

Monitoring Data Matters Even More: A Review of State Attendance Data Policy and Practice in School Year 2022-23



A Policy Brief

June 2023

Overview

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, chronic absence in U.S. schools has grown into a national crisis. Attendance Works estimates it doubled, and now affects nearly one in three students, or an estimated 16 million overall. Emerging data shows that chronic absence for the 2022-23 school year remains persistently high. Despite many people's hope, absenteeism and engagement have not returned to pre-pandemic levels even though students are no longer being quarantined. Monitoring attendance data, especially chronic absence rates, and addressing inequities exacerbated by the pandemic are crucial to recovery.

While reporting chronic absence data on state report cards is required by the federal government, the details of how that data is reported are left to state education agencies (SEAs). Well-crafted state guidance can ensure that attendance is taken in a consistent and accurate manner daily. States can also provide access to data on a more frequent basis than the federal government.

This brief is our third annual examination of how state attendance policies and practices have evolved since the onset of the pandemic. Our team gathered information about 50 states and the District of Columbia from SEA websites, prior policy reviews and state truancy statutes, and asked our SEA contacts to review data and provide responses to questions that could not be answered from public sources. We received confirmations from 43 SEAs, including the District of Columbia. The data is summarized in [this table](#).

Several positive developments are worth highlighting. Although only a decade ago chronic absence was just gaining recognition as a helpful education metric, today, 48 states and the District of Columbia publish chronic absence data online. In addition, states are beginning to publish data in a more timely manner, with most reporting it for the prior school year and three states making it available before the end of the school year. This is a major improvement from two years ago when only nine states published data for the prior school year.

Most states disaggregate chronic absence data, which helps educators, key partners and policymakers see patterns that can inform action. Fewer states (18) break down data by grade, which can make it easier to detect elevated levels of absenteeism — which is common in kindergarten, 9th and 12th grades and is especially high in most states — and intervene early in the year to prevent poor attendance and disengagement.

Below are the key findings:

1. Daily attendance taking is the norm for in-person learning, although not always for distance learning.
2. The majority of states code absences by learning mode.
3. Definitions of what constitutes a day of attendance vary among states, with even greater diversity in distance learning than for in-person instruction.
4. The vast majority of states define chronic absence as missing 10% of school for any reason.
5. Most states include all types of absences, regardless of reason, when calculating chronic absence.
6. Chronic absence data is published online in almost all states.
7. States are starting to collect and publish chronic absence data in a more timely manner.
8. Chronic absence data is typically available by district, school and a variety of student populations but not by grade.
9. States are resuming use of chronic absence as a school accountability metric, but the pandemic has complicated its use.
10. Data on unexcused versus excused absences, as well as truancy, is much less available.

Written for state level policymakers and advocates, this brief concludes with recommendations for how states can ensure accurate, comparable and transparent data as well as leverage attendance data to inform action. It is a call to action for states to make it possible for

everyone to dig deeper into attendance metrics and assess whether inequitable approaches to unexcused absences and truancy are undermining local efforts to improve attendance for some students, especially those with the fewest resources.

I. Monitoring Attendance Data Matters Even More

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% of school for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences as well as suspensions. It is an early warning sign that students are off-track for reading proficiently by the end of third grade, at risk for suspensions and poor academic performance in middle school and more likely to drop out in high school.¹

Chronic absence is not a new problem. In the 2018-19 school year, an estimated 8 million students — one in six — missed that much school. Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, chronic absence has grown into a national crisis. Based upon data from multiple states, Attendance Works [estimates it doubled](#), affecting an estimated 16 million students — one in three — by the end of the 2021-22 school year.

Although many people hoped attendance would quickly return to pre-pandemic levels once students were no longer quarantined for Covid-19, emerging data shows that this has not occurred. Consider the situation in Connecticut, which collects and publicly releases attendance data monthly throughout the school year in order to inform timely action. The state has made significant strategic investments in reducing chronic absence. As of March 2023, 22% of its students were chronically absent, compared with 23.7% in the 2021-22 school year but just 11.7% in 2018-19.

High levels of chronic absence for a particular school, district or student group suggest an erosion in [positive conditions for learning](#) (i.e., physical and emotional health and safety; a sense of belonging, connection and support; academic engagement and challenge; and adult and student well-being). High levels of chronic absence signify the need for systemic programmatic and policy solutions.



Monitoring chronic absence by grade, student populations, school, district and geography, when possible, is crucial to recovery and addressing inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. Chronic absence and other types of attendance data can help identify where more engagement and support are needed as well as shed light on policies and practices yielding better outcomes.

A growing body of research also reveals a need to dig deeper into attendance metrics in order to assess whether unexcused absences and truancy are having an inequitable impact. Truancy-related policies and practices existed long before the concept of chronic absenteeism was introduced. They continue to affect responses to students and families when students miss school. New research, [Disparities in Unexcused Absences Across California Schools](#), suggests that overuse of the “unexcused” label for absences could undermine efforts to improve attendance for some students. The California Department of Education made this study possible by publicly releasing data showing how many absences were excused versus unexcused.

II. States Play Critical Data Role

Taking data-informed action to address chronic absenteeism requires easy access to timely, high-quality data broken down by district, school, grade and student group. With data systems in place, everyone (students, parents, educators, policymakers, community agencies, businesses, etc.) can monitor, detect and address high levels of absenteeism and identify inequitable access to learning opportunities. Data can help identify schools and districts that are using promising practices that yield better attendance and engagement.

States can play an essential guiding role in the collection, use and public availability of attendance and chronic absence data. While reporting chronic absence on state report cards is [required by the federal government](#), how that data is reported is left to the states. They can decide whether to establish a consistent definition of a day of attendance or leave it to local discretion, the frequency of collection of the data from districts, and how to share



the data publicly, including for which school years. Well-crafted state guidance can ensure that attendance is taken daily in a consistent and accurate manner. States can also provide the public with access to data on a more frequent basis than the federal government provides.

Purpose of Brief

This brief is our third annual examination of how state attendance policies and practices have continued to evolve since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, with particular emphasis on shifts that occurred following the 2020-21 school year. It assesses the extent to which states support consistent collection of comparable data, make data available to the public and use chronic absence as a metric for school accountability. In addition, it examines whether states collect data that would allow them to analyze disparities in unexcused absences and truancy.

Especially targeting state-level policymakers and advocates, this brief shares the findings of our review of state data policy and practice. It makes recommendations for how states can ensure accurate, comparable and transparent data as well as leverage attendance data to inform action. And it is a call to action for states to leverage their data, resources and influence to ensure that everyone can work together to overcome the skyrocketing levels of chronic absence so that every child has an equal opportunity to thrive and learn in school.

III. Source of Information/Methods

This report builds upon prior briefs analyzing state attendance data policy and practice, including [Monitoring Who Is Missing Too Much School: A Review of State Policy and Practice in School Year 2021-22](#) and [Are Students Present and Accounted For? An Examination of State Attendance Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic](#). Adding to the information collected for these earlier reviews of state websites, we compiled details about the attendance data practices and policies for all 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

The brief is based on data provided by 43 states (among which we include the District of Columbia) as of early May 2023. In March and April 2023, our team gathered

information about 50 states and the District of Columbia from SEA websites, prior policy reviews and state truancy statutes, and asked SEA contacts to review data and provide responses to questions that could not be answered from public sources. We heard back from 42 states plus the District of Columbia. For the remaining eight states, we use “don’t know” as the response, with the exception of information publicly available on the state website or in the state’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan, or information referring to a truancy statute. We also indicate “don’t know” if one of the 43 states (including the District of Columbia) with confirmed information did not respond to a particular question.

Based upon our analysis of this information, we produced [these tables](#) documenting attendance policies and practices, as well as availability of disaggregated chronic absence data, across all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

This brief also draws upon insights gained from our ongoing work with states. Attendance Works operates a peer learning forum for states called the [Network to](#)

[Advance State Attendance Policy and Practice \(NASAPP\)](#), and we work in-depth with a number of state education agencies, including in California, Connecticut, Ohio, Virginia, South Carolina and Washington. In addition, we offer subject matter expertise on chronic absence to the national [Student Engagement and Attendance Technical Assistance Center](#) and the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center at WestEd.

IV. Key Findings

An analysis of the compiled information combined with insights from our work with states yield 10 key findings, outlined below. Each finding includes data on the number of states that have adopted specific attendance reporting practices or policies (along with the total number of states included in that particular analysis) and an explanation of its importance.

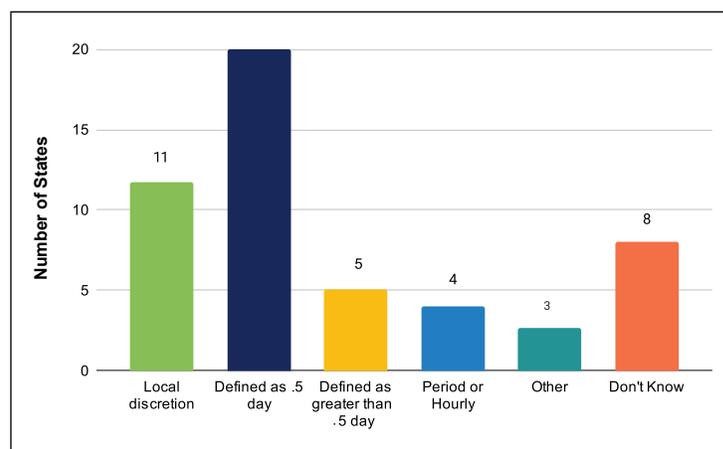
1. Daily attendance taking is the norm for in-person learning, although not always for distance learning. All 43 states with confirmed data indicated that attendance is taken daily for in-person learning. Most states (36 of 43) also require daily attendance taking for distance learners. This finding confirms that daily attendance taking, which had stopped for a short time during the pandemic, is the norm again. When attendance is taken daily, it is more accurate since as time passes it is harder to remember correctly whether a student was present or absent. Daily attendance taking can also support relationship building in distance as well as in-person learning.

2. The majority of states code absences by learning mode. A majority of states (28 of 43) indicated that they code absences by learning mode. While in-person learning is the norm in the United States, virtual or distance learning remains broadly available as a long-term option in many states and localities. Knowing whether an absence occurs in an in-person or distance learning setting is important because the reasons why students miss school are often different. It can also shed light on whether a particular mode of learning is especially problematic.

3. Definitions of what constitutes a day of attendance vary among states, with even greater diversity in distance learning than for in-person instruction.

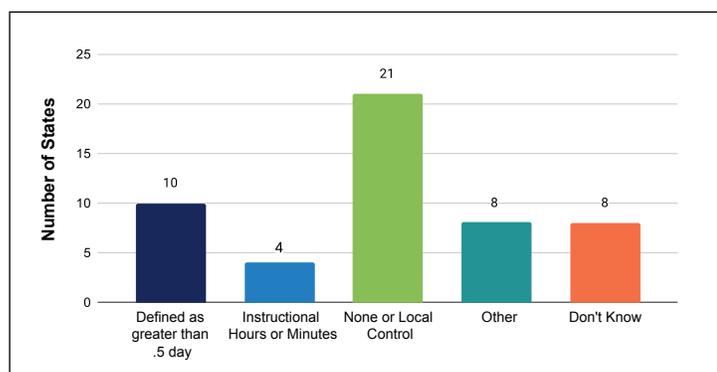
For in-person learning, almost half of all states (20 of 43) define a day of attendance as half a day. A small number of states (5 of 43) require students to show up for more than half a day to be counted present. A few states (4 of 43) require districts to submit data on the number of hours students are in school rather than days of attendance. A significant number (11 of 43) leave definitions to local discretion. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Definition of Day of Attendance for In-Person



Although in-person learning is the norm again, we asked about the definition of attendance during distance learning because it was still an option in many places during the 2021-22 school year. In addition, it is important to keep distance learning as a viable option for the future.

Figure 2: Definition of Day of Attendance for Distance Learning



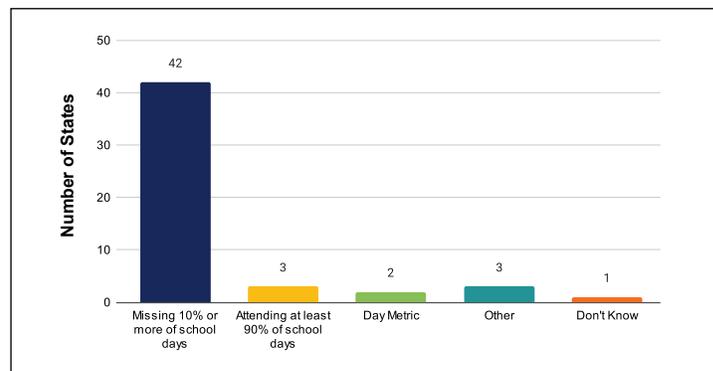
Definitions for what counts as attendance for distance learning are even more variable. Nearly half of states (21 of 43) do not offer a definition or leave the decision to local education agencies. About a quarter of states (10 of 43) require showing up for half of a day or more of instruction, a few states (4 of 43) monitor hours of participation, and the remainder (8 of 43) use a variety of approaches. These approaches include evidence of two-way communication, check-ins and completion of assignments. (See Figure 2.) These findings reflect earlier research revealing the lack of an established definition during Covid-19 school closures.²

A common definition of a day of attendance is important for interpreting and comparing data from different schools and districts within and across states. Without a consistent definition, a district may appear to have a lower rate of chronic absenteeism simply because it is easier for its students to be counted as present. For example, if a student is required to show up for only one class period to be considered in attendance for that day, the district is likely to have a lower level of chronic absence when compared with a district that requires students to be in class for multiple periods.

4. The vast majority of states define chronic absence as missing 10% of school for any reason.

Most states (42 of 51) have adopted missing 10% of the school year as the definition of chronic absence. Seeking to take a more positive approach but using an equivalent measure, a few states (3 of 51) monitor when students show up 90% of the time. A couple of states (2 of 51) use day measures: Alabama considers students who miss 18 days to be chronically absent, while Hawaii monitors missing 15 days. In Montana, chronic absence is defined

Figure 3: State Definition of Chronic Absence



as missing 10% of school for the purpose of collecting data for [EDFacts](#), but for ESSA accountability it monitors how many students participate at least 95% of the time. Two states, Wyoming and New Hampshire, leave the definition up to localities. (See Figure 3.)

Attendance Works recommends using 10% of days enrolled to define chronic absence because it supports using absenteeism as an early warning indicator of school disengagement, academic risk and high school dropout. It encourages noticing when students are already on track for chronic absence in the first months of a school year (e.g., missed two or three days in September) so that early and preventive action can be taken. Research shows that attendance during the first month of school can predict patterns for the remainder of the year. If a specified number of days absent is used instead of a percentage of days absent, practitioners may wait to intervene until the absences add up and the student's attendance has become a crisis. Using the recommended 10% metric prompts practitioners to take early action to help a student overcome barriers, cultivate a habit of regular attendance and get caught up academically. In addition, when chronic absence is defined as a percentage of days missed, it allows for a fair comparison even if the length of the school year varies from district to district.

5. Most states include all types of absences, regardless of reason, when calculating chronic absence rates. The vast majority of states (39 of 42) include all absences in their calculations of chronic absence data. In a handful of states (4 of 43), absences can be excluded for varying circumstances. In Oklahoma, for example, medical exemptions can be given in extreme situations such as a student who is receiving treatment for a chronic or terminal disease or has lost an immediate



family member. New Jersey allows for certain excused absences (e.g., religious holidays, up to three days for college visits, and take-your-child-to-work day) to be excluded from calculations. In Colorado, all absences are included for the purpose of publicly reporting chronic absence data, but for the 2020-21 school year, data on excused absences was removed from the calculation for ESSA accountability.

Attendance Works recommends including all absences (excused, unexcused and suspensions) when calculating chronic absence. For every day a student is in school, there is an opportunity to learn, build relationships and access support. We advise against excluding absences, no matter the circumstance. As we have seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, excessive excused absences can still affect students' connection to school, well-being and academic progress, especially if students do not have access to resources to help them make up for lost opportunities to learn in the classroom.

6. Chronic absence data is published online in almost all states. Most state education agencies (48 states and the District of Columbia) make chronic absence data publicly available on their websites. This is an improvement compared with the 43 states found to be publishing data online last year in a report by the Data Quality Campaign, [Show Me the Data 2022](#), and the 35 states in [Show Me the Data 2021](#).

Tips on Finding Chronic Absence Data in State Report Cards

Chronic absenteeism is often not a “headline measure” in state report cards, and finding this data can require searching the appropriate website for a detailed view of the state, district and school-level data. If you need help finding your state report card website, the U.S. Department of Education includes links to each state report card on its website at <https://oese.ed.gov/families/reportcards/>.

Chronic absenteeism data can go by many names. This requires understanding the definition of chronic absenteeism to see if the state definition for attendance tracking aligns with chronic absenteeism. Some names include:

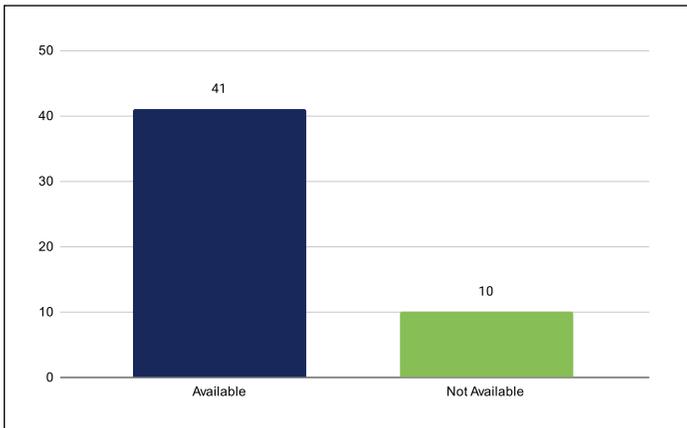
- Attendance
- Absenteeism
- Chronic absenteeism
- Consistent attendance
- Proportional attendance
- Regular attendance
- Good attendance

Chronic absenteeism data can often be found in the nonacademic indicator section of school reports. Specifically, attendance data is frequently listed under school climate or environment categories.

In some states, the only way to identify chronic absenteeism rates is to download spreadsheets and search through the individual tabs. To quickly identify relevant attendance data, search for common words like “attendance” or “absenteeism” when reviewing websites or spreadsheets by using the find command.

7. States are starting to collect and publish chronic absence data in a more timely manner. At the end of April 2023, data was available for the 2021-22 school year in most states (41 of 51). This is a major improvement over previous years. The Data Quality Campaign’s report [Show Me the Data 2022](#) found that only 25 states had data for the prior school year, while [Show Me the Data 2021](#) counted just nine with prior-year data. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4: Prior Year Chronic Absence Data Publicly Available



Chronic absence data is now publicly available in real time or close to it, and before the end of the school year, in three states (Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island).

Having data available publicly as quickly as possible can provide policymakers, advocates and other education partners with timely information to inform their actions. In Connecticut, the availability of high-quality monthly chronic absence data allowed Gov. Ned Lamont’s office to realize that the state was experiencing a surge in chronic absence as early as spring 2021. It helped the governor and the Connecticut State Department of Education to quickly launch the [Learner Engagement and Attendance Program](#) (LEAP), which has helped to significantly reduce chronic absence, especially among middle and high school students.

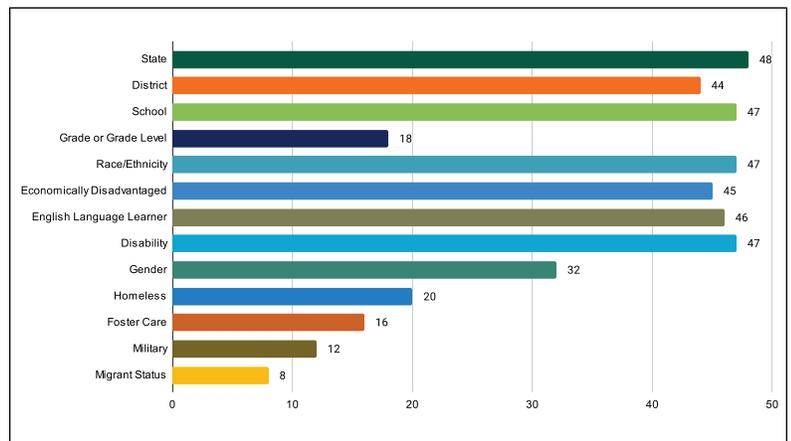
Several states are exploring ways to produce more current internal data reports that can be accessed by educators to inform timely action. Arkansas, for example, drew upon the [data templates](#) offered by Attendance Works to provide educators with real-time chronic absence reports using data automatically uploaded daily from districts. New York has created a data tool that allows districts to voluntarily submit data and in return receive a chronic absence report. Leveraging the benefits of adopting a standard data structure through [Ed-Fi](#), South Carolina is working with a nonprofit, Ed Analytics, to create real-time, interactive data dashboards. Attendance and chronic absence reports are the first element of the dashboard, which will be released to districts by the end of 2023.

8. Chronic absence data is typically available by district, school and a variety of student populations but not by grade.

Most states provided chronic absence data by district, school and these specific student groups: racial/ethnic groups, English learners, economic status and students with disabilities. These more commonly reported categories reflect, to a large degree, [what the federal government](#) requires states to submit.

Grade-level data is not required by the federal government and exists in only 18 states. (See Figure 5.) Unfortunately, the lack of such data can make it difficult to detect elevated levels for a particular grade or grades — which is common in kindergarten, 9th and 12th grade — and intervene early in the year to prevent poor attendance (for example, during the transition to kindergarten or high school).

Figure 5: Disaggregated Chronic Absence Data Available on State Websites



When data can be disaggregated, it helps educators, key partners and policymakers detect patterns that can inform action. High chronic absence for a particular district, school, grade or population of students is a sign that educators and community partners need to expand outreach and analysis to understand common barriers to getting to school. States can help make patterns easier to see by creating bar charts or other visualizations of the data. When possible, geo-mapping results by ZIP code or location in the state can also help call attention to the impact on attendance seen in specific locations. Disaggregated data can help identify “bright spots”: a school, district or community that has comparatively better attendance or lower chronic absence, and might have effective practices worth sharing with others.

9. States are resuming use of chronic absence as a school accountability metric under ESSA, but the pandemic has complicated its use. When ESSA was approved, the Attendance Works report titled [Chronic Absence: Our Top Pick for the ESSA School Quality or Student Success Indicator](#) made the case that the chronic absence rate, either alone or as part of an index, was among the best measures that states could choose to fulfill the requirement that they select at least one indicator to measure school quality or student success. A 2017 report by FutureEd [Who's In: Chronic Absenteeism Under the Every Student Succeeds Act](#) initially reported that the majority of states (36 plus the District of Columbia) adopted chronic absence as a school accountability metric in their implementation plans by the end of 2018. States took different approaches to setting targets for improvement, typically using data available at the time (the 2018-19 school year) to establish expectations. Most states gave a modest weight to chronic absence, and some included it as one component of a fifth indicator, also including data related to school climate or college and career readiness.

The coronavirus pandemic occurred just as many states were beginning to use chronic absence as an accountability metric. During the first year of the pandemic, ESSA accountability was suspended for all metrics, including chronic absenteeism. The U.S. Department of Education, however, still encouraged continued monitoring through its February 2021 [guidance](#), which required public reporting of disaggregated chronic absence data as a condition of waiving accountability and school identification requirements. States have also submitted waivers to change their ESSA target goals and can propose changes to chronic absence as part of that process.

As levels of chronic absence have risen, state education agencies are hearing some concerns over the use of chronic absence as an accountability metric. Administrators sometimes feel they are being held solely responsible for the impact of external factors on attendance, including illness, quarantines and an upsurge in extreme weather conditions that cause students to miss school. The counterargument is that the goal isn't to assess blame but to use the data to activate positive problem-solving, to expand strategic partnerships with other organizations serving the same students and families, and to allocate additional resources to schools to enhance their capacity to engage students and families.

School Accountability Under ESSA

ESSA requires action in the following types of schools:

- Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI): Schools that are in the bottom 5% of Title I schools for all students, or have a graduation rate of 67% or lower.
- Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI): Schools that are “consistently underperforming” for any group of students, as defined by the state.
- Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI): Schools that are doing especially badly for any group of students (as badly as the bottom 5% of schools are for all students).

The law requires state, district and school leaders to engage various stakeholders to develop and implement a plan for improving these schools.

Excerpted from the ESSA Fact Sheet, published by the Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/ESSA_FactSheet_Overview_Hyperlink.pdf

State experiences using chronic absence under ESSA accountability have varied significantly, reflecting differences in how their education systems are organized as well as how states calculate attendance and chronic absence, implement their ESSA accountability systems, and provide support to schools and districts. Consider, for example, the situations in California and Virginia.

California

In California, chronic absence increased from 12.1% in the 2018-19 school year to 30% in 2021-22. Rather than adopting a weighted formula to identify schools in need of improvement under ESSA, California uses a data dashboard to annually assign individual accountability measure ratings to every public school. Chronic absence is used as an accountability metric for K-8 schools. See California's Dashboard Technical Guide for more detail.

Typically, ratings are based on current year performance and any change from the previous year. But for the current year the legislature determined that ratings including chronic absence could only be determined



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

by examining performance in the 2021-22 school year, with cutoffs based on pre-pandemic data. Over 6,000 schools were identified for additional targeted support and improvement based in part on their chronic absence data. In California, this has had significant implications for county offices of education, which shoulder the responsibility for offering technical assistance to lower performing schools and districts.

Virginia

In Virginia, chronic absence increased from 10.7% in the 2018-19 school year to 20.1% in 2021-22. In the state's accountability system, chronic absenteeism is one of nine indicators. For this indicator, schools are designated as [Level One, Two or Three](#) based on the current performance rate, the cumulative three-year rate, or improvement over the previous year (where the current year rate is in a specific range and the school improved by at least 10%). Schools at Level One are considered to have met the standard if the chronic absence rate is below 15% or they met sufficient improvement criteria from the previous year. Schools are designated Level Two if their chronic absence rate is greater than 15% but less than or equal to 25%, or they met sufficient improvement criteria from the previous year. Schools at Level Three have chronic absence rates above 25%. At the end of the 2021-22 school year, the Virginia Department of Education identified 505 schools at Level Two and 121 at Level Three on the chronic absenteeism indicator. Because of these results, a number of Virginia Department of Education offices, including accountability, school quality and student services, worked together to develop a comprehensive plan to provide support to Level Two and Level Three schools.

These experiences raise several key questions for states, including:

- A. How can chronic absence be appropriately used to identify schools in need of improvement and support?
- B. How can states ensure that their systems of technical assistance and support are equipped to help schools reduce chronic absence and increase student engagement?
- C. What are appropriate expectations for reductions in chronic absence, given the continuing challenges in the aftermath of the pandemic?

It is also important to keep in mind that ESSA is not the only vehicle for motivating districts and schools to work with their families and community agencies to reduce chronic absence. Making chronic absence data easily accessible to the public on websites is also a form of accountability. Some states — Connecticut and New Jersey, for example — also have laws requiring the creation of teams responsible for developing and implementing attendance improvement plans once chronic absence has reached a particular threshold. Multiple states that did not include chronic absence in their ESSA plans — e.g., Idaho, Iowa and Louisiana — are still investing in expanding access to data and offering technical assistance to help schools and districts understand and use this data.

10. Data on unexcused versus excused absences, as well as truancy, is much less available. This report examines how many states collect data on unexcused absences and truancy and create publicly available reports. Several states (24 of 42 responses) reported collecting data on excused versus unexcused absences, while 18 did not collect information on types of absences. We do not know about the collection in nine states. Five states (California, Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico and the District of Columbia) each published a report including data about unexcused absences.

A minority of states (18 of 40 responses) collect data on how many and which students are designated as truant and/or habitually truant. An even smaller number of states (14 of 41 responses) indicated that they publish data on how many students are truant or habitually truant.



An unexcused absence occurs when a school determines that a student missed school for a reason not considered legally permissible. The basis for labeling an absence as excused versus unexcused varies by state. Many defer to local school districts to decide if absences should be considered excused or unexcused. Some states regulate what constitutes a valid reason for excusing an absence (e.g., illness, bereavement, religious holidays and, increasingly, mental health challenges). Anything that falls outside these pre-established categories, as well as an absence lacking a note from a parent or doctor, is typically considered unexcused. Even when states have a regulatory definition of excused absences, plenty of room exists for educators to decide whether to categorize an absence as excused or unexcused.

When too many excused absences occur, a student is considered truant. Habitual truancy is when the accumulation of unexcused absences requires schools to take interventions specified by the state such as notifying parents or developing a locally defined strategy. States have the authority to define truancy and determine when truancy or the accumulation of unexcused absences triggers intervention and legal action. Definitions for truancy and habitual truancy vary significantly across states, with many states leaving definitions up to local discretion.

The most robust report on types of absences is found on the California Department of Education's interactive portal, [DataQuest](#). It allows users to analyze and compare the percent of excused versus unexcused absences by student group for every school, district and county. Leveraging that data, *Disparities in Unexcused Absences* published by Policy Analysis for California Education, found that socioeconomically disadvantaged students are much more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused. This is also true for Black, Native American, Hispanic/Latino and Pacific Islander students relative to White, Asian American and Filipino students. Black students experience the largest disparity. These disparities cannot be fully explained by poverty since they remain across differences in socioeconomic status.

Unfortunately, it is easy for families with fewer resources to accumulate unexcused absences. Consider this common scenario: Two students are sick. Both miss five days of school. One student has a family physician, and their parents are familiar with school policies. This student returns to school with a doctor's note, and their five absences are excused. The other student's family cannot afford to see a doctor. This student returns to school without a doctor's note, and their five absences are unexcused. The family receives a letter stating that their child is truant and they may be taken to court if absences continue.

Monitoring potential overuse of the "unexcused" label is critical to improving attendance practices. Labeling an absence as unexcused affects how a student and their family are treated. When absences are unexcused, students can be denied credit for missed work, excluded from extracurricular activities, and eventually taken to court and families fined for unexcused absences. As unexcused absences accumulate, responses generally become more punitive. Yet punitive responses are unlikely to improve attendance when absences occur for reasons beyond the control of the student and their family. Rather, overuse of the unexcused absence label could undermine efforts to partner with students and families to improve attendance.

V. Recommendations

As states continue to develop and evolve their attendance policy and practice, we offer two sets of recommendations. The first set focuses on what states can do to ensure accurate, comparable and transparent data. The second set addresses how states can promote using attendance data to inform action.

A. Ensure Accurate, Comparable and Transparent Data

- 1) **Require tracking attendance daily and by mode of learning.** Require and provide districts with guidance for tracking attendance daily and differentiating whether absences occur during in-person or distance or hybrid learning.
- 2) **Establish a common definition of a day of attendance.** States should establish a common definition and publicize it whenever attendance data is shared. A common metric would allow for better comparisons across states. Attendance Works recommends adoption of the *EDFacts* definition: A student counts as present for a full day of instruction if they attend school for 50% or more of the day. At a minimum, each state should create a consistent definition that can measure student exposure to instruction across all modes of learning, including in-person and distance, and across all districts in the state.
- 3) **Review and invest in data quality.** Examine data while collecting it from districts to ensure that it is being submitted in accordance with agreed-upon definitions. Identify when definitions need to be clarified or revised in order to ensure consistent and comparable data. If needed, review and audit local data collection procedures. Use insights gained to improve data collection in subsequent years.
- 4) **Monitor and publish chronic absence data.** Monitor and publish data on the percent and number of students who are missing 10% of school for any reason in an easy-to-access location on the state education agency's webpage. Share data, broken down by school, grade, race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage, English Learner status, home language, disability status, foster care status, homelessness,

mode of learning and geography if possible. When publishing data, provide contextual information to help readers understand and use the data, including building awareness of the connection between attendance, behavior and achievement, sharing the definitions for a day of attendance and chronic absence, and describing any challenges related to data collection.

- 5) **Include all absences when calculating chronic absence.** When calculating chronic absence, include all absences to ensure an accurate and complete picture of how much school is being missed. If states are concerned about a particular type of absence (e.g., long-term medical care, quarantine or college visit), they should still track the absence and create a code so it can be monitored separately.
- 6) **Collect and report on types of absences.** In order to monitor the impact of disparities in truancy-related practice and policies, collect and publish data showing the percent and number of absences overall and how many are excused, unexcused or due to suspension. Make it easy to examine how types of absence might differ by grade, race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage, home language, disability status, foster care status, homelessness and mode of learning. Ensure that data can be compared across schools and districts.

B. Using Data to Inform Action

- 1) **Explicitly address concerns about the release of challenging data.** Given the elevated levels of chronic absence data, states should address concerns that data will be used to blame programs and practitioners. Emphasize the importance of continuous improvement and offer information about additional support that will be made available to help schools and districts improve attendance and engagement.
- 2) **Expand development of real-time data dashboards.** Support the creation of easy-to-use data dashboards with real-time data that can allow educators and their partners to use data throughout the year to engage continuous improvement.

States can invest in the development of a statewide dashboard available to all districts, or provide funding, technical assistance and guidance to help districts develop their own.

- 3) **Use chronic absence data to inform allocation of state funding and resources.** Use chronic absence data along with other indicators to identify where additional investments in state resources — such as tutoring, mentoring, expanded learning, home visiting, transportation, community schools' strategies and physical and mental health services — are needed to support engagement and address barriers to learning. Disaggregated data can help identify which districts, schools or student populations should be prioritized as well as whether to target particular grades.
- 4) **Strengthen state capacity to take a cross-departmental, data-informed approach to improving attendance.** States should ensure a team exists that can develop, organize and implement a cross-cutting approach to addressing chronic absence and offer technical assistance to districts and schools. The team should include expertise far beyond student services and across multiple divisions — given the impact of absenteeism on multiple aspects of schooling — such as academics, climate, behavioral supports, data and accountability, enrichment, student and family engagement, site-level leadership, etc. How this should be operationalized would need to be tailored to each state and include the intermediary agencies that are a rich source of professional development for schools and districts in many states. States can leverage resources, such as our [state self-assessment tool](#) and the [Attendance Playbook](#), with proven, research-based strategies, developed by FutureEd and Attendance Works.
- 5) **Use data to identify and learn from bright spots.** Use your data to identify schools or districts with significant improvements and comparatively lower rates of chronic absence than peers with similar demographics. Keep in mind the value of looking at data for schools within a district as well as populations of students within a school, since improvement could be masked when looking at overall rates of chronic absence. Follow up with more in-depth research to confirm the accuracy of the data and find out what practices or policies may be contributing to these better outcomes. Use presentations, written materials and the media to share the insights gained with practitioners and policymakers.
- 6) **Expand metrics used to examine opportunities to learn.** Promote collection and reporting on a set of metrics that allow chronic absence data to be reviewed in the context of learning opportunities that might be available outside of school. For example, put in place data to assess whether chronically absent students are enrolling and regularly participating in preschool, summer and after-school programs, all of which could help to compensate for missing out on learning opportunities in the classroom. To identify gaps in learning opportunities, compare data across district, school, grade and student groups, feeder patterns and, if possible, ZIP codes.
- 7) **Explore options for incentivizing districts and schools to expand learning opportunities for chronically absent students.** States should explore policies that would recognize and incentivize helping chronically absent students make up for lost time in the classroom through appropriate and high-quality learning alternatives such as online instruction, expanded learning programming and credit recovery programs.

ENDNOTES

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Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org) is a national nonprofit initiative that promotes equal opportunities to learn and advances student success by inspiring and catalyzing policies and practices that prevent and reduce chronic absence. Its website offers a wide array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools, districts and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.

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