Policy Brief

Improving Student Achievement by Addressing Chronic Absence

Chronic absence, defined as missing 10 percent or more of school over the course of the school year for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences, is a proven early warning sign for both academic failure and dropping out of school. However, attendance tracking systems are most often used to determine the percentage of students who show up each day at school (average daily attendance) and to track unexcused absences in order to fulfill legal obligations to address truancy. By also identifying chronic absence, school districts and county offices of education can use the data to make decisions about school improvement efforts and to target increasingly scarce resources. Early identification of attendance problems allows schools to help struggling students before more obvious indicators of academic failure appear and intervention becomes more difficult and more costly to undertake.

Extent of the problem

Starting in the early grades, chronic absence can reach remarkably high levels. National data suggest one out of 10 kindergartners are chronically absent.[1] Absenteeism can reach even higher levels in particular schools and districts. It can affect as many as one out of four students in grades K-3 in a single district and as many as half of the students in a particular elementary school.[2]

A common pattern is for chronic absence to be high in kindergarten, decrease by grade 3, but then start to increase substantially, especially during the transition to middle and high school.[3] Unfortunately, the reductions in chronic absence that occur later in high school are often not a positive sign but rather an indicator that the students with the worst attendance have already dropped out.

The focus in many districts/COEs on collecting ADA data can cover up large numbers of chronically absent students. For example, in a school with 200 students and a 95 percent ADA, 30 percent (60) of the students could be missing a month of school over the course of the school

Definitions

Chronic absence differs from truancy in that truancy generally refers only to unexcused absence while chronic absence may be for any reason. In 2010, the Governor signed legislation which defines "chronic absentee" for purposes of reporting student attendance within the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (SB 1357) and defines "chronic truant" for purposes of establishing consequences for parents of chronic truants in grades K-8 (SB 1317).

Chronic absentee: A student who is absent for any reason, whether excused or unexcused, on 10 percent or more of the school days in the school year (Education Code 60901)

Truant: A student who is absent from school without a valid excuse three full days in one school year and/or is tardy or absent for any 30-minute period during the school day without a valid excuse on three occasions in one school year (Education Code 48260)

Habitual truant: A student who has been reported as a truant three or more times within the same school year (Education Code 48262, 48264.5)

Chronic truant: A student who has been absent from school without a valid excuse for 10 percent or more of the school days in one school year, from the date of enrollment to the current date (Education Code 48263.6)

year. Aggregate data do not reveal whether most students are missing a few days or whether a small but still significant minority of students are experiencing excessive absences. At the same time, truancy figures miss chronic absence, especially among young students who typically do not stay home without the knowledge of an adult.

The link to learning

It is important to address chronic absenteeism because research confirms that students do worse in school if they are not in class to learn. Along with behavior problems and failure of core academic courses, chronic absenteeism is one of three critical early warning signs for dropout.

An analysis of chronically absent kindergarten students revealed a lower subsequent academic performance in grade 1 than their peers, with reading scores for Latino children the most affected. Among poor children who lack the resources to make up for time on task, chronic kindergarten absences translated into lower achievement in grade 5.[4] By grade 6, chronic absence can be associated with dropping out of school.[5] By grade 9, missing 20 percent of school can be a better predictor of dropout than grade 8 test scores.[6] A study in the Los Angeles Unified School District found that students who were chronically absent in grade 9 had subsequent graduation rates of only 17 percent.[7]

When chronic absence reaches high levels, it affects all students as teachers must spend time reviewing concepts for students who missed the lesson in the first place. It also decreases the educational resources available to all students in the district/COE by reducing state funding which is distributed on the basis of ADA.

Addressing chronic absence

Chronic absence reflects the degree to which schools, communities and families adequately address the needs of children and youth. For example, school attendance suffers when families struggle to keep up with the routine of school in conjunction with a lack of reliable transportation, working long hours in poorly paid jobs with little flexibility, unstable and unaffordable housing, inadequate health care or escalating community violence. A student's attendance also can suffer when parents do not realize the importance of their children going to school regularly, especially for parents who may not have had a positive school experience themselves.

Therefore, it is critical that schools and communities work together to ensure students attend school regularly. The most effective efforts include schools, community-based organizations and government agencies working collaboratively to:

- Use data on chronic absence to identify patterns, set targets for reduction, and monitor progress over time.

- Actively and consistently communicate the importance of regular school attendance.

- Provide rich, engaging, more personalized learning experiences with stable, experienced, and skilled teachers; actively engage parents in their children's education; and offer enriching, quality after-school experiences.

- Provide early childhood experiences that prepare children and families for formal education.

- Revise and adopt disciplinary policies and practices that ensure students are not suspended or expelled unnecessarily for nonviolent offenses, including skipping school.

- Reach out to families and youth when students begin to show patterns of excessive absence.

- Examine factors contributing to chronic absence, especially from parent and youth perspectives.

- Pay attention to attendance in the early grades and throughout a student's academic career, particularly during the transitions from elementary school to middle school to high school.

- Combine strategies to improve attendance among all students, with special interventions targeting those who are chronically absent.

- Offer positive supports to promote school attendance before implementing responses that are punitive or that require legal action.

Districts/COEs can also take advantage of the newly revised School Attendance Review Board guidelines which now recommend reporting on chronic absence in addition to truancy and the other attendance data typically reviewed.

Role of the board

There are opportunities for the governing board to address chronic absence through each of its major areas of responsibility:

Setting direction

The board can incorporate a focus on improving attendance and addressing chronic absence within the long-term vision and goals, strategic plan and other key documents of the district/COE. When forming partnerships with community-based organizations or government agencies to address chronic absence, the board can participate in the development of a collaborative vision statement to ensure that the work of the initiative is designed to support its core academic mission.

Establishing structure

Working with the superintendent, the board can ensure that structures are in place that reinforce the importance of attendance. The board can adopt and align policies that address attendance accounting and verification of excused absences, processes for identifying chronic absentees and truants, strategies for addressing the factors contributing to chronic absence, and expectations for evaluating and reporting on progress in improving student attendance (e.g., see CSBA sample board policies and administrative regulations BP/AR 5113 – Absences and Excuses and BP/AR 5113.1 – Chronic Absence and Truancy).

In addition, when adopting the budget, the board should consider the level of funding, staffing and other resources that will be utilized to track attendance data and implement prevention and intervention strategies. District/COE staff should have the resources necessary to develop and maintain longitudinal data systems to identify individual students who are chronically absent and to track patterns of chronic absence in order to determine which schools have the highest percentage of chronic absentees and which student subgroups have the highest rates of chronic absence. Such data can be used to target funding and resources to the schools and students with the greatest need. As appropriate, financial incentives might be offered to schools for improving attendance and reducing chronic absence.

Providing support

The board must provide support to the superintendent and staff in carrying out the direction provided by the board. To support its priority on improving student attendance, the board might:

- Ensure that the superintendent has assigned staff to monitor student attendance for early warning signs.

- Invest in professional development to help teachers, school administrators and attendance supervisors understand the factors contributing to chronic absence in their community.

- Require schools to address high levels of chronic absence in their school improvement plans.

- Publicly recognize successful programs that are making a difference in reducing chronic absence.

Ensuring accountability

The board has a responsibility to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its attendance policies. The board and superintendent can ensure that attendance data are used to calculate, analyze and publicly report on multiple measures of attendance including chronic absence, average daily attendance, and truancy for every school. The board should ask to see overall absence data as well as absence data displayed by grade and by student subgroups. Access to this information should also be provided to site-level staff including principals, teachers and counselors. The board might request that statistics on attendance be included on data dashboards and school report cards. The tracking of this information may be further bolstered by the implementation of SB 1357, which adds attendance data to California's longitudinal student data system, contingent upon federal funding.

Acting as community leaders

In their role as community leaders, board members can establish partnerships with parents and community agencies to identify barriers to attendance and gather resources to overcome them. In some communities where violence may be a challenge, the district/COE might partner with parents, neighbors and law enforcement to organize safe passages to and from school. In other communities, asthma, poor oral health or other chronic illnesses may be a barrier to attendance that can be addressed through partnerships with community health clinics or other

agencies that connect families to needed health education and medical care. Regardless of the specific barrier, engaging parents and community members is a key strategy to ensuring that families are part of developing and implementing the solutions to chronic absence.

Case Studies

Palm Springs Unified School District—A Systemic Approach

The effort undertaken by Palm Springs Unified School District to address chronic absence offers an excellent example of systemic approach to improving attendance. The district's strategy includes:

- Making improved attendance a district priority, including incorporating improved attendance into personnel reviews for administrators.

- Offering fiscal incentives to schools that improve attendance. At the beginning of each school year, schools receive a bonus if they increase attendance over the average of the previous three years. Because of these incentives, schools engage in a wide array of activities aimed at creating a culture of regular attendance among their students.

- Employing a cadre of community attendance aides to engage in targeted outreach and support to chronically absent students. These aides also support student attendance by building collaborations with other agencies and encouraging families to apply for the free and reduced-price lunch program. Because an evaluation demonstrates that the attendance aides recoup a significant portion of their cost in improved attendance among the students they serve, these positions have survived recent budget cuts.

- A well-functioning Student Attendance Review Board infrastructure.

- A weekly report provided to all principals from Student Services of students who have had five consecutive days of absence for any reason.

- Close attention and monitoring, at the site level, of the status of students exiting the system. Each site is required to submit a monthly report to Student Services that reflects the students who have exited and the status of their student record request from receiving school districts.

The district credits these reforms with helping to reduce the district drop-out rates.

San Diego Unified School District— "Attendance is Everything"

The San Diego Unified School District has initiated a campaign to address student attendance called "Attendance is Everything." The effort is headed by the district's attendance office, and a dedicated website has been created to provide facts, resources, reporting, forms and even a district map that demonstrates where pockets of chronic absence occur.

The services provided by this office include calculating and reporting ADA to the state, providing training in attendance and enrollment procedures for school sites, ensuring compliance for annual instructional minutes and providing support for students with chronic attendance problems via the SARB process.

The Attendance is Everything campaign has included a newsletter focusing specifically on this issue, which covers critical topics such as:

- Patterns and trends in attendance.

- The importance of attendance both for the financial health of the district and for the ability of students to learn and succeed.

- The implications and unintended consequences of pulling a student out of school for a full day for a medical appointment.

- The district's efforts to provide saturday school and why this is an important effort to bolster attendance numbers.

- Best practices of individual school sites and the successes of those schools that are making positive progress toward increasing attendance.

Baltimore Public Schools—Comprehensive Student Attendance Initiative

The benefits of a collaborative, comprehensive approach to improving student attendance are demonstrated by the impressive impact of Baltimore, Maryland's Student Attendance Work Group. In Baltimore, data showed one out of six elementary students was missing at least 20 days of class. The rates were even higher among older students: 34 percent of middle schoolers and 44 percent of high school students were chronically absent. By calling attention to these data, the Open Society Institute spurred the creation of this city-wide attendance work group, now co-led by the Baltimore City Schools and the Mayor's Office.

Key strategies adopted as part of this initiative include:

- Implementing new, more detailed school attendance reporting on multiple measures of attendance, including chronic absence, truancy, ADA, good attendance (missing 5 percent or less of school during the year) and high attendance (missing less than five days of school).

- Decreasing unnecessary suspensions.

- Reducing the number of school transitions by creating schools housing grades K-8 and 6-12.

- Creating more personalized school environments by lowering the size of the student body in remaining middle schools.

- Increasing student and family options by creating and supporting innovation, contract, charter and transformation schools.

- Supporting school-level work (e.g., outreach to families with chronic absence, attendance incentives, attendance monitors).

- Convening multiple agencies to work together to improve school attendance among high-risk populations (e.g,. students involved in foster care, juvenile justice or experiencing homelessness).

- Maximizing student participation in health services.

- Launching a city-wide marketing campaign to engage students, parents and the community in the issue of attendance and garner their active participation with improving attendance in Baltimore.

Over the course of three years, the initiative had the greatest impact on middle school chronic absence, lowering levels from 33.7 to 18.6 percent. Chronic absence in elementary school also decreased from 14.0 to 11.3 percent. Reducing chronic absence among high school students, which continues to hover at 40 percent, has been more difficult. One challenge identified through conversations with young people is that many do not perceive regular attendance in school as important, even though developing the habit of going to class every day is a skill that can help students to persist through higher education and succeed in the workplace Collecting multiple measures of attendance, including learning that far fewer high school students are high attenders (missing less than five days of school), has been essential in determining which strategies will ensure that more students attend school and ultimately graduate.

Conclusion

Making headway on this critical issue starts with the simple act of counting in order to determine if and where chronic absence is a problem. Schools and communities can use data on chronic absence to trigger early interventions aimed at helping to ensure every child begins school with an equal opportunity to reach his or her potential.

Resources

California School Boards Association provides sample board policies, policy briefs, publications and other resources on a variety of topics related to effective governance, student wellness, school safety and student achievement.
www.csba.org

Attendance Counts is a national and state initiative that promotes awareness of the important role that school attendance plays in achieving academic success. It aims to ensure that every school in every state not only tracks chronic absence data for its individual students but also intervenes to help those students and schools.
www.attendancecounts.org

California Association of Supervisors of Child Welfare and Attendance provides a support network, advocacy and professional development opportunities for supervisors of child welfare and attendance.
www.cascwa.org

California Department of Education provides resources to support local efforts to improve student attendance, including the *School Attendance Improvement Handbook* and *School Attendance Review Board Handbook.*
www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai

California Dropout Research Project was established in 2006 to synthesize existing research and undertake new research to inform policymakers, educators and the general public about the nature of the dropout crisis in California and to help the state develop a meaningful policy agenda to address the problem.
www.cdrp.ucsb.edu

National Center for Children in Poverty is the nation's leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health and well-being of America's low-income families and children. NCCP uses research to inform policy and practice with the goal of ensuring positive outcomes for the next generation.
www.nccp.org

Endnotes

1   Romero, M., & Lee, Y. (2007). *A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades: Technical Report*. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty. www.nccp.org/publications/pub_771.html

2   Chang, H.N., & Romero, M. (2008, September). *Present, Engaged and Accounted for: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades.* New York: National Center for Children in Poverty. www.nccp.org/publications/pub_837.html

3   Oakland Unified School District student attendance data, 2006 to 2010.

4   Chang, H.N., & Romero, M. (2008, September). *Present, Engaged and Accounted for: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades.* New York: National Center for Children in Poverty. www.nccp.org/publications/pub_837.html

5   Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & MacIver, D.J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223-235. http://web.jhu.edu/bin/q/b/PreventingStudentDisengagement.pdf

6   Allensworth, E.M., & Easton, J.Q. (2007). *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year.* Chicago: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research. http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/07%20What%20Matters%20Final.pdf

7   Silver, D., Saunders, M., & Zarate, E. (2008, June). *What Factors Predict High School Graduation in Los Angeles Unified School District. California Dropout Research Project Report #14.* www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/dropouts/pubs_reports.htm