

Date: November 14, 2018

Prepared By: Stiles

Purpose: Explore the national and local context of chronic absenteeism versus habitual truancy, and understand the implications of absenteeism for students

Witness: Jamie Gonzales, Deputy Director of Policy, Innovation, and Measurement, PED; Angelo Gonzales, PhD, Chief Strategy Officer, United Way of Central New Mexico; Representative Patricio Ruiloba

Expected Outcome: Understand chronic absenteeism and the impact on student success

Chronic Absenteeism and its Impact on Student Learning: A Shift from Focusing on Unexcused Absences

Introduction

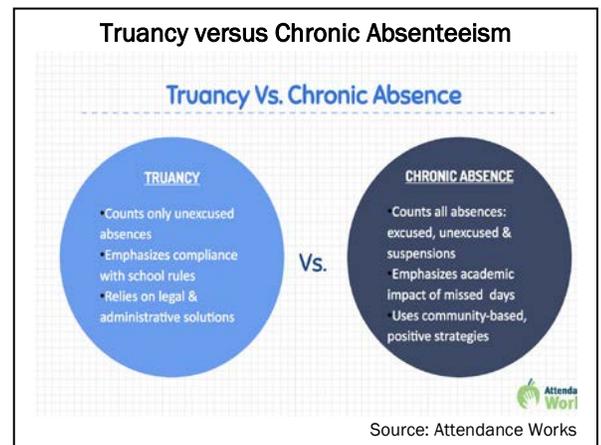
Student attendance is a critical element in ensuring that the public education system helps students overcome difference in privilege and background. Educators and policymakers have become increasingly concerned with the issue of student absenteeism as research has shown that excessive student absenteeism, excused or unexcused, may be an early warning sign for poor academic outcomes. There is a strong correlation between student attendance and overall performance, regardless of the reason for the absence.

According to research from the Education Commission of the States (ECS), each day that a student misses school is a day of learning lost. For chronically absent students, this is a detrimental pattern. Research has also shown there is a strong relationship between chronic absenteeism and graduation rates.

Background

Historically, it has been a national trend for schools to only track truancy, or the number of unexcused absences that a student accrues, as opposed to total absences. However, in the last several years, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) has produced a report stating chronic absenteeism is a hidden educational crisis, noting that during the 2013-2014 school year, roughly 14 percent of students nationwide were chronically absent, defined as missing 10 percent or more school days, for excused or unexcused reasons. Chronic absenteeism is a significantly bigger problem in secondary school than in elementary school. While absenteeism is not a new concern States are finding that the identified problem was understated as the focus shifts from truancy to chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism takes into account all days of missed instruction, regardless of the reason; however, definitions of chronic absenteeism vary



According to the Education Commission of the States, compared with their white peers, Native American elementary students are 1.9 times as likely to be chronically absent, and African American elementary students are 1.4 times as likely to be chronically absent. High school students with disabilities are 1.4 times as likely to be chronically absent than high school students without disabilities.

across states. The USDE defines chronic absenteeism as missing 15 or more school days per year for the purposes of data collection and reporting in the civil rights data collection. Some states define chronic absenteeism in terms of days of school missed, and some define it in terms of the percentage of time missed.

National Trends

Currently, about one in seven students misses 15 or more days of school every year for various reasons, though it is difficult to pinpoint root causes of chronic absenteeism because it can vary widely from student to student, and may be personal or confidential. Students can be chronically absent for many reasons, including: family responsibilities and obligations, work, transportation issues, poor health, homelessness, school safety issues, and disengagement from school.

ECS recently released a report that explains chronic absenteeism has the potential to exacerbate the achievement gap because it disproportionately affects students who already face significant academic challenges. ECS also notes understanding and intervening with students who are chronically absent presents an opportunity to begin to close the achievement gap.

A 2008 study of graduation patterns in Chicago Public Schools found the number of days students were absent in eighth grade was eight times more predictive of freshman year course failure than eighth grade test scores.

The same study found freshman year absences were nearly as predictive of graduation rates as grade point average and course failures.

Chronically absent students are at serious risk of falling behind in school.

The research findings note students who are chronically absent in the early grades are much less likely to read at grade level by third grade, and students who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school. While chronic absenteeism can negatively affect students at any grade, chronic absenteeism during the early grades sets students up for failure from a young age.

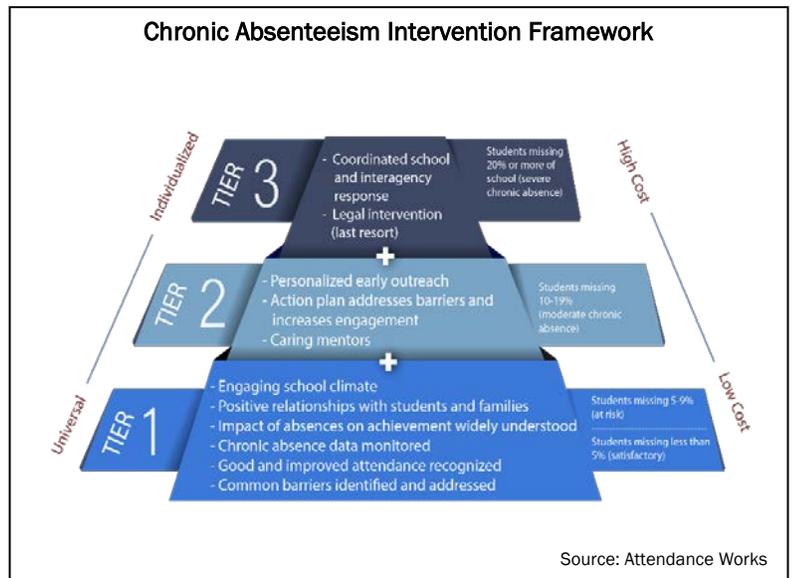
USDE is encouraging state policymakers to create local policy that addresses chronic absenteeism rates instead of habitual truancy rates. In 2015, in a joint effort, the U.S. departments of justice, health and human services, housing and urban development, and USDE prepared a report that made recommendations to states to combat chronic absenteeism. Major recommendations included the following:

- Implementing early warning and intervention systems to identify youth who are chronically absent from schools;
- Convening and sustaining a local taskforce with representatives from different constituencies and organizations — including education, health, public housing, and justice agencies as well as youth, families, faith and community representatives, and child welfare agencies — that can research the root causes of chronic absenteeism among local youth and recommend research and evidence-based solutions for those youth;
- Partnering with a broad range of third-party providers and agencies, in a manner consistent with applied state law and the Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to provide additional support services to students who are chronically absent and their families, and;

- Exploring opportunities to provide mentoring and other important support services for local youth to promote daily school attendance and to help deal with personal or family challenges that become barriers to daily attendance and school success.

Chronic Absenteeism in New Mexico

In New Mexico, law focuses on “habitual truancy”, which only reflects absences which are unexcused, and likely underestimates the number of actual absences any one student accrues. Current law requires parent notification if a student is habitually truant, which means a student has 10 or more unexcused absences within a school year. If unexcused absences persist after parent notification, the student shall be reported to the probation services office of the judicial district for investigation as to whether the student will be considered to be a neglected child or a child in a family that is in need of services. In addition to this, a children’s court may order the habitually truant student’s driving privileges to be suspended for a specified period of time not to exceed ninety days on the first finding and one year for a subsequent finding of habitual truancy.

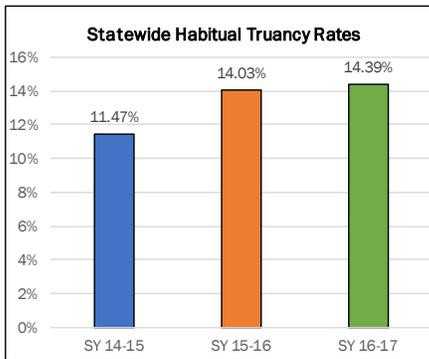


In current law, if a parent is found to be the cause of habitual truancy, the parent may be guilty of a petty misdemeanor and fees may be imposed upon the parent. If the student continues to be truant, a parent can be subject to a fine of up to \$500 dollars or imprisonment for a definite term not to exceed six months, or both.

New Mexico’s State ESSA Plan

According to ECS, several states have enacted legislation to address chronic absenteeism and many are discussing the utility of chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school quality or student success in their accountability systems under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ECS recommends all states incorporate chronic absenteeism data into their ESSA state accountability plans. This measure would encourage schools and school districts to adopt and implement interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism rates.

New Mexico’s state ESSA plan required the state to report habitual truancy for students who have accumulated the equivalent of 10 or more full-day unexcused absences within a school year during the 2017-2018 school year. Beginning in the 2018-2019 school year, the state ESSA plan will expand the statewide methodology to account for all absences, both excused and unexcused, including tracking the attendance of prekindergarten students. According to the state’s ESSA plan, this measure will fully replace the state’s reporting of student attendance by the 2019-2020 school year.



New Mexico’s ESSA plan says the state will work with stakeholders to detail the chronic absenteeism measure so that adequate protections and audits are in place prior to implementation, and PED will update the ESSA plan once a statewide, comparable definition of chronic absenteeism has been defined for use in 2018-2019 school grades. It is unclear whether this has happened.

Currently PED includes attendance as a performance indicator in the state’s school grading system; however, it is unclear if school districts and schools are reporting all absences, or only unexcused absences.

Early Warning Systems

PED has instituted an early warning system to assist schools and school districts in identifying students at risk of dropping out early. The early warning system takes into account, amongst other things, truancy rates. However, it is unclear whether the early warning system accounts for unexcused absence rates only, or if it accounts for all absences. PED’s website notes the early warning system uses truancy as an indicator, however training materials and cited research found on the PED website refer to chronic absenteeism.

As part of its early warning system, PED is instituting an Attendance Success Initiative in the 2018-2019 school year. The purpose of the initiative is to establish a cohort of attendance success coaches in elementary, middle, and high schools across the state. The role of these coaches is to work with students, families, communities, schools, and districts to eliminate chronic absenteeism. PED notes that the attendance success initiative aligns with the state’s ESSA plan by focusing on the implementation of chronic absenteeism interventions before turning to punitive measures. The initiative emphasizes early identification, parent notification, intervention, and community partnership, and is consistent with the elements outlined in the state’s ESSA plan.

A 2016 LFC report on Time on Task notes that attendance and truancy are critical factors impacting instructional days. Encouraging students to attend school and connecting with students and families to emphasize the importance of attendance are important responsibilities for school districts. It also noted that previous LFC evaluations showed chronic absenteeism can dramatically affect student success and is a major indicator of dropout risk.

Other New Mexico Attendance Initiatives

In New Mexico, certain organizations have lead initiatives to combat chronic absenteeism. Mission Graduate, an initiative created by the United Way of Central New Mexico, works with schools and community partners to help school leaders develop research-based strategies for reducing absenteeism rates. Communities In Schools of New Mexico is a branch of the nonprofit national organization Communities In Schools (CIS). In spring 2018, CIS released a report detailing how integrated student supports can reduce chronic absenteeism. Integrated supports can improve attendance by helping school leaders identify both the academic and non-academic barriers that keep students away from schools. Site coordinators work directly in schools to identify and address the needs of students and help connect them to appropriate resources.

In 2018, two bills associated with school attendance were proposed during the legislative session. House Bill 22 required schools to notify a student’s parents by text

when a student is absent from school. House Bill 297 proposed to repeal the Compulsory School Attendance Law and replace it with the Attendance Success Act. The bill provided for early, intensive interventions for students who were absent, chronically absent and for students who missed school for any reason. The bill included progressive interventions for students and maintained interventions currently in law, including suspension of the student's driver's license and potential referral to the Children, Youth and Families Department.

State Actions and Chronic Absenteeism

States are shifting their focus from addressing truancy rates to addressing chronic absenteeism. ECS recommends states adopt a standard definition of chronic absenteeism. Research suggests using a specified percentage of missed instructional days is preferable to using a set number of days because a percentage threshold promotes earlier identification of students in need of intervention than a specified number of days missed. ECS recommends states collect and use data on chronic absenteeism to make further policy recommendations. Also, when attendance is disaggregated by subgroups, trends can be evaluated to further support specific student populations.

Connecticut enacted a law aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism at the local level, which requires school districts and schools to establish attendance review teams in areas where chronic absenteeism is high. The law requires the Connecticut State Department of Education to develop a chronic absenteeism prevention intervention plan for use by school districts and regional school boards. Indiana enacted similar legislation in 2013, which requires the Indiana State Department of Education to provide resources and guidance to schools and school districts to guide them in research-based interventions for chronically absent students. In 2016, Oregon enacted similar legislation which would also help guide school districts in tracking chronic absenteeism.

Some states have used public awareness initiatives to help reduce their chronic absenteeism. In Arkansas, the Arkansas Campaign for Grade Level Reading leads an initiative which releases public service announcements on local radio stations, and provides buttons, banners, and handouts to school districts to help make the public aware of chronic absenteeism issues. New York has a partnership between non-profits, educational organizations, and government to distribute informational materials that address chronic absenteeism. In Utah, the nonprofit, Voices for Utah Children, leads a campaign to educate stakeholders and families about the repercussions of chronic absenteeism.

Many states are now collecting data on chronic absenteeism, and using that data to implement early warning systems. The Hawaii State Department of Education provides chronic absenteeism data to the public through their transparent and interactive strategic plan dynamic report, allowing anyone access to education statistics online. Massachusetts has an early warning system that collects data on students in first through 12th grade and provides information to the school districts about whether students are on track to meet academic goals and whether students

A 2016 joint study from the Education Endowment Foundation, conducted by Harvard University and the University of Bristol, reviewed the effects of sending parents one text message per week with information such as dates of upcoming tests and warnings about missed homework. Students who received the intervention were shown to have made an additional month's progress in math with reduced absenteeism.

According to ECS, state actions on chronic absenteeism can be categorized into four general areas: attendance improvement plans, public awareness initiatives, data usage and early warning systems, and school improvement efforts.

require intervention pertaining to attendance. The Rhode Island Department of Education collects information on chronic absenteeism that is accessible to the public in a user friendly database. Virginia has an early warning system that tracks students who have 10 percent or more absences in the first 20 days of school and over the first grading period so that early intervention can occur.

Some states require schools to track chronic absenteeism as part of their school improvement plans. For example, Indiana requires schools with a letter grade of B or lower to include a strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism in their school improvement plans. Iowa, New Jersey, and Virginia all require schools in need of improvement to track chronic absenteeism and to implement plans to address it.

Conclusion

Evidence shows attendance is critical to student progress, and excessive absenteeism for any reason, excused or unexcused, is detrimental to student success. Shifting focus from habitual truancy to chronic absenteeism may allow schools to use early warning systems to identify chronically absent youth at an early stage. The state may also consider actions other states have taken regarding chronic absenteeism, including implementing further attendance improvement plans, public awareness initiatives, and school improvement efforts.