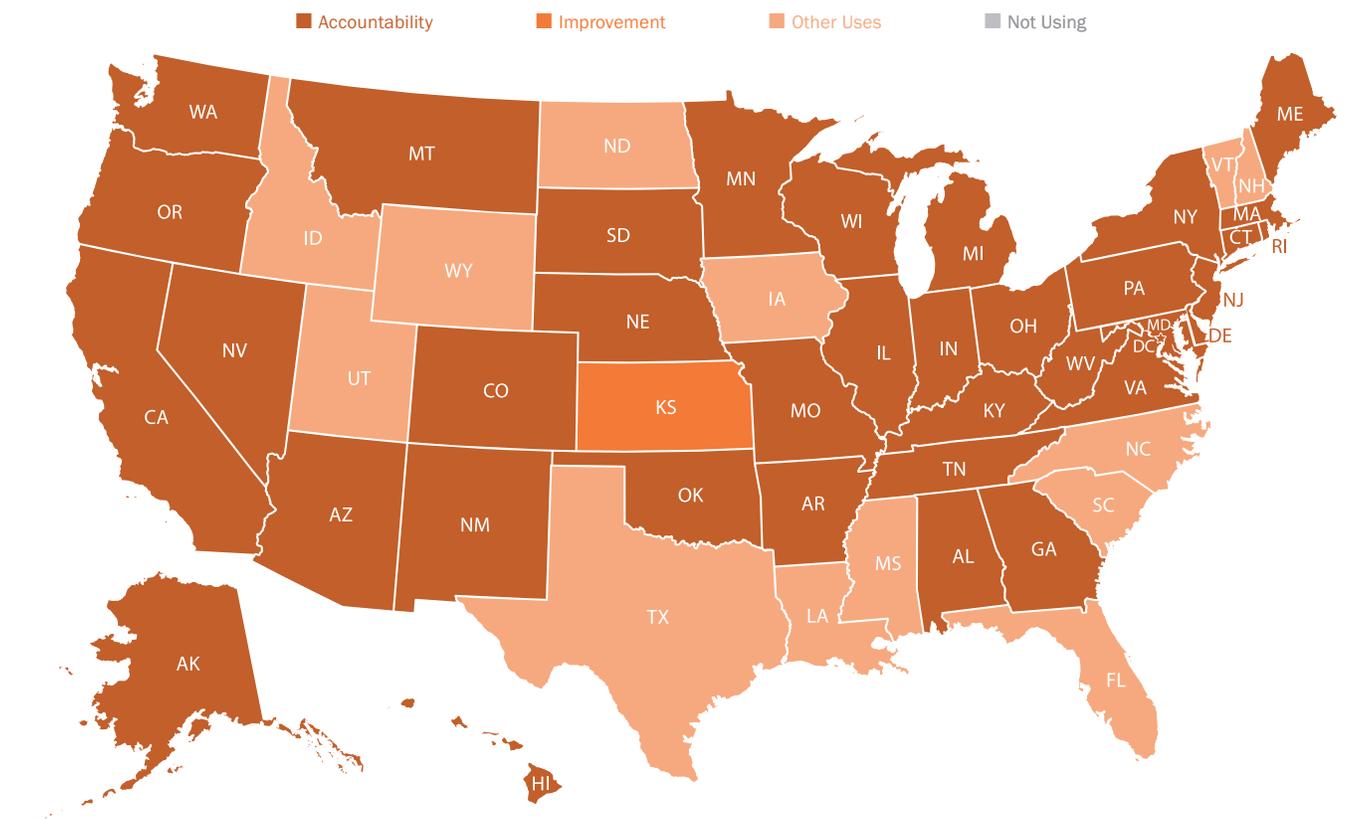
Chronic absenteeism—often defined as missing 10% or more of the school year—negatively impacts students’ school performance, high school graduation rates, and students’ overall success in adulthood. For example, students who are chronically absent score lower on tests, on average, than students with better attendance, after controlling for race or socioeconomic status.<sup>1</sup> Chronic absenteeism in early grades has been found to predict students’ levels of success in later grades and the likelihood of dropping out of school. Students of color are disproportionately chronically absent compared to their White peers. Latinx students are 11% more likely to be chronically absent, African American students are 36% more likely, and Native American and Pacific Islander students are over 65% more likely to miss significant school time.<sup>2</sup>

Ensuring that all students receive the support they need to remain present and engaged in learning throughout their k–12 experience begins with obtaining an accurate picture of how much instructional time students are losing and why. Because individual chronically absent students are out of school on different days, chronic absences could be masked by average daily attendance data. For example, a school with 90% average daily attendance for the year might have 30% or more of its students chronically absent. Chronic absenteeism is a more accurate measure for tracking individual student attendance.

Data from this indicator can illuminate patterns in student absences by school, grade, and student subgroup. Once staff identify the reasons behind these patterns, they can implement interventions that address issues ranging from health concerns, student disengagement, anxiety, and fear of bullying to lack of transportation, homelessness, and students’ efforts to help their families by working or caring for children at home. Schools have reduced chronic absenteeism by partnering disengaged students with mentors or arranging for teacher home visits to build relationships and develop solutions between students, parents, and schools. Chronic absenteeism data can also inform systems for teachers and administrators to intervene early when students miss class.<sup>3</sup>

Thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia use a measure of chronic absenteeism in their accountability and improvement systems (see Figure 1). Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia are using this as an indicator to help identify schools for support and improvement. One additional state, Kansas, is using rates of chronic absenteeism to inform efforts in schools already identified for support and improvement. The remaining 14 states are reporting rates of chronic absenteeism as required by ESSA.

**Figure 1**  
**States Incorporating a Chronic Absenteeism Rate Indicator for School Identification or Improvement Purposes in Their Statewide Accountability Systems**



**Selected State Approaches: Connecticut, Indiana, and Virginia**

**Connecticut** includes chronic absenteeism as a k–12 accountability measure and set a goal of cutting average statewide rates to 5%.<sup>4</sup> To do so, the state uses a multitiered approach that emphasizes early prevention, such as providing mentors who serve as caring adults who remind students of the importance of school attendance and create tailored attendance plans. Students who need more intensive interventions receive case management. Connecticut collects chronic absenteeism data and makes it publicly available through its reporting system and has built in checks to ensure the quality of the data. These checks include creating district and school attendance review teams, conducting data audits, and routinely analyzing attendance data.<sup>5</sup>

As a part of its federal accountability system, **Indiana** uses a chronic absenteeism indicator to measure both the share of students who are attending school regularly and those who are improving their attendance. Schools are provided with individual student data so they are able to intervene with students whose attendance is low and not improving.<sup>6</sup> Indiana’s chronic absenteeism indicator also rewards schools for students who meet a statewide definition of a “model attendee,” which is defined by the state as either a student who attends at least 96% of the days he or she was enrolled during the school year (persistent attendance) or a student who attends 3% more days than he or she did in the previous school year (improved attendance). The state’s goal is for at least 80% of students to be model attendees. As is the case with the definition of the model attendee, to control for consistency across the state, Indiana created a uniform definition of what counts as an absence. The state’s

uniform definition of “attendance” includes being physically present in school or at another location at which the school’s educational program is being conducted (for example, a field trip or other school-sanctioned event).

Like many states, **Virginia** is using chronic absenteeism as an SQSS indicator for all levels. Based on research, the state set a long-term statewide goal for all students and all subgroups to have an average chronic absenteeism rate of no more than 10% by 2024. (In the 2014–15 school year, the statewide average chronic absenteeism rate was 18.3%.) Additional research regarding chronic absenteeism in Virginia suggests that in order to achieve equitable attendance among all subgroups, districts have to focus resources on high school students, low-performing students, and students who move between schools.<sup>7</sup>

Virginia is working to achieve this goal through a partnership with [Attendance Works](#) by creating a set of online modules that help teachers and administrators stress the importance of attendance in their communications to students and parents.<sup>8</sup> Staff trainings to identify strategies that can improve attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism are also planned. In its data analysis, Virginia will focus on the absenteeism of students experiencing homelessness to identify additional supports for these students and their families. Additional supports include providing access to school social workers, school psychologists, and coordinators to help homeless students attend school regularly, especially during times those students are most likely to be chronically absent, such as when they are transitioning between schools.<sup>9</sup>

## Policy Considerations for Implementation

States and districts can better measure and help reduce chronic absenteeism by:

- Creating clear definitions of what counts as an absence. Having a uniform definition allows for easier data comparison and analysis. This includes developing and maintaining a consistent definition of partial-day absence and how it counts toward overall attendance. For example, if one district aggregates class periods missed and another district does not keep track of periods missed unless a student has missed a half day or more, then comparisons may misrepresent student attendance patterns.<sup>10</sup>
- Including both in-school and out-of-school suspensions in the definition of what counts as an absence, because both result in lost learning time.
- Ensuring that rates of absences are measured and patterns of chronic absence are addressed at all grade levels.
- Incorporating chronic absenteeism data into early warning systems that also measure discipline incidents, course performance, and credit accumulation. These systems allow staff to identify students at risk of dropping out and to examine performance on each of these indicators within the context of other related indicators in order to diagnose concerns and provide timely interventions.<sup>11</sup>
- Sponsoring professional development and forming communities of practice among educators to share resources on how to connect schools with integrated student supports, develop reliable means of monitoring attendance, and create schoolwide systems to reduce chronic absence.

## Resources on Chronic Absenteeism

### Portraits of Change: Aligning School and Community Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence (Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center)

This brief provides a national and state analysis of schools facing high levels of chronic absence, discusses the implications for state and local action, and provides examples of initiatives to reduce chronic absence.<sup>12</sup>

### Chronic Absenteeism: A Key Indicator of Student Success (Education Commission of the States)

This guide highlights state and local efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism and provides policy recommendations to improve the efficacy of measuring attendance.<sup>13</sup>

### Addressing the Problem of Chronic Absenteeism: A Promising School-Community Partnership (Communities In Schools)

This brief presents examples of how school districts organize and use integrated student supports to improve student attendance.<sup>14</sup>

## Endnotes

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12. Chang, H. (2017). *Portraits of change*. San Francisco, CA: Attendance Works.
13. Rafa, A. (2017). *Chronic absenteeism: A key indicator of student success*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.
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# Chronic Absenteeism Indicator Usage by State

The use of multiple measures in **school accountability and improvement systems** under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers states the chance to gather and respond to information that is meaningfully connected to student opportunity and success. As states implement ESSA, using the information from these systems, policymakers should continue to engage with educators, parents, community-based organizations, and other education stakeholders to improve their efforts to ensure that students furthest from opportunity can graduate from high school fully prepared for college, career, and civic engagement.

## HOW STATES ARE USING THE INDICATOR:

**Accountability:** States using one or more measures of the indicator to identify schools for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) or targeted support and improvement (TSI) in their accountability systems.

**Improvement:** States using one or more measures of the indicator to inform improvement efforts in identified schools or as part of a broader system of continuous improvement across schools.

**Other Uses:** Additional state efforts to measure or improve school performance on this indicator.

STATE	INDICATOR USE	DESCRIPTION OF USE
Alabama	Accountability	Alabama's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 15 or more days per school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 28
Alaska	Accountability	Alaska's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 32
Arizona	Accountability	Arizona's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 29
Arkansas	Accountability	Arkansas' chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentages of students who are absent less than 5%, between 5% and 10%, and 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 51
California	Accountability	California's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students in grades k-8 who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 50
Colorado	Accountability	Colorado's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students in elementary and middle school who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pp. 64-65
Connecticut	Accountability	Connecticut's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 42
Delaware	Accountability	Delaware's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 55
Florida	Other Uses: Data Reported	Florida collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system. Florida measures chronic absenteeism as the percentage of students with attendance below 90% and uses the data as part of its early warning system to support students. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 33

<b>STATE</b>	<b>INDICATOR USE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION OF USE</b>
<b>Georgia</b>	Accountability	Georgia's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent less than 10% of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 30
<b>Hawaii</b>	Accountability	Hawaii's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 15 or more days per school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 45
<b>Idaho</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported	Idaho collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.
<b>Illinois</b>	Accountability	Illinois' chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 54
<b>Indiana</b>	Accountability	Indiana's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are present for at least 96% of the schools days per school year and students who demonstrate increases in days attended from the prior to current school year. A demonstrated increase is defined as an increase of at least 3% in days attended of the student's enrollment from the previous school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pp. 44–45
<b>Iowa</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported	Iowa collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.
<b>Kansas</b>	Improvement	Kansas collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA. Kansas expects schools identified for support and improvement to demonstrate a decrease in chronic absenteeism in order to exit identification status. Kansas does not describe how it will measure chronic absenteeism. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 44
<b>Kentucky</b>	Accountability	Kentucky's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentages of students who are absent less than 5%, between 6% and 10%, and 16% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 63
<b>Louisiana</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported and Resources Available	Louisiana collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system. In addition, Louisiana makes support available for a collaborative planning process at the school level that includes an ongoing review of chronic absenteeism data and planning for responding to any issues. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 31
<b>Maine</b>	Accountability	Maine's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 40
<b>Maryland</b>	Accountability	Maryland's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 28
<b>Massachusetts</b>	Accountability	Massachusetts' chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 47

<b>STATE</b>	<b>INDICATOR USE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION OF USE</b>
<b>Michigan</b>	Accountability	Michigan's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 35
<b>Minnesota</b>	Accountability	Minnesota's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are present 90% or less of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 34
<b>Mississippi</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported	Mississippi collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.
<b>Missouri</b>	Accountability	Missouri's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are present at least 90% of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 27
<b>Montana</b>	Accountability	Montana's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 5% or less of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 25
<b>Nebraska</b>	Accountability	Nebraska's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 84
<b>Nevada</b>	Accountability	Nevada's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pp. 48–49
<b>New Hampshire</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported	New Hampshire collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.
<b>New Jersey</b>	Accountability	New Jersey's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 51
<b>New Mexico</b>	Accountability	New Mexico's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10 or more days per school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pp. 86–87
<b>New York</b>	Accountability	New York's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 62
<b>North Carolina</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported and Considering for Accountability and Improvement Purposes	North Carolina collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system. North Carolina does not indicate how it will measure chronic absenteeism, but it will use rates of chronic absenteeism to determine whether support in this area is needed as part of its approach to overall school improvement and will consider including it for school identification and improvement purposes. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 50 and pg. 82
<b>North Dakota</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported	North Dakota collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.

<b>STATE</b>	<b>INDICATOR USE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION OF USE</b>
<b>Ohio</b>	Accountability	Ohio defines chronic absenteeism as the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. School performance on this indicator is based on whether the state-set benchmark has been met or whether the school meets an improvement standard by reducing the percentage of students who are chronically absent by at least 3 percentage points from one school year to the next. ESSA State Plan PDF pp. 37–39
<b>Oklahoma</b>	Accountability	Oklahoma’s chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students enrolled for a full academic year who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 82
<b>Oregon</b>	Accountability	Oregon’s chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 46
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	Accountability	Pennsylvania’s chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 53
<b>Rhode Island</b>	Accountability	Rhode Island’s chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. Rhode Island also incorporates the percentage of students who are taught by a chronically absent teacher, measured by the teacher missing 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pp. 31–32
<b>South Carolina</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported	South Carolina collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.
<b>South Dakota</b>	Accountability	South Dakota’s chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students in grades k–8 who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pp. 31–32
<b>Tennessee</b>	Accountability	Tennessee’s chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 84
<b>Texas</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported	Texas collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.
<b>Utah</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported	Utah collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.
<b>Vermont</b>	Other Uses: Data Reported	Vermont collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.
<b>Virginia</b>	Accountability	Virginia’s chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pp. 22–23
<b>Washington</b>	Accountability	Washington’s chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students in grades k–12 who are absent 10% or more of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 37

STATE	INDICATOR USE	DESCRIPTION OF USE
Washington, DC	Accountability	The District of Columbia's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are present for 90% or more of the school year and growth in the percentage of students present more than 90% of the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pp. 20–21
West Virginia	Accountability	West Virginia's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of students who are present for 90% or more of instructional days during the school year. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 25
Wisconsin	Accountability	Wisconsin's chronic absenteeism indicator measures the percentage of all students who are absent 10% or more of the school year. Performance on this indicator will be based on 3 years of school data. ESSA State Plan PDF pg. 40
Wyoming	Other Uses: Data Reported	Wyoming collects and reports data on chronic absenteeism rates as required by ESSA; however, it is not a formal indicator in its accountability and improvement system.