

Chronic Absenteeism Can Devastate K-12 Learning

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Warning systems exist to keep us out of harm's way. The car's dashboard light warns of low tire pressure; the urgent weather bulletin advises us to evacuate ahead of a storm. We are conditioned to take these warnings seriously and act upon them.

Now, just weeks into the new school year, another warning system is sending a message to parents and educators: the early signs of chronically absent students.

Half of all students who miss two to four days of school in the first month will go on to miss nearly a month of school in excused or unexcused absences, according to a study released in July by the Baltimore Education Research Consortium.

The study examined chronic absence and found a striking pattern. Remarkably, nine out of 10 students who missed five or more days in the first month went on to be chronically absent—defined as missing 10 percent of the school year in excused and unexcused absences—for the year.

So, even though it's only October, we already know which students are most at risk. The warning lights are blinking. The alerts are flashing before us. What happens if we disregard them?

If poor attendance is allowed to persist, the impact can undermine children's prospects for academic achievement. In the early grades, students who are chronically absent have lower reading and math scores, as well as weaker social-emotional skills than they need to persist in school.

In fact, in a study of California students for Attendance Works, the organization that Hedy Chang oversees, only 17 percent of the students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and 1st grade were reading proficiently by 3rd grade, compared with 64 percent of those with good attendance in the early years. Weak reading skills in the 3rd grade translate into academic trouble ahead: Students who aren't reading well by that point are four times more likely to drop out of high school, according to a 2012 study released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Chronic absence in middle school is another red flag that a student will drop out of high school. By high school, attendance is a better dropout indicator than test scores.

This is a particular problem for children from low-income families, who often face significant barriers to getting to school. They may have little access to health care to control the asthma that keeps them home, or they may live in housing that contributes to their health problems. They may face a dangerous walk to school, either because of community violence or traffic patterns.

Other students are being pushed out of school by strict discipline policies. After all, days missed due to suspensions are absences, too. And these disciplinary absences fall disproportionately on children of color,

costing them valuable instructional time and exacerbating achievement gaps.

So what can be done?

A recent report, "Absences Add Up," also from Attendance Works, documents what many know from common sense: At every age, in every demographic, and in every state and city tested, students with poor attendance scored significantly lower on standardized tests. In our schools, this translates into weaker reading skills, failing grades, and higher dropout rates. Rather than looking at attendance as an administrative chore, schools can use the same data as a warning sign to change the trajectory.

Poor attendance can be turned around if schools and community partners work together with families to monitor who is at risk for poor attendance, nurture a habit of regular attendance, and identify and address the challenges that prevent students from getting to school. The key is using data to identify and intervene early, before students have missed so much school they can't catch up.

That's what happened when New York City put its Success Mentors in 100 schools. Students who were chronically absent in the prior year were assigned mentors, drawn from the school staff, student leaders, or national service programs such as City Year and Experience Corps.

The mentors had several simple but straightforward responsibilities. They greeted the students every day to let them know they were glad to see them at school. They called home if students were sick to find out what was happening. They connected the students and their families to resources to help address attendance barriers. Mentors participated in school-based teams that analyzed data and shared insights about students. And they also supported schoolwide activities, including assemblies, incentives, and contests, to encourage better attendance for all students.

The results were significant. Students with mentors gained nine school days—almost two weeks—during the year. They were more likely to remain in school and maintain their grade point averages than similar students without mentors. The program worked at every K-12 level: elementary, middle, and high school, with the greatest impact on students struggling with poverty and homelessness.

In a smaller city, New Britain, Conn., administrators focused on kindergarten, which had one of the highest absenteeism rates in the community. Elementary schools set up attendance teams to identify and monitor the students with the worst attendance. Part-time social workers, hired with philanthropic and state dollars, connected with families. Principals and teachers promoted attendance at back-to-school nights, at parent-teacher conferences, and through regular calls home. This work led to a significant drop in absenteeism in all elementary grades, particularly in kindergarten. The percentage of chronically absent kindergartners fell from 30 percent in the 2011-12 school year to 13 percent in 2013-14. And reading scores began to climb.

It's clear that we can improve attendance and, with it, achievement—if we pay attention to who is missing too much school for any reason and use the data to take positive, supportive action. Now, still early in the school year, is the time to start.

This is why our organizations—Attendance Works, the Campaign for Grade Level Reading, and America's Promise Alliance, in addition to the United Way Worldwide and Points of Light—for the second straight year,

launched a nationwide campaign that called for communities to recognize the traditional start of the school year—September—as Attendance Awareness Month.

Our goal has been to build awareness of the importance of monitoring attendance so all students have the chance to learn and succeed. We call for districts and community partners to use the right data to identify which schools and students most need support. This requires moving beyond the traditional metrics of attendance—average daily attendance and truancy (or unexcused absences) to also monitor chronic absence.

We need to start right away to connect the students struggling with poor attendance to positive, engaging supports and to activities that will motivate them to attend class every day.

Attendance Works recently laid out step-by-step strategies for reducing chronic absence in "The Power of Positive Connections: Reducing Chronic Absence Through PEOPLE: Priority Early Outreach to Positive Linkages and Engagement." As the title of the plan suggests, positive, preventive approaches are typically more productive and cost-effective than punitive steps. These strategies include using data from the past year or first month of school to identify students and then connect them to mentors, engaging programs before or after school, walk-to-school programs, and health support for students with chronic illnesses such as asthma.

Reducing chronic absence is good not only for students, but also for our schools. As taxpayers, we already pay for the school buildings and the teachers needed to educate our children. We're spending time and money to expand early education and improve 3rd grade reading so that we can increase our graduation rates. Why not do everything we can to ensure that students show up every day and make the most of our investments?

Hedy Chang is the director of Attendance Works, which is located in San Francisco and seeks to improve the policy and practice around school attendance. John Gomperts is the president and CEO of the Washington-based America's Promise Alliance, which promotes reduction in chronic absence as a key to improvement in graduation rates. Leslie Boissiere is chief operating officer of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which focuses on reducing chronic absenteeism and improving reading skills in the early grades. It is also located in Washington.