

Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight

A Research Brief from Attendance Works and Child & Family Policy Center



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Summary

Chronic absenteeism—or missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason—is a proven early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout. Too often, though, this problem is overlooked, especially among elementary students, because of the way attendance data are tracked. This study confirms the premise that districts and schools may fail to detect high levels of chronic absence because the problem is easily masked by average daily attendance, one of the most commonly calculated attendance measures. While many educators assume a 95 percent ADA rate is an indicator of good attendance, our research found that is often not the case. We found that schools with average daily attendance rates higher than 97 percent rarely have a problem with chronic absence, but that schools with ADA rates between 93 and 97 percent need to analyze their data to determine whether chronic absence is a significant problem. Moreover, schools with ADA rates of 93 percent or below are almost certainly dealing with high concentrations of absenteeism. Local, state and federal governments can take steps to ensure districts and schools use existing data to monitor and identify chronic absence starting in kindergarten.

“If children aren’t in school, they don’t learn. Improving school attendance improves success in school.”

The Critical Importance of Attendance In the Early Grades

A key ingredient for ensuring success in school is helping children — at the beginning of their academic careers — get into the habit of attending school every day. While going to school regularly will not by itself ensure that children learn, missing extended periods of school, especially when children are acquiring the basic academic skills that lead to becoming proficient readers, certainly puts a child at risk. The research shows:

- All children, regardless of socio-economic background, do worse academically in 1st grade if they are chronically absent (missing 10 percent or more of school including excused and unexcused absences) in kindergarten. A recent study in California found that only 17 percent of children chronically absent in both kindergarten and 1st grade were proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade as compared to 64 percent of their peers who attended regularly (missing less than 5 percent of school.)ⁱ
- Going to school regularly in the early years is especially critical for children living in poverty, who are less likely to have the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom. Among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of 5th grade.ⁱⁱ
- Available well before the results of standardized tests — typically in 3rd grade — chronic absence can be an important early warning sign that intervention may be needed to ensure a child is on the path to success.

While chronic absence is not a problem everywhere, it can reach surprisingly high levels even in the early grades. Nationwide, nearly 10 percent of kindergartners and 1st graders are chronically absent. In some communities, chronic early absence can affect a quarter of all students in kindergarten through 3rd grade. Within particular schools in the same district, chronic early absence can range from less than 1 percent to more than 50 percent!ⁱⁱⁱ

Why is chronic early absence overlooked?

Unfortunately, although teachers take roll every day, most schools currently do not use their data to monitor if they have a problem with chronic absence. Schools generally focus on average daily attendance (ADA) figures and mistakenly assume that 95 percent ADA is an indicator of good attendance. This is not necessarily the case. For example, even in a school of 200 students with 95 percent average daily attendance, 30 percent (or 60) of the students could be missing nearly a month of school (i.e. chronically absent) over the course of the school year. It all depends whether absences are due to most students missing a few days or excessive absences among a small but still significant minority of students.

In keeping with No Child Left Behind, states, school districts and schools also typically track and monitor truancy. While the definition of truancy is left to states to determine, in most places it only refers to unexcused absences and is associated with students willfully missing school without the permission of an adult. Most importantly, truancy figures miss chronic absence especially among young children, who typically do not stay home without the knowledge of an adult who can call in an excuse.



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- i *Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes*, **Applied Survey Research**. May 2011
- ii Chang and Romero, Present, *Engaged & Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty: September 2008, http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_837.html (accessed July, 2009).
- iii Chang & Romero. 2008.

What is the connection between Average Daily Attendance and Chronic Absence?

To better understand the relationship between ADA and chronic absence, Attendance Works and the Child and Family Policy Center obtained school-by-school attendance information for elementary schools in three urban districts. The data include both the average daily attendance rate and the percentage of students who met the definition of chronic absenteeism. We then plotted this information and calculated the degree to which the ADA rate could “explain” or “predict” the level of chronic elementary absenteeism.

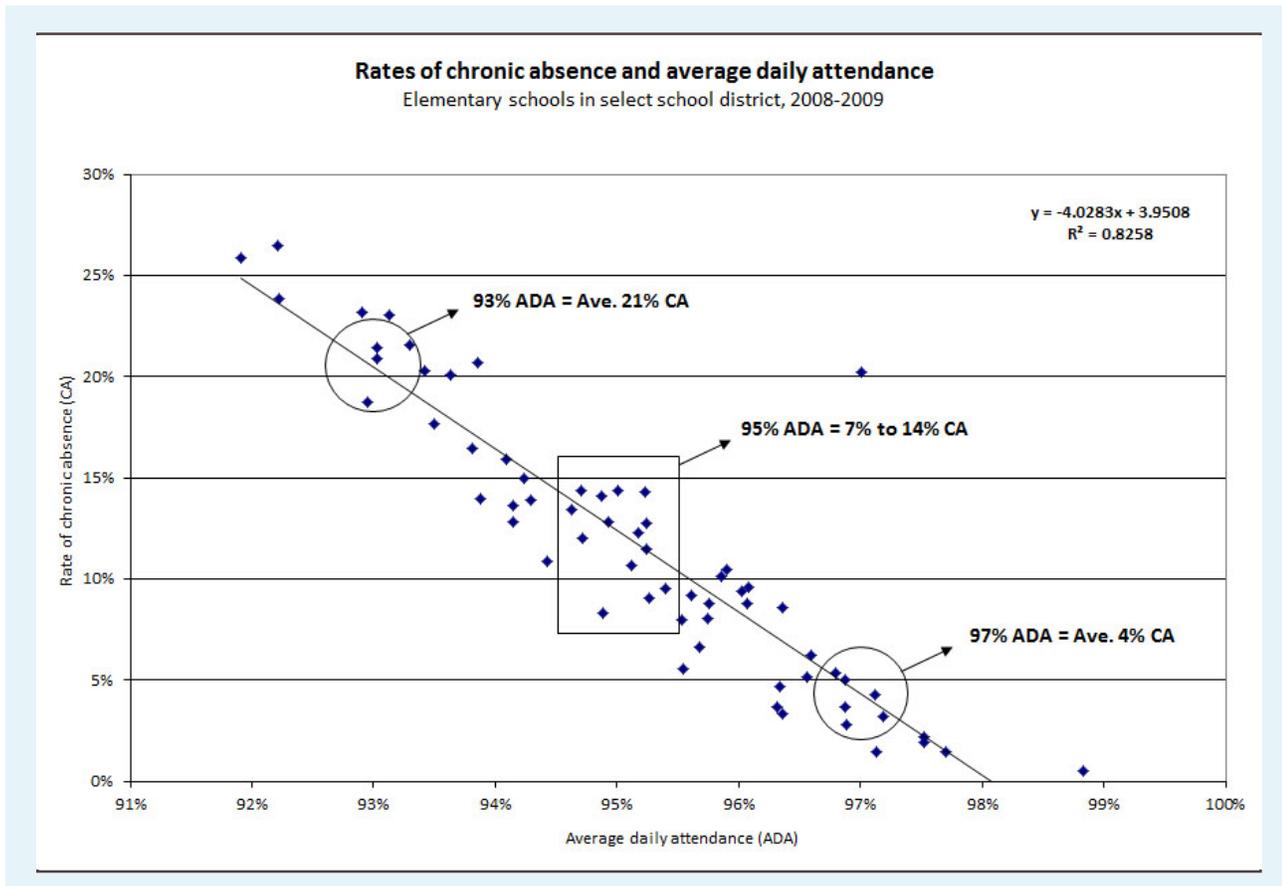
The analysis found:

- Schools with average daily attendance rates higher than 97 percent rarely have a problem with chronic absence.
- Schools between 93 and 97 percent need to analyze their data further to determine the extent of the problem.
- Schools with ADA rates below 93 percent are almost certainly dealing with high concentrations of absenteeism.

In fact, all schools would benefit from an analysis of chronic absence to determine patterns of absenteeism and possible interventions. All schools enroll some students who have injuries or illnesses leading to frequent absences, and schools should know who these students are and design individual strategies to support them. But buildings where 4 percent of students are chronically absent do not have systemic attendance failures. Buildings where 20 percent are chronically absent, on the other hand, clearly face individual as well as school- and community-wide challenges. There may be systemic problems in the building, such as a negative school climate, ineffective discipline practices or chaotic classrooms. Or there may be community and family challenges, such as a lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, high levels of violence or unaffordable housing. Strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism require public recognition and community support, as well as school-wide policy changes and strategies targeted toward with specific children and their families.



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The Results

Figure 1 shows the results of the analysis in one of the three urban districts studied, with similar patterns discerned in the other districts, as well. (see the appendix for information on all districts).¹ The data show that schools around the 95 percent ADA mark (between 94.5 percent and 95.5 percent) have rates of chronic absenteeism ranging from a little more than 7 percent to as high as 14 percent.² Analysis from other cities included in the [appendix](#) show rates higher than 20 percent. That range implies at least some concern with chronic absenteeism at many of the schools in this group; understanding the nature of that concern—whether individual, school or community issues—students requires further study.

Figure 1

At the higher or lower levels of average daily attendance, the relationship to chronic absenteeism is more straightforward. In the district depicted in Figure 1, average daily attendance rates in most buildings range from 93 percent to 97 percent. In the schools with 97 percent ADA, only 4 percent of the children are, on average, chronically absent. In comparison, in the schools with 93 percent ADA, 21 percent of children are, on average, chronically absent. This 4 percentage point difference in average daily attendance translates to a 17 percentage point difference in chronic absenteeism!

- 1 Although the slopes of the lines and the range of attendance and chronic absenteeism patterns are slightly different, the data from all three districts are very consistent with Figure 1.
- 2 The r2 value shows the percentage of the variation in chronic absenteeism across schools that can be predicted simply from knowing the average daily attendance. For the data in the Figure, the r2 value is .8258. Statistically, values that exceed .8 (80 percent) in the social science world are uncommonly high and suggest that there is a nearly complete match in what underlies their measurement.

Implications

If schools, school districts and states are to improve educational achievement and, in particular, the sentinel measure of 3rd grade reading proficiency, they will need to address chronic elementary absenteeism.

To do so effectively, they will need more and better data. They will need to know how many, and which, students are chronically absent. This requires comparing the number of days each student attends school with the number of days the student is enrolled. At a minimum, such measures should be incorporated into school data systems at the district and state levels. Additional information – on tardiness, the reasons for absences and the enrollment history of students who change schools within a school year – would be helpful to fully understand and respond to chronic absenteeism, starting in elementary school.

Such data collection will not happen overnight. Examination of average daily attendance information offers a valuable way to begin assessing the degree of concern around chronic absenteeism while laying the groundwork for collecting more complete data:

- At the district level, officials can start by identifying elementary schools with average daily attendance rates at or below 95 percent to collect information about chronic absenteeism and act upon it.
- At the state level, education departments can report more fully on ADA and its implications and provide technical assistance to districts in addressing low rates of attendance, while at the same time requiring or pressing for collection of chronic absence data.
- At the federal level, the reauthorization of ESEA can require or provide incentives for states to collect information on chronic absenteeism for all schools and districts and provide incentives (through demonstration grants, use of ESEA funds and technical assistance and support) to report and act upon chronic absenteeism.

One of the great values of focusing upon chronic absenteeism in elementary school is that it represents an



early warning sign for subsequent school problems. In a presentation to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading in March 2011, U.S. Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan noted as much. “We know in pre-K and K who our students most at risk are, those students who are missing, 15, 20, 25 days a year,” he said. “We know right there if we don’t intervene, these are our future dropouts.”^{iv} Beyond that, it’s a problem that can be fixed with the right response from school and community leaders. Nationally, there is increasing attention to this issue, particularly as it relates to early literacy. The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading—a collaborative effort by dozens of funders to ensure more children master reading by the end of third grade—recognizes chronic elementary absenteeism as a significant problem that must be addressed

Further, many of the solutions represent low-cost or no-cost activities that make education simpler, rather than more complicated, for all involved. Finally, successful efforts to address chronic absence generally involve schools, families and communities working together, an approach that also supports educational success generally.

To view Appendix and more data, please visit:

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ChronicAbsenceAppendix.pdf>

iv “Duncan Vows Support for Early Learning in ESEA, Grant Programs,” at: <http://www.gradelevelreading.net/2011/03/duncan-vows-support-for-early-learning-in-esea-grant-programs/>.