

## 1 in 7 Students Found to Be 'Chronically Absent,' Report Finds

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As schools prepare to face increased accountability for bringing down rates of **chronic student absenteeism**, a new report reveals the scale of the task.

Nationwide, about 1 in 7 students was chronically absent, missing at least 15 school days during the 2015-16 year, according to an analysis of the most recent federal data that was released last week by the research-and-advocacy groups Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University.

Of those nearly 8 million students, 52 percent were concentrated in schools where chronic absenteeism rates topped 20 percent.

And the problem varies geographically. In eight states and the District of Columbia, more than 20 percent of students were chronically absent, a state-by-state breakdown found. The problem was worst in Maryland, where 29.1 percent of students missed 15 or more days of school.

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"When you have high and extreme levels of chronic absence, it's an alert that additional support is needed to make sure students have the resources they need to be in class and to thrive," said Hedy Chang, the executive director of Attendance Works.

#### **Role of ESSA**

Levels of chronic absenteeism will soon be more accessible to the public and, consequently, a big concern for many schools.

That's because the **Every Student Succeeds Act**, the federal education law that replaced No Child Left Behind, requires schools to list chronic absenteeism rates on their state report cards, which must be posted by December 2018.

That law also sought to **broaden definitions of school success** by requiring states to include at least one additional indicator, beyond traditional academic factors, in their accountability systems.

After seeking public input and debating a range of possible indicators, 36 states and the District of Columbia included rates of chronic absenteeism in their plans.

Every state set its own definition of chronic absenteeism. Some chose a fixed cap on the number of days a student could miss. Others adopted the definition favored by groups like Attendance Works, which suggests students shouldn't miss more than 10 percent of class days.

Setting a percentage, rather than a fixed number, allows schools to track students' missed school time throughout the school year, giving a moving indicator that can alert them early if there is a problem, attendance advocates argue.

The elevation of absenteeism in policy follows years of drumbeating for the cause by advocates at the state and national levels.

When states were tasked with updating their accountability plans, groups that had pushed for an increased focus on attendance at the local level were naturally positioned to speak up in those conversations, Chang has said.

"We believe this is a bit of a watershed moment," Chang said, adding that people have "long misunderstood whether or not this was even an issue."

### **Whole-School Solutions**

Absenteeism rates include school days missed for any reason—excused or unexcused—including illness and disciplinary issues like suspensions.

That means reducing absenteeism will require a whole-school approach that may include an examination of discipline policies, encouraging academic engagement to keep students motivated to show up, and coordinating resources to tackle non-academic factors that keep students out of school, like illness or a lack of transportation.

Districts that have tackled the problem have launched large advertising campaigns that encourage families to focus on attendance; they've worked with local celebrities and athletes to record student wake-up calls; and they've paired students with mentors who helped them with both academic and social issues.

Schools have also provided wraparound services, hosted free flu shot clinics on site, and coordinated with local providers to provide mental and physical health care to low-income students.

As states considered absenteeism, some groups, like local teachers' unions, argued that it was a tall task to ask schools to tackle so many non-academic factors. Others suggested absenteeism rates would merely serve as a proxy for poverty, which is outside of a school's control.

Some have also expressed concerns that districts may skew their data related to attendance or suspensions to meet goals and reduce their absenteeism rates.

In Washington, D.C., for example, an investigation by the [state superintendent of education's office](#) found an "increasing incidence of students graduating despite missing a large proportion of instructional days at school" in violation of district policy.

That report followed investigations by local media, like a Washington Post story that found schools underreporting suspensions to drive down discipline rates.

### **'Success Stories'**

The Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center analysis found that, nationwide, schools with high concentrations of poverty were also more likely to have high rates of chronic absenteeism.

Among schools where more than 75 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, 17 percent had rates of chronic absenteeism that topped 30 percent, the report shows. And an additional 17 percent had rates between 20 percent and 29.9 percent. By comparison, just 4 percent of schools where fewer than 24 percent of students were low-income had chronic absenteeism rates above 30 percent.

Native American, Hispanic, African-American, and Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students are also disproportionately represented among chronically absent students.

Absentee rates were extremely high at schools focused on special education. At about half of those schools, more than 30 percent of students missed at least 15 school days.

Twenty-seven percent of vocational schools had that level of chronic absenteeism, along with 47 percent of alternative schools.

Schools shouldn't see high rates of poverty or out-of-school challenges as destiny, said Robert Balfanz, the director of the Everyone Graduates Center.

"Even if you look at the highest poverty level, you will see in most states, a number of schools that have really low rates of chronic absenteeism," he said. "That's a signal that there are some bright spots and success stories."

States can explore those success stories to determine what works and what can be replicated in other schools, Balfanz said.

Along with the report, the organizations promoted a data tool created by the Hamilton Project at The Brookings Institution that allows users to search data by geographic area and demographic group.

States shouldn't seek to penalize schools that fall short on attendance, Chang said.

Rather, they should use the data to identify where they can target support and resources to fix the problem.

"The history of attendance in this country has been looking at attendance as a matter of compliance ...which is, in fact, the opposite of what we know works," she said. "What we know works is taking a positive, problem-solving approach."

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