

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

An Overview

Chronic absenteeism is a measure of how many students miss a defined number of school days (often around 15 or more days) for any reason. Research shows that chronic absenteeism is associated with a number of negative consequences for students, including lower achievement, disengagement from school, course failure, and increased risk of dropping out.

How is it measured?

Chronic absenteeism rates are usually measured as the percentage of students missing a certain number of school days, regardless of the reason. Several state education agencies and advocacy organizations calculate chronic absenteeism as the number and percentage of students missing 10 percent or more of their school days. Other states define chronic absenteeism based on a set number of days used. The number of days varies from state to state, ranging from 10 or more days of school missed to 21 or more days of school.

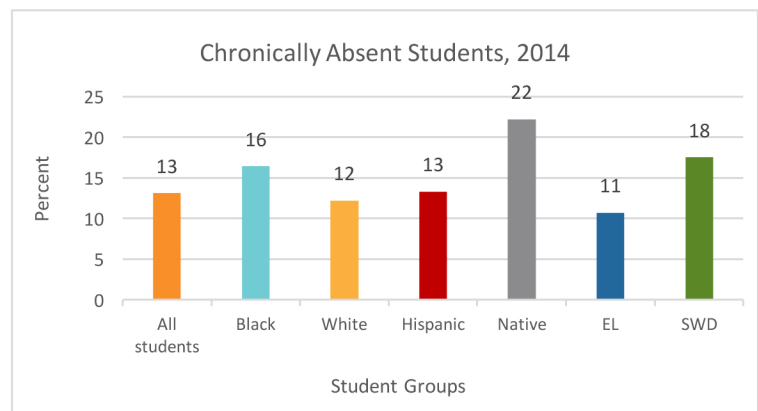
All districts have to report to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection the percentage of students in each school who miss 15 or more days. Under ESSA, this information must also be included in school report cards.

How is chronic absenteeism different from other measures?

- *Average daily attendance* measures the average number of students who show up on any given day. Most schools have very high average daily attendance rates — often above 95 percent — so this measure does not meet the “meaningful differentiation” requirement in ESSA. Additionally, average daily attendance masks which students are at risk of academic failure due to chronic absenteeism.
- *Truancy rates* only include unexcused absences, while chronic absenteeism includes both excused and unexcused. Research shows that for student achievement, what matters is the number of days a student misses, not the reason — which is why chronic absenteeism is a stronger measure.

What do the research/data tell us?

1. Based on the most recent national data, about 13 percent of students miss 15 or more school days.¹
2. Schools demonstrate higher chronic absenteeism rates for some groups of students — especially low-income students, Native students, and students with disabilities.²
3. On average, schools with higher chronic absenteeism rates have lower proficiency rates, and vice versa, regardless of how chronic absenteeism is defined. This holds for students overall and for each group of students.³
4. On average, schools with higher chronic absenteeism rates also have higher discipline rates for students overall.⁴
5. Research is clear that schools and districts can impact students' absenteeism rates.⁵



Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-14

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, “2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look,” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, June 2016), <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>.

² Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, “The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Public Schools,” (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, May 2012).

³ Based on an Education Trust analysis of Florida Department of Education, Massachusetts Department of Education, and Michigan Department of Education data.

⁴ Based on an Education Trust analysis of Massachusetts Department of Education data.

⁵ *Attendance Works*, “Evidence-Based Solutions.” <http://www.attendanceworks.org/research/evidence-based-solutions/>.

What are the benefits and risks of including this measure in a school rating system?

Benefits

- Absenteeism has strong relationships with achievement and graduation rates. It matters for student success.
- The measure is relevant to all grades, including early elementary grades.
- Absenteeism is something that schools/districts don't always feel responsible for. Including the metric in accountability would send a clear signal that they are responsible, and encourage early intervention.

Considerations/Warnings

- The measure may be gameable. States will need to have processes in place for ensuring data accuracy.
- The measure's inclusion may provide schools with incentive to define "absence" as narrowly as possible.
- Including the measure in accountability may lead districts to unjustifiably pursue legal action against families whose kids are missing lots of school.

If your state is considering including a chronic absenteeism measure in school ratings, what questions should you ask? What should you watch out for?

How is an absence defined?

When defining chronic absenteeism, both excused and unexcused absences should factor into the measure. Since a student's absence from school matters regardless of the reason, all lost instructional days should be counted, including those resulting from disciplinary action. Currently, many — but not all — states consider out-of-school suspension as absences. Many consider students suspended in-school to be present.⁶

- **Tip:** Watch out for attempts to include only unexcused absences in a measure of chronic absenteeism or to exclude students suspended out-of-school. Students suspended in-school should also be considered absent since they are losing instructional time.

States will need to make sure that there are exemptions in place for students absent for medical reasons.

Lost instructional time is more difficult to measure in high school, where students may miss individual classes — but not the entire day — repeatedly. How will your state define an absence at the high school level?

How many days does a student need to miss to be considered chronically absent?

States will need to define how many missed days constitute "chronic" absenteeism. Research suggests that missing 10 percent or more school days can affect student outcomes.⁷ However, this definition may result in allowing different numbers of lost instructional days in different schools and districts. For accountability purposes, it may be easier to define chronic absenteeism based on a set number of days missed.

- **Note:** States have to report the percentage of students missing 15 or more days to the Civil Rights Data Collection. Under ESSA, this information must also be included in school report cards.

How will the state ensure that the data are accurate? Is there a process for auditing districts to verify that data are correct? What does that process involve?

If schools know that their ratings depend in part on their chronic absenteeism rates, they may try to "game" their data — for example, by reporting inaccurate numbers of absences. If states are planning to hold schools accountable for chronic absenteeism rates, they need to have quality controls in place to make sure the data are accurate, as well as a process for reviewing the data once it becomes part of the accountability system. For example, if chronic absenteeism rates drop dramatically — rather than steadily — once schools are held accountable for reducing them, that may be an indication of gaming.

⁶ Based on an informal survey of 15 states conducted by Attendance Works.

⁷ Robert Balfanz, Lisa Herzog, and Douglas MacIver, "Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions," *Educational Psychologist* 42, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): 223–235, http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/preventing_student_disengagement.pdf; and Applied Survey Research, "Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Associations with Student Characteristics, School Readiness, and Third Grade Outcomes," (San Jose, Calif.: July 2011), <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ASR-Mini-Report-Attendance-Readiness-and-Third-Grade-Outcomes-7-8-11.pdf>.