



# Missing school matters

According to recently released data, 6.5 million U.S. public school students are chronically absent. Here's what the problem looks like — and what we can do about it.



**By Robert Balfanz**

The U.S. education system is based on a comforting assumption. Absent an illness or the occasional family event, we tend to think that preK-12 students are in school every day. School district instructional pacing guides assume this, as do accountability systems and program evaluations. Faced with certain issues — such as why a particular class didn't learn as much as another, why the desired amount of material wasn't taught, or why the education improvement effort didn't have much effect — we seldom ask whether students for whom the effort was intended were in school often enough to benefit from it.

Chronic absenteeism plays a much bigger role in our education outcomes than is commonly perceived. For students to learn, instruction to be effective, and progress to occur, students need to be in school regularly. Yet until this year, the United States has never measured how many students are chronically absent, and only a handful of states have done so on their own. What is not measured is often not noticed. And that's been the case with chronic absenteeism.

## **What is chronic absenteeism?**

Chronic absenteeism is increasingly being defined as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason. Some states have established thresholds that typically range from missing 15 to 21 days. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights survey uses 15 or more days as its metric. Whatever the cut point, chronic absenteeism is determined by measuring how many days of school a student misses in a year or the year to date for any reason. As such, it counts both excused and unexcused absences, as well as any days a student might have missed for being suspended.

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This is different from how attendance has traditionally been reported. To this day, schools and districts report average daily attendance — the percentage of enrolled students, on average, who are in school each day. They also often report truancy rates, which are tied to legal statutes and defined as a certain number of unexcused absences during a specific time period. The number of unexcused absences that makes a student truant varies widely by states and districts, as does the extent to which courts are used to fine or incarcerate truant students or their parents. Current evidence suggests that these punitive responses to absenteeism have limited effects.

### **Why have we not routinely measured it?**

Chronic absenteeism is typically not reported by schools or districts nor is it well-estimated by either average daily attendance or truancy rates. In fact, commonly used attendance measures can mask attendance challenges. A school could have an average daily attendance rate of 92% and still have 20% of its students missing a month or more of school. This is because different students on different days are making up the 92%. In preK, kindergarten, and the elementary grades, reporting only on truancy rates greatly underestimates chronic absenteeism because, at these grade levels, most absences are excused. To understand the true percentage of students chronically absent at these levels, we would need numbers for both excused and unexcused absences.

Most schools place the number of days a student has missed each quarter and the cumulative amount year to date on the report cards they send home to parents. They don't, however, aggregate or report these data for the entire school or district. So although that information exists in almost every school in the United States, by and large, schools are not using it to measure chronic absenteeism.

### **How many students are chronically absent?**

For the first time in its 2014 survey, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights asked schools to report how many students missed 15 or more days of school for any reason and to disaggregate these data by race, ethnicity, students with disabilities, and English language learners. The results, released in June 2016, were staggering. More than 6 million public school students (13%) don't attend school regularly — that is, they're missing at least three weeks of school. This climbs to close

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to 20% for high school students and for black and Hispanic students, and to 25% for students with disabilities.

This is an underestimate. Some chronically absent students weren't counted, either because their school didn't respond to the question on the survey or because there were some first-year glitches in the schools' understanding of what they were supposed to report. For example, even though schools were instructed to count days missed for any reason, many of their data-keeping systems don't count suspended students as missing school. Moreover, when students transfer, the time lost between leaving one school and enrolling in the next often is not captured and therefore doesn't appear in district and state records.

### **Does chronic absenteeism vary?**

Initial analysis of the Office for Civil Rights chronic absenteeism data, as well as more detailed analysis of existing state and district data sets, shows three key features of chronic absenteeism in U.S. schools.

#### **#1. Rates vary by grade level.**

Typically, chronic absenteeism rates are high in preK, kindergarten, and 1st grade. They then improve through elementary school, with students attending 3rd and 4th grade most consistently. Absenteeism starts to increase with the transition to the middle grades and often peaks in 9th and 10th grade. Occasionally, there's a dip in 11th and 12th grades because significant numbers of chronically absent students already have dropped out.

#### **#2. Rates vary over time.**

Many students are chronically absent for multiple years. Currently, no district or state that we're aware of tracks cumulative chronic absenteeism. When researchers examined longitudinal data sets for states and districts with high rates of chronic absenteeism, they found large numbers of students missing huge amounts of schooling over time.

For example, a study that followed a cohort of Baltimore City 1st graders through elementary and middle school found that nearly half missed a month or more of schooling at least once during their elementary and early middle grades and that two-thirds of these students had persistent attendance problems in at least two of those years (Balfanz, Durham, & Plank,

2008). Roughly one-third (39%) were chronically absent in at least three years, and just under one-quarter (22%) were chronically absent in four or more years. A companion study that followed students from 6th grade through high school found that the 20% of students who missed the most days were cumulatively absent, on average, almost one full year (BERC, 2011).

A similar study of 146 New York City schools found that of students who were chronically absent in 2012-13, more than half had been chronically absent as early as 2009-10 and roughly three-quarters were chronically absent in at least one of the three previous years (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). Most troubling, 40% had been chronically absent every year from 2009-10 to 2012-13, missing, on average, 194 days, equal to more than one full year of schooling. Thus, in many cases, chronic absenteeism is not an isolated occurrence but rather a frequent and recurring one with serious, cumulative effects.

### #3. Rates vary by place.

Chronic absenteeism rates are not consistent across districts and schools. Analysis of the Office for Civil Rights data found around 500 school districts with chronic absenteeism rates of 30% or higher. Across the United States, half of the chronically absent students are found in just 4% of districts; in most states, 25% of chronically absent students are concentrated in one to five districts. This translates into a subset of schools in which the scale and scope of chronic absenteeism are particularly intense. Analysis of state data from Maryland found that in the most challenged elementary schools, one-quarter of students (often more than 100) were chronically absent (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). In the most affected middle schools, roughly half of all students (more than 200) were chronically absent — and this climbed to two-thirds of students in the high schools with the highest chronic absenteeism rates. In these most affected high schools, more than 500 students were chronically absent.

#### Why does chronic absenteeism matter?

The evidence couldn't be clearer. Academic achievement from kindergarten on, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment are all highly sensitive to absenteeism. Missing even a little school has negative ef-



#### Just the facts

Absenteeism in the first month of school can predict poor attendance throughout the school year. Half the students who miss two to four days in September go on to miss nearly a month of school.

**Read more:** *Why September matters: Improving student attendance* by Linda S. Olson. Baltimore Education Research Consortium, July 2014.

<http://baltimore-berc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/SeptemberAttendanceBrief-July2014.pdf>

fects. Missing a lot of school throws students off track to educational success.

Studies of chronic absenteeism in preK, kindergarten, and the elementary grades have consistently found links to lower achievement levels in later grades, especially for children from low-income families (Applied Survey Research, 2011; Barge, 2011; Chang & Romero, 2008; Connolly & Olson, 2012; ECONorthwest, 2011; Gottfried, 2010; Musser, 2011; Ready, 2010). Chronic absence in middle and high school are negatively linked to later achievement levels, as well as to increased odds of dropping out, and to postsecondary enrollment outcomes (Allensworth, Gwynne, Moore, & de la Torre, 2014; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Barge, 2011; BERC, 2011; Kieffer, Marinell, & Stephenson, 2011). Data from Rhode Island and New York City also show that at least three-fourths of the students who become involved with the juvenile justice system have histories of chronic absenteeism, putting it in the middle of the school-to-prison pipeline (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

At the same time that chronic absenteeism has been negatively linked to so many key academic outcomes, evidence from New York has shown that students who exit chronic absentee status can get back on track, with increased odds of staying in school and raising both their achievement levels and grade point averages. Thus, effective interventions aimed at chronically absent students can improve education outcomes.

Given the strong connection among poverty, absenteeism, and academic achievement, one of the most effective strategies for closing the achievement gap will be a concerted effort to ensure that high-poverty students attend school regularly from preK through 12th grade. Likewise, the data are clear that strong academic performance cannot be achieved when chronic absenteeism rates as high as 20%, 35%, or 50% are found in the highest-poverty elementary, middle, and high schools.

The emerging data on absenteeism and achievement also suggest that we may need to re-examine our assumptions about what has and hasn't worked to close achievement, graduation, and postsecondary enrollment gaps. Efforts that appeared only modestly successful, or not at all successful, may have greater potential if we take into account the extent of student absenteeism. Finally, we must factor the strong relationship between achievement and absenteeism into efforts to develop next-

generation accountability systems for schools and teachers.

### How can we reduce chronic absenteeism?

A growing number of schools and districts show that it's possible to reduce chronic absenteeism. They're measuring chronic absenteeism, closely monitoring attendance, and increasing attendance by uncovering root causes, supporting students and families, and making school inviting. Many are using multi-tiered student support and early warning and intervention systems. They also recognize that schools alone cannot reduce chronic absenteeism and so are partnering with other agencies and community sectors.

An important first step is to recognize the four broad categories of reasons why students are chronically absent. Schools and districts need to understand which drive chronic absenteeism in their community and how the drivers vary by grade:

- *Events and forces outside school.* Situations such as sibling or elder care, jobs, untreated medical and mental health conditions, or poor transportation prevent students from getting to school.
- *Threat avoidance.* Students are avoiding unpleasant or dangerous situations in school or on the way to or from school, such as being teased or bullied, feeling threatened, or not wanting to be punished or called out for being late or for not having completed assignments.
- *Disengagement.* Students are disengaged from school because they feel that little is going on there or that no one will notice or care if they don't attend.
- *Faulty beliefs.* People hold faulty beliefs about the importance of regular school attendance, such as viewing preK and kindergarten as daycare that students can drop in and out of or believing that it's OK to miss days here and there, without realizing that missing just two days each month adds up to being chronically absent for the year.

### Programs that work

Three success stories provide a deeper understanding of how to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Missing even a little school has negative effects. Missing a lot of school throws students off track to educational success.

### Diplomas Now

Diplomas Now ([diplomasnow.org](http://diplomasnow.org)) is a partnership of Johns Hopkins University, City Year (an AmeriCorps program that helps at-risk students succeed), and Communities in School (an effective dropout prevention organization). Diplomas Now helps challenged middle and high schools ensure that students graduate ready for college and career. It combines whole-school reform strategies with enhanced student support, guided by an early warning system. An extra team of adults works alongside school staff to help struggling students with attendance, behavior, and course performance in mathematics and English.

Winner of a federal Investing in Innovation grant, Diplomas Now is in the midst of a seven-year randomized field trial. In June 2016, MDRC, an education and social policy research organization, released two significant findings on chronic absenteeism:

- Diplomas Now reduced chronic absenteeism in 6th grade by an average of 17%.
- Academic success in elementary school doesn't inoculate students against the forces of poverty that hinder attendance. Across 30 high-poverty middle schools, nearly 20% of students who were academically proficient in 5th grade became chronically absent in 6th grade, and nearly one-third developed an early warning indicator — they were either chronically absent, got in trouble, or failed math or English (MDRC, 2016).

Diplomas Now uses a four-part, multitiered approach:

- Schoolwide efforts create a positive school culture that celebrates and supports attendance and makes students feel welcome and wanted. For children with attendance challenges, this includes having an adult who knows them warmly welcoming them when they arrive at school in the morning and having shout-outs for the homerooms with the most improved attendance.
- Early warning systems monitor absenteeism weekly and coordinate follow-up with adults who know and understand students' circumstances. Students have champions — teachers and other adults who have a positive relationship with the student — who monitor their progress

every two weeks and adjust interventions as needed.

- Success Mentors, usually City Year corps members, are assigned to students who enter 6th grade with a history of chronic absenteeism; these mentors respond to every absence and serve as tutors and role models.
- A Communities in Schools site coordinator addresses the needs of students with serious out-of-school challenges, connecting the neediest students to the services and professional assistance they need to attend school every day.

Following a study about the pervasiveness of chronic absenteeism in New York City schools, then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg undertook the nation's most ambitious effort to tackle this issue. The mayor created an interagency task force to develop a comprehensive set of strategies to combat this problem; they were piloted in 100 schools with more than 80,000 students.

The task force created the NYC Success Mentor Corps, reaching nearly 10,000 at-risk students — the nation's largest school-based mentoring effort in a single city. Other strategies included a citywide interagency effort that coordinated data and resources among key city agencies and partners; data use to measure, monitor, and act on absenteeism; weekly data review meetings led by principals in which participants monitored attendance trends and devised strategies to improve attendance; new models for connecting community resources to schools; and growing awareness of chronic absenteeism as well as offering incentives for attendance.

Key findings from an evaluation of this effort showed that task force schools consistently outperformed comparison schools in reducing chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). Students in task force schools were less likely to be chronically absent and more likely to be solid attenders than students in comparison schools. In particular, students in poverty at task force schools were 15% less likely to be chronically absent than similar students at comparison schools, and students in temporary shelters who attended task force schools were 31% less likely to be chronically absent than similar students at comparison schools.

The Success Mentors were the most effective component of the task force's effort. Chronically absent students who had men-

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tors gained almost two additional weeks (nine days) of school each year. In the 25% of schools with the greatest effects, chronically absent students with mentors gained, on average, more than a month of school. These findings demonstrate that effective, cost-efficient strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism, increase attendance, and improve academic outcomes are achievable, even in communities with the greatest needs.

### **Challenge 5: Strive for fewer than five days absent.**

When school and community officials in Grand Rapids, Mich., learned that 36% of their public school students were chronically absent, they quickly took a community-based, communications and engagement approach. They blanketed the area with the Challenge 5 message in both English and Spanish, used data-driven strategies to monitor attendance and intervene with students missing too much school, and established attendance teams at each school to track students who were chronically absent and to contact them and their families to reverse the trend. Within the schools, principals received professional development on the importance of attendance and of instituting strategies to improve it. Incentives, competitions, and targeted parent outreach ensured that everyone got the message and acted on it. Attendance Works, a nonprofit focused on helping communities and states address chronic absenteeism, supported Grand Rapids with its three-year effort. And it paid off — the chronic absenteeism rate dropped by 25%, and student achievement rose.

### **Scaling it up: My Brother's Keeper Success Mentor Initiative**

This year, the federal government launched the Every Student, Every Day Campaign to highlight the importance of taking an interagency approach to reducing chronic absenteeism. In October 2015, the Secretaries of Education, Housing, Health and Human Services, and Justice, along with the Surgeon General, sent a letter to chief state school officers alerting them to challenges posed by chronic absenteeism and outlining how to address it. In June 2016, teams from 30 states gathered in Washington, D.C., for the first-ever national conference on reducing chronic absenteeism to learn from leading states, districts, and schools how to take a multitiered, multisector approach.



## Just the facts

An estimated 5 million to 7.5 million U.S. students miss nearly a month of school each year.

**Read more:** *The importance of being in school* by Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes. Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, May 2012.

[http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport\\_May16.pdf](http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf)

The most ambitious federal effort is the My Brother's Keeper Success Mentor Initiative, which is working to scale Diploma Now's Success Mentor model to more than 30 school districts across the United States with high rates of chronic absenteeism. The goal is to pair every chronically absent 6th and 9th grader with a Success Mentor, as well as implement a version of the model in elementary schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism.

## A problem we can solve

Chronic absenteeism is a much bigger problem than we thought. But there is good news: We can do something about it at a modest cost, and our efforts will have a substantial effect on students and schools with the greatest needs.

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