



Chronic Absenteeism as a “Fifth Indicator” in Accountability

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Chronic Absenteeism is a measure of how many students miss a defined number of school days for any reason. In Colorado, the definition is “the unduplicated count of students absent 10 percent or more of the days” in the school year. 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.ⁱ

What does the data tell us?

- According to the most recent data available, nationwide about 14 percent of students missed 15 or more school days. That’s one in seven students.ⁱⁱ
- At every level, schools demonstrate higher chronic absentee rates for some groups of students, especially low-income students, Native American students, and students with disabilities.ⁱⁱⁱ

Rationale for Incorporating Chronic Absenteeism into Accountability Systems

- Absenteeism is a powerful early predictor of student performance; unequivocal evidence shows that regular attendance is positively related to student achievement and graduation rates.
 - As early as pre-kindergarten, students who are chronically absent are less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade and more likely to be retained in later grades.^{iv} Among low-income children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of fifth grade.^v Chronically absent kindergartners are less likely to develop the social skills needed to persist in school.
 - By sixth grade, absenteeism is one of three early warning indicators that influence whether students will graduate from high school. By ninth grade, absenteeism is a better predictor of graduation than eighth grade test scores.^{vi}
- Absenteeism is one of the few metrics available in Colorado that meets ESSA selection criteria:
 - Indicator is applicable to every student and data can be disaggregated;
 - Indicator is comparable across the state’s school districts;
 - Indicator is likely to aid in the meaningful differentiation of school performance and the identification of schools for comprehensive/targeted support and improvement;^{vii}
 - Indicator is valid (accurately measures how much school has been missed) and reliable (taking attendance/computing absence repeatedly yields a consistent result).
- Absenteeism is relevant to all grades, including early elementary grades, which have historically been ignored in accountability systems. Incorporating absenteeism into accountability is a way to drive attention to the critical importance of the early years.
- Including absenteeism in accountability ensures that schools and districts will include the measure in their needs assessments and school improvement processes.



- Students miss school for a variety of reasons, but absenteeism is within the locus of control of schools to impact. There are countless no-cost, low-cost, and high-cost measures schools and districts can take to improve attendance. These can include establishing a more positive and engaging school climate, providing personalized outreach to families and developing plans together, and ensuring students have needed outside supports (transportation, health, etc.). Recent research shows that both schools and individual teachers can affect attendance.^{viiiix} Absenteeism provides guidance to schools about how to use hard-to-quantify characteristics, such as school climate and youth/parent engagement, to direct efforts (especially if coupled with perception surveys, school discipline rates, etc.).

Considerations for Colorado

- *Standardization of definitions.* In Colorado, how is an absence defined at each level (elementary and middle)? How many days does a student need to miss to be considered chronically absent?^x
- *Correlation with socioeconomic status.* Ensure that incorporating the indicator does not increase inequities in the current system by penalizing schools/districts with higher rates of absenteeism. The accountability system should reward progress towards steadily reducing absentee rates.
- *Exclusionary discipline policies.* Out-of-school suspensions are in control of the school, and including them in the calculation for chronic absenteeism incentivizes schools to examine and improve inclusive discipline policies.
- *Students with chronic health needs.* All schools enroll some students who have injuries or illnesses leading to frequent absences. An analysis of chronic absence to determine patterns and possible interventions will allow schools to know who these students are and design strategies to support them and their families, though certain exemptions could be considered.
- *Data collection.* Is there any associated burden with ensuring data accuracy and consistency of its collection? If so, ensure that any new requirements do not fall inordinately on certain districts.
- *Data privacy and security.* A benefit of tracking chronic absenteeism is the ability for schools to monitor the absenteeism of individual students and tailor interventions. Measures should be taken to ensure personally-identifiable information (PII) associated with the indicator is secure.
- *Implementation timeline.* Should it include a pilot, impact study, and/or “hold harmless” period?
- *Weight of the measure in accountability.* How do simulations affect overall school ratings?

Key Distinctions: Chronic Absenteeism, Average Daily Attendance, and Truancy

- *Average daily attendance.* Many states collect information about “average daily attendance,” an indicator that divides the total number of students in school on a given day by the number who were supposed to be there, and then averages those results over multiple days. This number is relatively easy to collect, but because most schools have high ADA rates, the Department of Education has indicated it does not meet the “meaningful differentiation” requirement in ESSA. ADA also masks whether absences are spread across



many students or select repeat offenders, and doesn't illuminate patterns of absence, such as specific classrooms or unsafe neighborhoods contributing to absence.

- *Truancy*. Truancy rates only include unexcused absences. For student achievement, what matters is the number of days a student misses, not the reason. That's why chronic absenteeism (which includes both excused and unexcused absences) is a stronger measure.

ⁱ The Education Trust. "Chronic Absenteeism: An Overview," <https://edtrust.org/students-cant-wait/chronic-absenteeism/>.

ⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. *A First Look: 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection*. June, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Balfanz, Robert and Vaughan Byrnes. *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*. Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. 2012.

^{iv} Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*. National Center for Children in Poverty. 2008.

^v Bruner, Charles, Hedy Chang and Anne Discher. *Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight*. Attendance Works. November, 2011.

^{vi} Ginsberg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. *Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success*. August, 2014.

^{vii} Whitmore Schanzenbach, Diane, Lauren Bauer and Megan Mumford. *Lessons for Broadening School Accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. The Hamilton Project. October, 2016.

^{viii} Attendance Works. "Evidence-Based Solutions," <http://www.attendanceworks.org/research/evidence-based-solutions/>.

^{ix} DesRosiers, Reed. "[Pre-K Attendance is a Strong Indicator of Future Success](#). New America Foundation." July 14, 2016.

^x Note: States already report the percentage of students missing 15 or more days to the Civil Rights Data Collection.