

Indicators of School Quality: Chronic Absenteeism

What is chronic absenteeism?

Chronic absenteeism is most commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason, excused or unexcused. Chronic absenteeism is a proven early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout. While the causes of chronic absenteeism are multifold, research shows that student health and a school's health and wellness environment are key factors that can contribute to a student being chronically absent.

Why is chronic absenteeism important?

The first-ever national comprehensive data collected on chronic absenteeism reveals that more than six million students—or 13 percent of all students—missed at least 15 days of school in the 2013-14 school year.¹ This data shows that chronic absenteeism affects students in all parts of the country and is prevalent among all races and among students with disabilities. It also shows significant disparities. Compared to their Caucasian peers, American Indian and Pacific Islander students are over 50 percent more likely to be chronically absent, African American students are 30 percent more likely to be chronically absent and Hispanic students are nine percent more likely to be chronically absent.

Frequent absences can be devastating for a child's school success. For example, children who are chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to be reading at grade level by the third grade.² Students who are not reading at grade level by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.³ By sixth grade, chronic absenteeism becomes one of the leading indicators that a student will drop out of high school.⁴ By high school, attendance is a better dropout indicator than test scores.

How is chronic absenteeism measured?

State by state definitions of chronic absenteeism vary significantly and, as a result, the measurement of chronic absenteeism varies as well. Defining chronic absenteeism as a percentage of days missed (such as 10 percent) rather than a number of days missed promotes earlier identification of students to trigger intervention. Using a percentage allows for the identification

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights 2013-2014 Data Collection. <http://ocrdata.ed.gov>.

² Ehrlich, S., Gwynne, J. A., Pareja, A. S., and Allensworth, E. M. Preschool attendance in Chicago public schools: relationships with learning outcomes and reasons for absences: Research summary. The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Reform, 2013. <http://bit.ly/1nGtqg>

³ Hernandez, D. Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011 April. p. 3.

⁴ Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., and Mac Iver, D. J. Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 2007; 42(4), 223-235.

of students who are on track for chronic absence at any point during the school year even if a student only misses two or three days each month. A school's chronic absence rate is the percentage of students who are chronically absent. While advocates believe the use of a percentage is a stronger way to measure chronic absenteeism, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) currently defines chronic absenteeism as missing 15 days or more of school for any reason.

How has this school quality measure been used to date?

ED requires public schools across the country to report their rates of chronic absenteeism as a part of the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). The inclusion of chronic absenteeism was a new requirement for the 2013-2014 CRDC, which means that the 99.5 percent of schools across the country that complete the CRDC are now measuring and reporting chronic absenteeism as a part of the CRDC.

Several states have already begun using chronic absenteeism as an accountability metric. New Jersey, Hawaii and Oregon added the measure through waivers to the prior federal education act. California requires local districts to report on chronic absence in their local funding plans; Connecticut has built it into its school improvement process; and Georgia makes it part of its school climate work.

Under ESSA, states are now required to include chronic absenteeism on their state report cards. Title I of ESSA requires that both state and LEA report cards include rates of chronic absenteeism, defined by ED as missing 15 days or more of school for any reason in a school year. Given the connection between student health and chronic absenteeism, requiring states and LEAs to report their rates of chronic absenteeism is a key strategy for elevating the importance of student health and raising awareness about chronic absenteeism.

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