Reducing Chronic Absence Starting with School Entry: A Critical Ingredient of Turning Around Low Performing Schools

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Attendance is Critical to Student Success Because…

❑ **Exposure to Language:** School exposes children to language-rich environments they may not have at home.

❑ **Time on Task:** Students who miss too much school fall behind and have a hard time catching up.

❑ **Persistence:** Good attendance builds habits, essential for success in school and life.

❑ **Engagement:** Attendance indicates engaged students and parents; absences can signal disengagement.

❑ **Classroom Churn**: Too many students missing too many days slow down classroom instruction and affect school climate.

❑ **School Funding**: In states where funding depends on enrollment, good attendance pays.

Defining Key Terms

❑ **Average Daily Attendance**: The percentage of enrolled students who attend school each day.

❑ **Satisfactory Attendance:** Missing 5% or less of school in an academic year including all absences – excused, unexcused, suspensions, etc.

❑ **At-Risk of Chronic Absence:** Missing 5-10% of school in an academic year including all absences.

❑ **Chronic Absence:** Missing 10% or more of school in an academic year including all absences.

❑ **Severe Chronic Absence:** Missing 20% or more days of school per year – approximately two months of school including all absences.

❑ **Truancy:** Typically refers *only* to unexcused absences and is defined by each state.

Myths to Dispel

MYTH 1:
Attendance in Kindergarten doesn't really matter for academic success.

MYTH 2:
Missing school isn't a big problem until middle or high school.

MYTH 3:
Most educators monitor chronic absence.

MYTH 4:
Since attendance is a family responsibility, we cannot do anything to address chronic absence.

Students Chronically Absent in Kindergarten & 1st Grade Much Less Likely to Read Proficiently in 3rd Grade

Percent Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on 3rd Grade ELA Based on Attendance in Kindergarten and 1st Grade
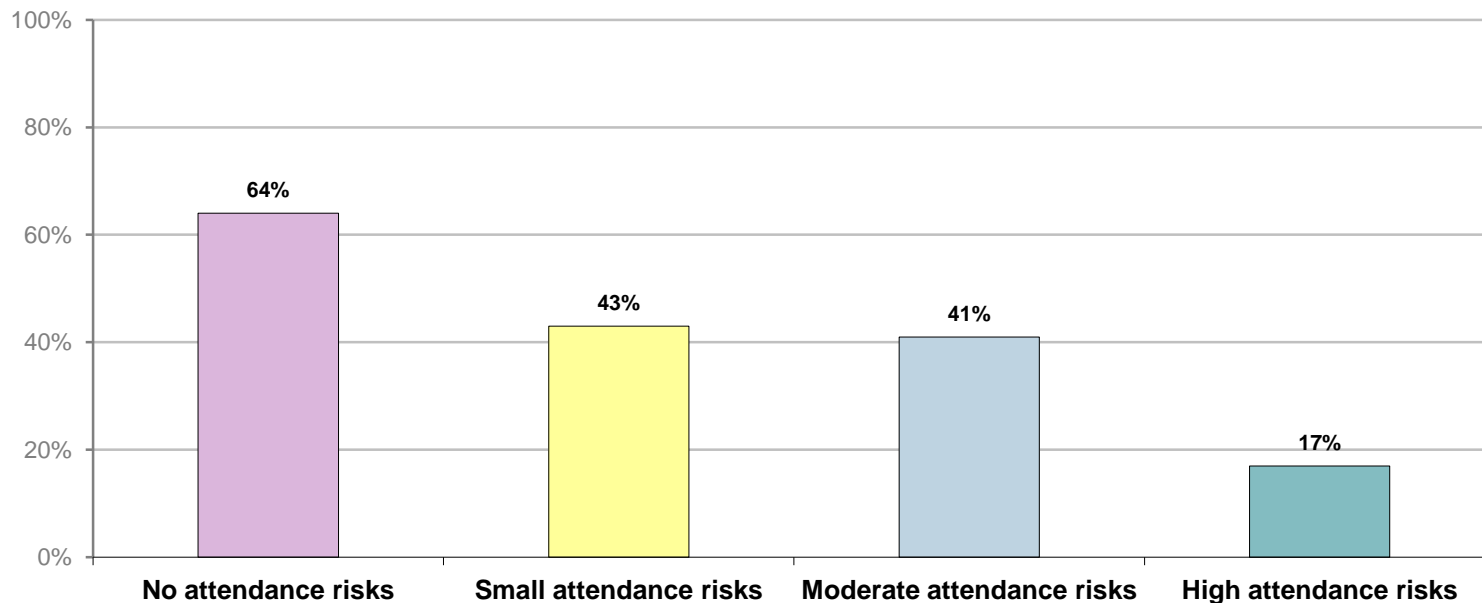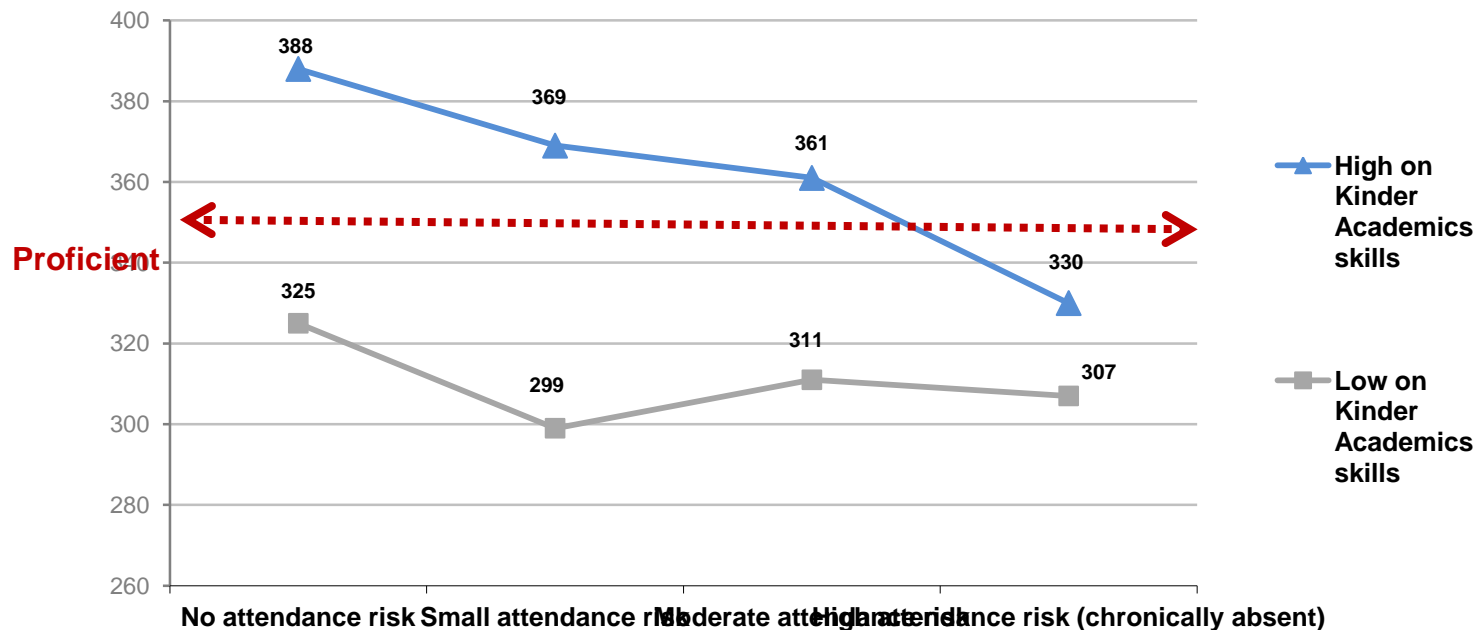
No risk	**Missed less than 5% of school in K & 1st t**
Small risk	**Missed 5-9% of days in both K & 1st**
Moderate risk	**5-9% of days absent in 1 year &10 % in 1 year**
High risk	**Missed 10% or more in K & 1st**

Source: Applied Survey Research & Attendance Works (April 2011)

School Readiness & Early Attendance Are Critical to Early School Success

**3rd Grade ELA Test Scores By Attendance and School Readiness Level**

No risk	**Missed less than 5% of school in K & 1st t**
Small risk	**Missed 5-9% of days in both K & 1st**
Moderate risk	**5-9% of days absent in 1 year &10 % in 1 year**
High risk	**Missed 10% or more in K & 1st**

Source: Applied Survey Research & Attendance Works (April 2011)

The Long-term impact of Chronic Kindergarten Absence Is Most Troubling for Poor Children

5th Grade Math and Reading Performance By K Attendance
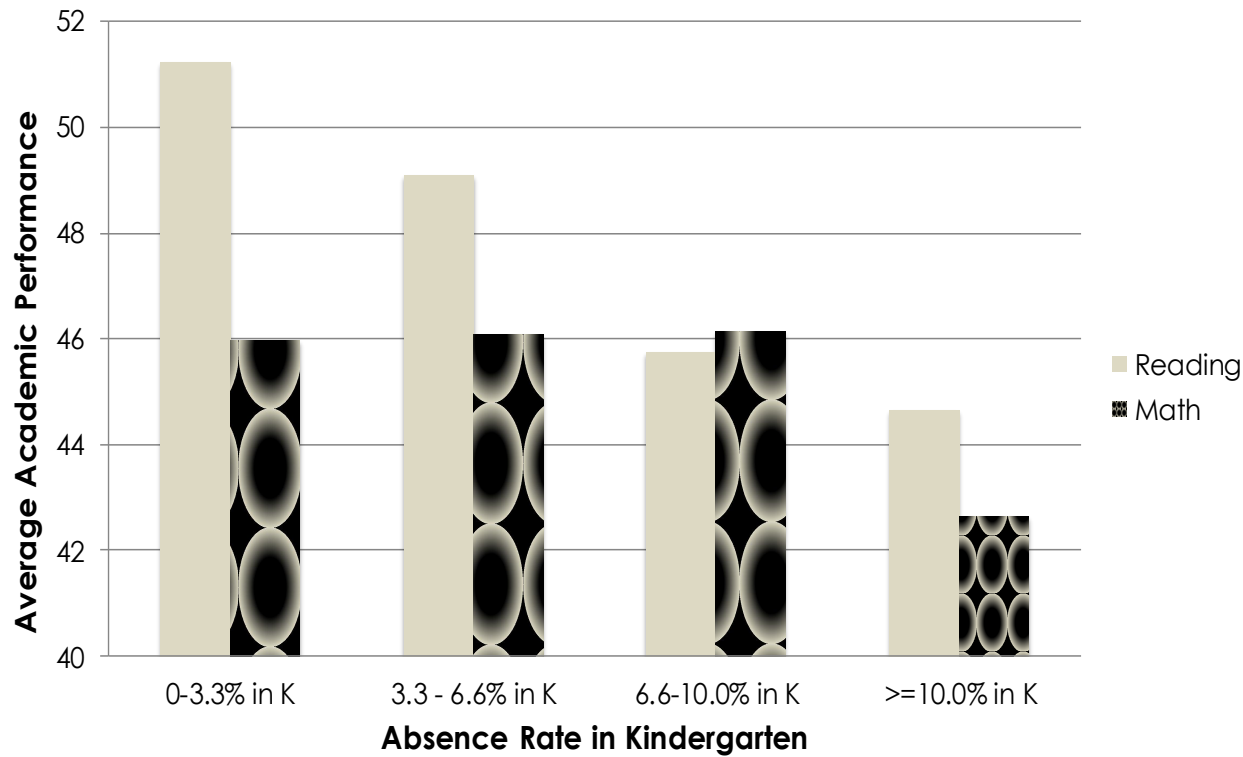
Source: ECLS-K data analyzed by National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP)
Note: Average academic performance reflects results of direct cognitive assessments conducted for ECLS-K.

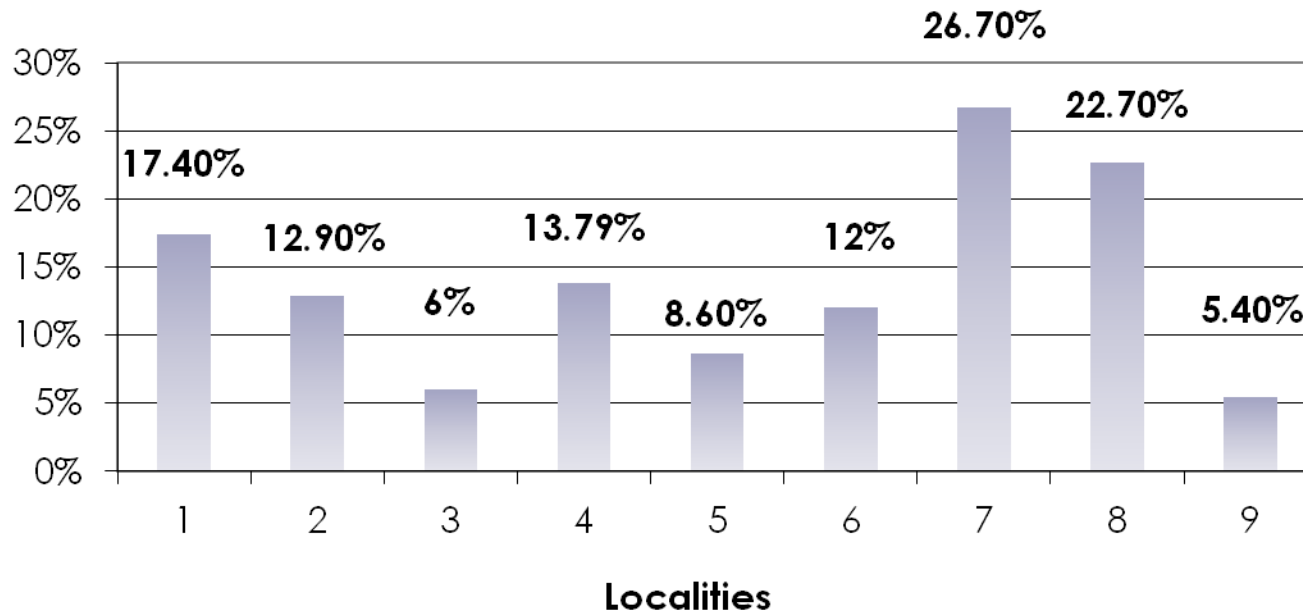# Chronic Absence is Especially Challenging for Low-Income Children

❑ Poor children are **4x** more likely to be chronically absent in K than their highest income peers.

❑ Children in poverty are more likely to lack basic health and safety supports that ensure a child is more likely to get to school. They often face:

- **Unstable Housing**
- **Limited Access to Health Care**
- **Poor Transportation**
- **Inadequate Food and Clothing**
- **Lack of Safe Paths to School Due to Neighborhood Violence**
- **Chaotic Schools with Poor Quality Programs, etc.**

* (Romero & Lee 2007)

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Chronic Early Absence Can Reach High Levels

Nationally, 1 out of 10 Kindergartners & 1st Graders are Chronically Absent. Levels Can be Higher Locally.

Bar chart showing chronic early absence rates by locality:
- Locality 1: 17.40%
- Locality 2: 12.90%
- Locality 3: 6%
- Locality 4: 13.79%
- Locality 5: 8.60%
- Locality 6: 12%
- Locality 7: 26.70%
- Locality 8: 22.70%
- Locality 9: 5.40%

Localities

Chronically Absent 6th Graders Have Lower Graduation Rates

Dropout Rates by Sixth Grade Attendance
(Baltimore City Public Schools, 1990-2000 Sixth Grade Cohort)

Source: Baltimore Education Research Consortium SY 2009-2010
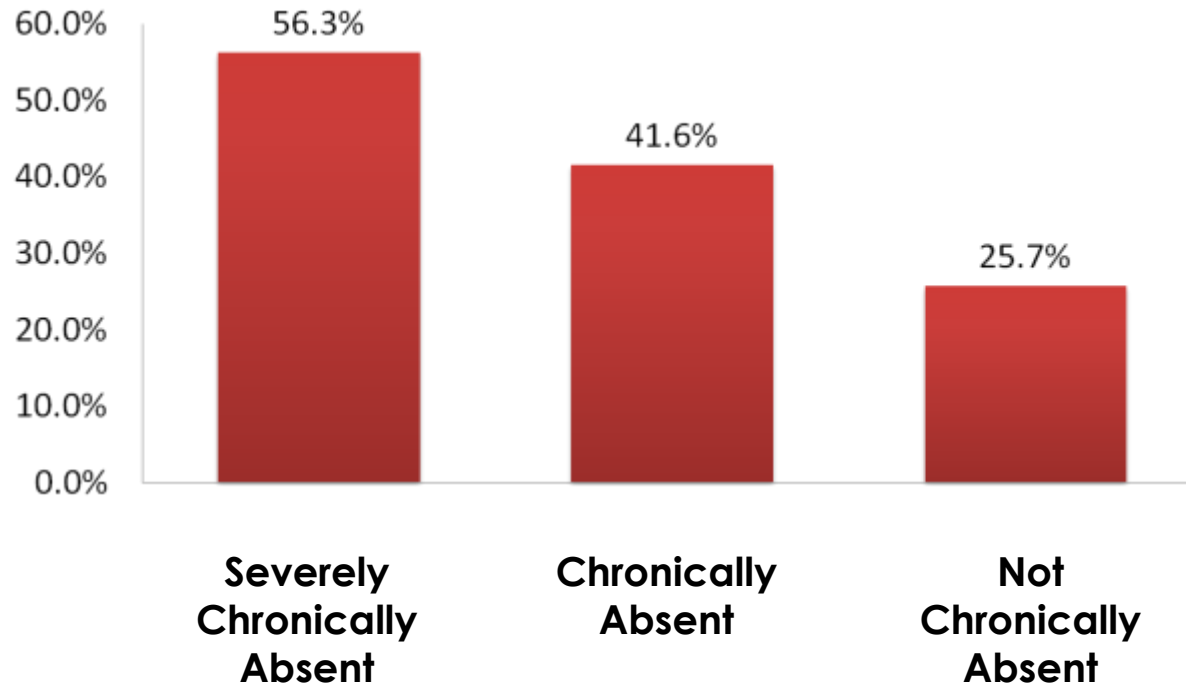
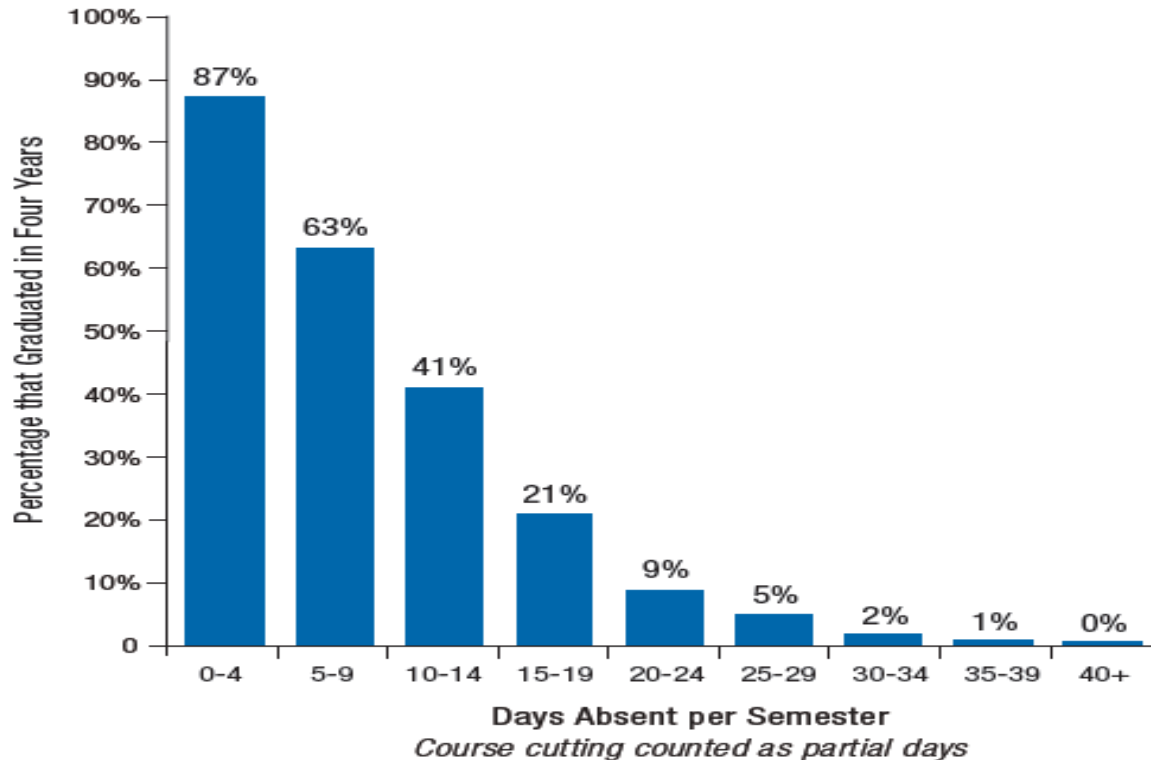# 9th Grade Attendance Predicts Graduation for Students of All Economic Backgrounds

Percentage that Graduated in Four Years

- 0-4: 87%
- 5-9: 63%
- 10-14: 41%
- 15-19: 21%
- 20-24: 9%
- 25-29: 5%
- 30-34: 2%
- 35-39: 1%
- 40+: 0%

Days Absent per Semester
Course cutting counted as partial days

Note: This Chicago study found attendance was a stronger graduation predictor than 8th grade test scores.

Source: Allensworth & Easton, *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools*, Consortium on Chicago School Research at U of C, July 2007

Data Usually Exists But Is Not Being Used Effectively

❑ In most schools, teachers take roll every day.

❑ In most districts, attendance for each student is recorded electronically.

❑ Although the data exists, districts are only just beginning to use chronic absence to identify at risk students.

❑ Most districts do not calculate and monitor whether chronic absence is a significant problem nor is such reporting required by most states or federal policy even for low-performing schools.

Moving into Action Requires Knowing If Chronic Absence is a Problem

Most Schools Only Track Average Daily Attendance and Truancy. Both Can Mask Chronic Absence.

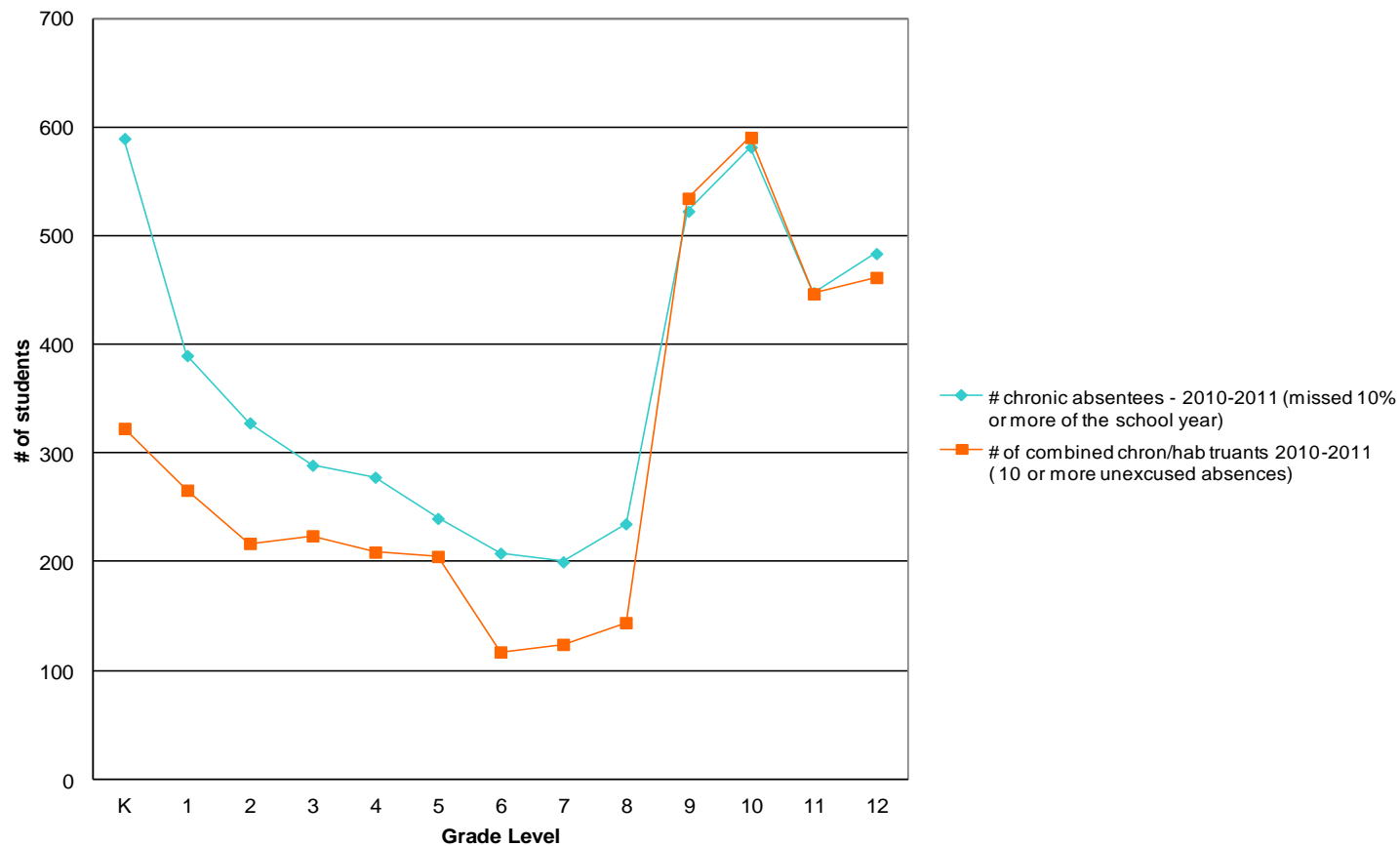**Variation in Chronic Absence for Schools with 95% ADA in Oakland, CA**

Chart showing chronic absence percentages: 5.8%, 9.3%, 12.4%, 12.5%, 14.2%, 17.3%
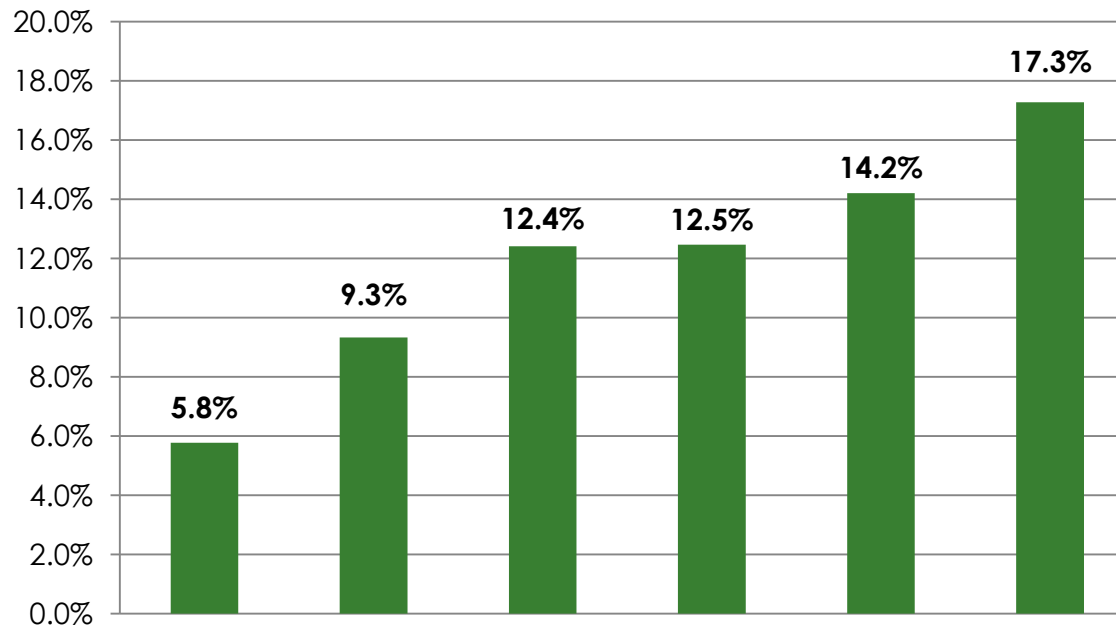
98% ADA = little chronic absence, 95%ADA = don't know; 93% ADA = significant chronic absence
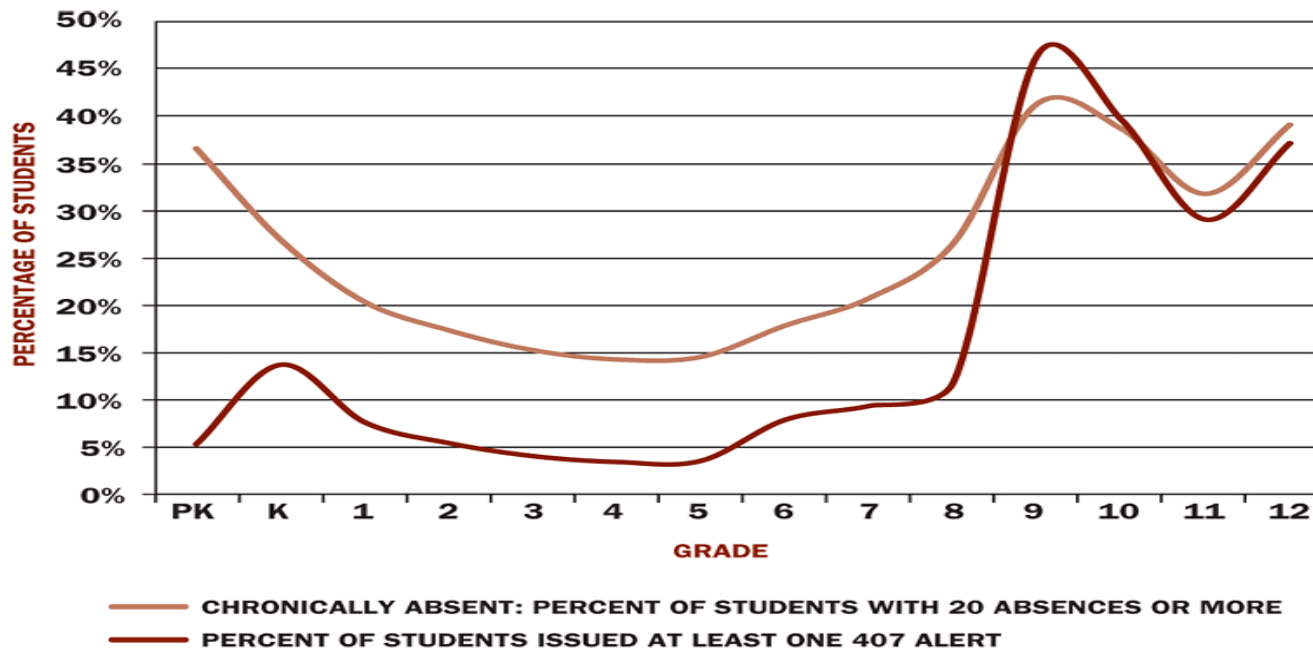
Truancy Can Undercount Chronic Absence

Chronic Absentees Compared To Combined Chronic and Habitual Truants in San Francisco Unified School District 2010-2011

Legend:
- ◆ # chronic absentees - 2010-2011 (missed 10% or more of the school year)
- ■ # of combined chron/hab truants 2010-2011 (10 or more unexcused absences)

Y-axis: # of students
X-axis: Grade Level

Chronic Absence can reach high levels.

New York City Schools

CHRONICALLY ABSENT: PERCENT OF STUDENTS WITH 20 ABSENCES OR MORE
PERCENT OF STUDENTS ISSUED AT LEAST ONE 407 ALERT

A 407 alert is issued when student misses 10 consecutive days or 20 days over a 40 day period. It misses more sporadic absence.
1 out of 5 elementary school children were chronically absent.

Data is Needed for Identifying Programmatic Solutions

❑ Chronic absence data (as well as other attendance measures) should be examined by classroom, grade, school, neighborhood or sub-population.

❑ If chronic absence is unusually high for a particular group of students, explore what might be common issues (unreliable transportation, community violence, asthma and other chronic diseases, poor access to health care, unnecessary suspension for non-violent offenses, lack of engaging curriculum, child care or afterschool programming, foreclosures, etc.)

❑ If chronic absence is unusually low for a high risk population, find out what they are doing that works.

Variation Helps Identify Good Practice and Need for Intervention

Chronic Absence Levels Among Oakland Public Schools

	Elementary	Middle	High School
# Schools with 0%-5% Chronic Absence	9	0	0
# Schools with 5.1%-10% Chronic Absence	17	4	1
# Schools with 10.1%-20% Chronic Absence	25	8	6
# Schools with >20.1% Chronic Absence	9	4	9
Total No. Schools	60	16	16
Highest % of Chronic Absence	31.5%	32.8%	42.1%
Lowest % of Chronic Absence	0.3%	6.9%	7.9%
Median	12.7%	14.9%	21.0%
Mean	11.9%	15.6%	22.4%

Schools + Communities CAN Make a Difference

Characteristics of Successful Attendance Initiatives

❑Partner with community agencies to help families carry out their responsibility to get children to school.

❑Make attendance a priority, set targets and monitor progress over time.

❑Offer personalized early outreach to improve attendance

❑Engage parents and students in identifying and addressing attendance barriers .

❑Clearly communicate expectations for attendance and explain why it matters for school success to students and families.

❑Begin early, ideally in Pre-K.

❑Combine targeted interventions with universal strategies.

❑Offer positive supports before legal action.

Examples of Successful Efforts

Baltimore: Fewer unnecessary suspensions, reduced middle school transitions, expanded monitoring of attendance data, and a citywide campaign have helped cut middle school chronic absence in half.
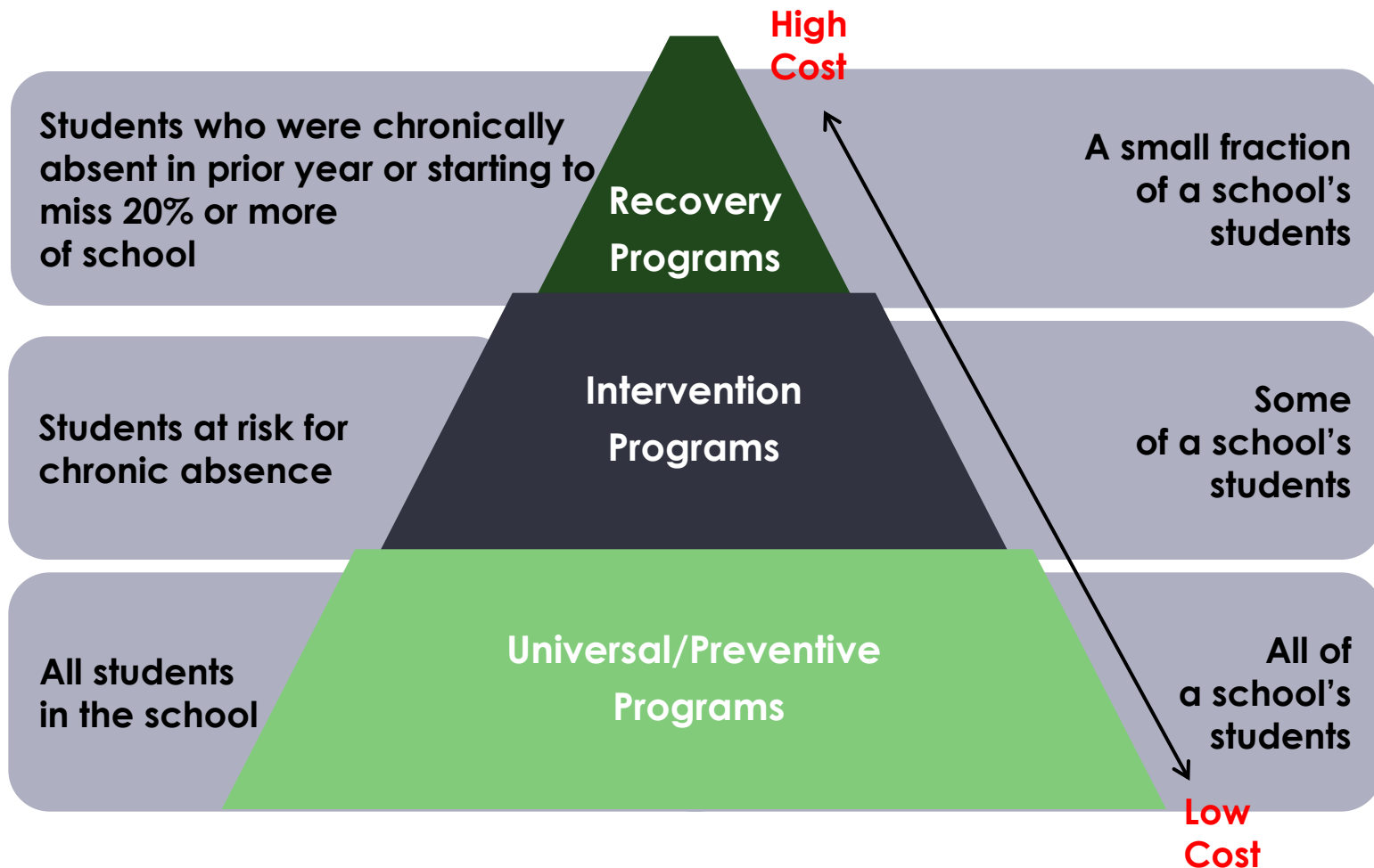
Grand Rapids: A community schools approach including outreach and case management for students with poor attendance has helped bring chronic absence down and student achievement up.

New York City: Schoolwide incentives, celebrity wakeup calls, data dashboards, and mentoring for at-risk students have reduced elementary and middle school chronic absence in pilot schools.

Increased Attendance Involves a 3-Tiered Approach that Fits with Most Reform Efforts

High Cost

Students who were chronically absent in prior year or starting to miss 20% or more of school

A small fraction of a school's students

Recovery Programs

Intervention Programs

Students at risk for chronic absence

Some of a school's students

Universal/Preventive Programs

All students in the school

All of a school's students

Low Cost

Examples of Strategies for 3-Tiered Approach

Recovery Programs

- Case management and wrap-around services
- Referral as last resort for court-based intervention

Intervention Programs

- Personalized early outreach, support, mentoring for students with poor attendance
- Identify and remove barriers
- Attendance contracts

Universal/Preventive Programs

- Safe & supportive school environment
- Engaging classroom environments
- Parent education about why attendance matters and how to help each other get students to school
- Ongoing attention to attendance data
- Recognition for good and improved attendance
- Collaboration with afterschool & early childhood
- School-based health supports

Family Engagement:
An Essential Ingredient

- Attendance reflects whether families understand the adverse impact of absence on their child's well-being. Start with hopes & dreams vs. complying with the rules.

- Families send their children to school when they trust the adults in the school.

- Families are a critical sources of help for each other around attendance.

- Families offer critical insights into what are effective strategies for improving attendance in a particular community

- Chronic absence is an early warning sign that families are at risk and need of economic and social supports.

Considerations for Younger Children

❑ Many parents may not be aware that attendance in pre-K & K matters.

❑ Young children's attendance is affected by what happens to parents. Multiple maternal and family risk factors increase chronic absence.

❑ Participation in formal child care is associated with lower chronic absence in kindergarten.

❑ Developing good on-time attendance habits begin in pre-K.

❑ Poor health was associated with higher chronic absence for in K-3 for children from 200-300% of poverty.

❑ While attendance is more affected by family conditions, children's attitudes are a factor too.

Considerations for Older Youth

❑ Attendance is more heavily influenced by the youth although family still matters.

❑ Older youth may miss school due to family responsibilities   (e.g. caring for siblings or ill parent, holding a job).

❑ Mental health, teen pregnancy, chronic conditions, and dental disease are top health concerns that affect attendance

❑ Safety issues (In-school and community) play even greater role.

❑ Students miss school due to suspensions for non-violent behaviors.

❑ Students become discouraged as they fall behind in credits and graduation feels increasingly unattainable.

❑ Direct and meaningful engagement of youth in the classroom and activities on campus even more essential.

Lessons Learned

1. Avoid the blame game. Find out how everyone can contribute to reducing absences.

2. Regular reports on chronic absence to inform action is essential.

3. Use data to identify priorities where you can make the greatest impact – for example -the transitions to K and 9th grade.

4. Provide positive supports first – it's less costly and more effective.

5. Build ownership at the school site level. But, remember schools can't do it alone! They need community partners and district support.

6. Engage in systemic reform by bringing together key stakeholders at district/community level and staffing the coordinated effort.

7. Reducing chronic absence takes time and sustained attention from site level and district leadership.

Why Attendance Matters For Turning Around Underperforming Schools

In order to develop an effective plan for turning raising achievement, you need to know:

a) *Are students not learning because they are missing too much school so can't benefit from classroom instruction?*

b) *Are students attending school but still not learning?*