

# Being There is Half the Battle: Chronic Absenteeism in Early Grades

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Ever since his stint as a top administrator for Philadelphia schools, Ralph Smith has had a hunch that poor school attendance in the early grades was a critical but overlooked problem in America's schools. In 2007, as executive vice president of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, he committed resources to testing that theory. It turns out he was right.

The research Casey commissioned examined school attendance in kindergarten through third grade across nine school districts and analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort. The results, released in the 2008 report *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For*<sup>38</sup> by the National Center for Children in Poverty, were clear and compelling.

The research found that one in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students are missing nearly a month of school every year. This is not truancy—the data include excused and unexcused absences, and most 5- and 6-year-olds do not stay home without a parent's knowledge. Casey intentionally uses the term "chronic absence," because the more frequently used term, "truancy," only refers to unexcused absences and connotes inappropriate student behavior requiring a punitive response. Rather than blaming children, especially in early grades, there should be a broadened awareness that missing extended periods of school could be an early sign of distress in school, community, or home that could respond to appropriate early intervention.

## Early Absenteeism Gets Little Attention

Although there is widespread awareness of absenteeism problems in older grades, too few states and school districts are paying attention to what is going on in elementary school. Casey's research found that more than half the students at some schools were chronically absent. These estimates could be conservative given the number of low-income students who

change schools at some time in the academic year and the lack of record keeping in some schools.<sup>39</sup>

Most schools do not pay attention to attendance patterns for individual students. They track average daily attendance for whole schools, because government funding is often tied to this measure. That approach can mask a problem with chronic absence. In Baltimore, for example, the average daily attendance rate for elementary students was 94.1% in 2006. But nearly 17% of children were missing 20 or more days of school—just not all on the same days. That meant daily attendance rates stayed high overall, while individual students missed weeks of school. The extent of the problem often takes school officials by surprise—because they are not looking at the data in that way.

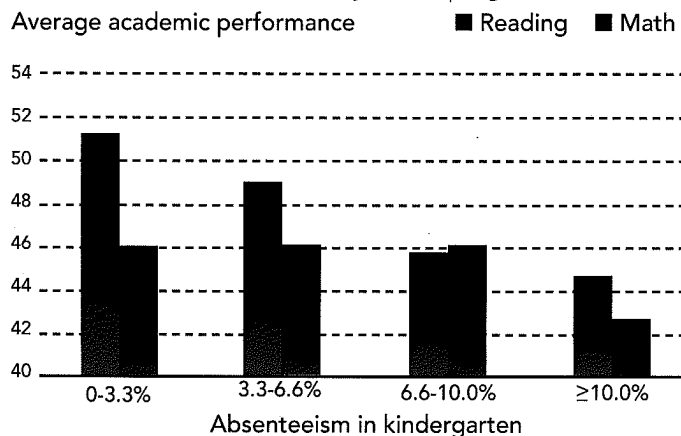
## Predictor of Success in Later Years

During the elementary school years, children are gaining basic social and academic skills critical to ongoing academic success. Chronically absent children in kindergarten show lower levels of achievement in math, reading, and general knowledge during first grade. Unless students attain these essential skills by third grade, they require extra help to catch up and are at grave risk for eventually dropping out of school. Studies have shown that this pattern continues into later grades: sixth graders who miss 20% of the school year are likely to drop out of high school; by ninth grade, missing excessive amounts of school can predict drop out with more accuracy than eighth grade test scores.

Chronic absenteeism is especially problematic for students living in poverty whose families lack the resources to make up for lost time on task. Low-income kindergarteners who miss 10% of the school year—18 to 20 days generally—will likely fall behind academically by fifth grade. In fact, among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of fifth grade.

### Poor Children Who Were Chronic Absentees in Kindergarten had the Lowest Performance in Reading and Math in Fifth Grade®

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These data effectively serve as an early warning sign of cognitive, social, health, and family problems that can lead students off track. And, at some point, absenteeism begins affecting not just the children missing school—but also other students in attendance as teachers struggle to provide remediation and play catch up for the absentee students.

### Contributors to Chronic Absenteeism

Approaching the problem from a variety of perspectives, there are a host of possible contributors to chronic absenteeism.

Although some absentee students are in fact sick, in many communities the cause of chronic absenteeism often lies in the web of problems that face families living in poverty: lack of reliable transportation, housing instability, foster care placements, fears about safety, and mental and physical health concerns among parents. In other words, chronic absence can be a sign of family distress.

Chronic absenteeism could also signal school- or community-related issues such as:

- How a school is monitoring individual absenteeism or reaching out to families when it becomes chronic; or
- What community supports are provided to help children transition to kindergarten.

Experience shows that intervening with students and schools can help. Sometimes, it is as simple as adding a school bus or safe walking route from a particular neighborhood—or putting in a school clinic to provide preventive care. Sometimes the problem is the school, which may lack an engaging curriculum or a disciplined approach to attendance. Sometimes, it means educating parents about the importance of the early school years or awarding attendance incentives and celebrations to encourage students to attend school more regularly.

### Implications for Grantmakers

A growing cohort of grantmakers are beginning to address the problem in their communities—conducting research into the extent of absences, engaging parents and school officials, enabling local school districts to track data and intervene with students and schools, and backing state advocacy campaigns to pursue better regulation and laws.

Critical to understanding the role private and public funders can play, is understanding the various entry points, and the importance of gathering data to demonstrate the extent of the problem and potential community solutions.

#### Identify Your Entry Point

Chronic absenteeism is a cross-cutting issue, often signaling one or more factors in a family or community that are contributing to a child missing school. Anyone interested in the success of children and families has an entry point for examining the impact of absenteeism in their communities. For example:

- *The Annie E. Casey Foundation* considers chronic absence an important part of an emerging grade-level reading campaign, which aims to ensure that every child reads proficiently by the end of third grade.<sup>40</sup>
- *The California Endowment* approaches chronic absence from a community health perspective—recognizing that high levels of school absence can not only keep children from becoming healthy, productive, and contributing members of society, but also can reflect unhealthy community conditions that affect a child's ability to attend school regularly—such as asthma, toxic waste, and the lack of access to health care.
- *The Open Society Institute in Baltimore* comes to the issue through the lens of promoting youth development and reducing school drop-out—recognizing that chronic absence at any level is a surefire warning sign of problems in a child's life and poor outcomes.

#### Research and Evaluation = Policy and Action

A strong research base is necessary to understand the prevalence and impact of this problem, raise awareness, and drive community solutions. Grantmakers can play a key role in gathering needed data.<sup>41</sup> And data can be not only a driver for action but also a measure of outcomes. Identifying barriers to addressing chronic absence is also critical. For example:

*In Baltimore*, data showed that one in six elementary students was missing at least 20 days of class. Rates were even higher among older students: 34% of middle-school and 44% of high-school students were chronically absent. Calling attention to these data catalyzed the creation of a city-wide attendance workgroup in 2008, led by the Mayor's Office and staffed by the Open Society Institute (OSI)—Baltimore's Education Program.<sup>42</sup> OSI also provided funding to the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland and the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute at Harvard University Law

School to research best practices and to coordinate the work group.

In Michigan, a community-schools partnership sponsored by The Kent Schools Services Network<sup>43</sup> provides support for the programmatic work needed to track, analyze, and intervene with students, schools, and communities showing high absentee rates. The collaborative effort engages school districts, county health officials, and a number of local funders including the Doug and Maria DeVos Foundation, Dyer-Ives Foundation, The Frey Foundation, the Grand Rapids Community Foundation, the Keller Foundation, Steelcase Foundation, and the United Way. Schools now have attendance committees that meet weekly to evaluate trends and individual students—the goal being to avoid punitive action and instead work on shaping attitudes, changing school culture, and building partnerships between schools and community.

In 2009, the California Endowment conducted a scan of policies and practices in the state's school districts to identify barriers to measuring chronic absenteeism.<sup>44</sup> The scan revealed that many districts track attendance data on individual students, but the state's new longitudinal student data system did not include information on absences. The scan results made a difference—the State Attendance Review Board now encourages districts to add chronic absence to the truancy data regularly examined in annual reports. A coalition of interest groups has also emerged to push for including chronic absence in the state's Race to the Top application and in state legislation. The scan also revealed good work going on in the state—school districts in San Diego County were already tracking absences in the early grades, with support from The Children's Initiative, a grantee of The California Endowment.

## More Work to be Done

Despite all that is going on, there is far more work to do on the chronic absence front. We still need research to tease out what role prekindergarten education or quality after-school programs can play in addressing the problem. We need more analysis of local data, particularly in rural areas, where we have little information so far. We need to reach school districts and states that are still unaware of this hidden problem. And we need to influence policy and legislation so that states and district are collecting, monitoring, and reporting on levels of chronic absence. ✂

In addition to the myriad grantmakers exploring the problem in their own communities, a national and state initiative is being launched called **Attendance Counts**. The goal, put simply, is to ensure that every school in every state is tracking, reporting, and acting on chronic absence. Initially, the focus will be:

- building public awareness and political will to address the problem
- establishing and supporting state campaigns on chronic absence, which includes advocacy for policy change
- providing technical assistance and practical tools for school districts
- exploring the role the federal government can play in encouraging states and school districts to adopt a common definition of chronic absence and to address the problem in school improvement plans.

The initiative will offer a nexus for bringing practitioners, policymakers, advocates, and grantmakers together to share knowledge and forge strategic alliances to address chronic absenteeism and the underlying factors.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is supporting the launch of the initiative by using its website as well as other communications strategies to provide materials that make the case, promote best practices, create a learning network, and offer resources for policy advocacy.

For more information on Attendance Counts, contact Hedy Chang at [hychang@earthlink.net](mailto:hychang@earthlink.net)

## References

- <sup>38</sup> Chang, H.N., & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. Retrieved from the National Center for Children in Poverty website: [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_837.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf)
- <sup>39</sup> Romero, M., & Lee Y.-S.. (2007). *A national portrait of chronic absenteeism in the early grades*. Retrieved from the National Center for Children in Poverty website: [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_771.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_771.html)
- <sup>40</sup> For information on The Annie E. Casey Foundation's grade-level reading initiative, contact Miriam Shark at [mshark@aecf.org](mailto:mshark@aecf.org)
- <sup>41</sup> *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For, The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades* includes considerations for calculating and analyzing the prevalence of the chronic absenteeism in school districts, as well as how communities can gather quantitative and qualitative information to identify key contributing factors. It is available at: [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_837.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf)
- <sup>42</sup> For more information, visit <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/baltimore>
- <sup>43</sup> For more information, visit <http://www.kentisd.org/kssn>
- <sup>44</sup> The California Endowment featured chronic absence in the Winter/Spring 2010 edition of their newsletter, *Centerscene*: [http://www.calendow.org/CHC/centerscene/pdfs/CHC\\_CenterScene\\_WI10.pdf](http://www.calendow.org/CHC/centerscene/pdfs/CHC_CenterScene_WI10.pdf)