

CONNECTICUT STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
Hartford

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Dr. Dianna R. Wentzell, Commissioner of Education

DATE: September 7, 2016

SUBJECT: Update on Chronic Absenteeism

Executive Summary

Purpose

This presentation provides an update to the State Board of Education (SBE) on the efforts and progress being made on reducing chronic absenteeism across the state. This effort is aligned with the Connecticut State Board of Education Five-Year Comprehensive Plan, 2016-21 – *Ensuring Equity and Excellence for All Connecticut Students*. One of the four promises made to our students in the Plan is: *Ensuring their non-academic needs are met so they are healthy, happy, and ready to learn*. The presentation will address the current data, strategic efforts and outcomes on chronic absenteeism in Connecticut. Additionally, September is nationally recognized as Attendance Awareness Month, a national awareness campaign celebrated by states and school districts across the nation. The month will be used to promote and inform various stakeholders of the importance of our students being in school and engaged every day. The presentation to the SBE is a launch of Connecticut’s campaign.

Background Information

National research as presented by Attendance Works (Chang, 2015), shows that good attendance is essential to student achievement and graduation and that truancy and chronic absenteeism can be precursors to school drop-out, academic failure and juvenile delinquency. Chronic absenteeism (also referenced as chronic absence), defined as missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason including excused and unexcused absences, is a proven predictor of academic failure and dropout rates. These absences can occur due to many factors, e.g., health, unstable housing, lack of transportation, and safety concerns/school climate. An assessment of barriers uncovers information on which to build school or districtwide plans and individualized interventions based on needs. Additionally, research has shown that:

- Improving attendance and reducing chronic absence takes commitment, collaboration and tailored approaches to particular challenges and strengths in each community.
- The impact of chronic absence hits low-income students and children of color particularly hard if they do not have the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom and are more likely to face systemic barriers to getting to school, such as, unreliable transportation, lack of access to health care, and unstable or unaffordable housing.
- Chronic absence exacerbates the achievement gap that separates low-income students from their peers, since students from low-income families are both more likely to be

chronically absent and are likely to be affected academically by missing school. Absenteeism also undermines efforts to improve struggling schools, since it is hard to measure improvement in classroom instruction if students are not in class to benefit from instruction.

Given the research, Connecticut's chronic absenteeism efforts are built on a cross-sector approach that includes the Connecticut General Assembly's Committee on Children, the SBE and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) as well as multiple state and local stakeholders. Further, our efforts are supported by national leaders such as Attendance Works and the Campaign for Grade Level Reading.

Connecticut is recognized as a national leader in this work and has presented at the first national conference that was convened in June 2016 in Washington, DC - *Every Student, Every Day National Conference: Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism by Implementing and Strengthening Cross-Sector Systems of Support for All Students*, hosted by The U.S. Department of Education, in collaboration with the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice. A team from Connecticut, including CSDE, facilitated a workshop presentation that focused on key elements for building a state-level infrastructure to reduce chronic absenteeism. Additionally, the opening conference panel, *Leadership Matters: The Importance of State and Local Leadership in Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism*, featured Connecticut's work as represented by Charlene Russell-Tucker, CSDE's Chief Operating Officer.

Follow-up Activities

The SBE's continued engagement is important as we remain focused on addressing the issue of attendance. The research supports the concept that being present and engaged in learning is foundational to ensuring equity and excellence for all children. The CSDE will continue to update and inform the SBE on progress and outcomes made in reducing chronic absence in all of Connecticut's schools and districts.

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States Attend to Chronic Absenteeism

By Lisa McKinney, CSG Communications Associate

The U.S. Department of Education released its first nationally comprehensive data on chronic absenteeism in June, revealing that about 6.5 million students—or 13 percent of the total student population—were absent at least 15 days during the 2013-2014 school year. The problem is so extensive that in October 2015 the presidential administration launched the Every Student, Every Day initiative to reduce chronic absenteeism by at least 10 percent each year, beginning in the current school year.

"Chronic absenteeism is a national problem," said U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. in a June 10 press release. "Frequent absences from school can be devastating to a child's education. Missing school leads to low academic achievement and triggers drop outs. Millions of young people are missing opportunities in postsecondary education, good careers and a chance to experience the American dream."

Although the Department of Education's data is shining a national light on the problem, chronic absenteeism has been a priority for many states for years.

"States have a huge role to play," said Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, a non-profit organization that promotes best practices around school attendance. "Education in practice is local; states are where you take it to scale."

She said one of the states' primary tasks is collecting and analyzing attendance data from districts and schools to determine the extent and causes of chronic absenteeism and the populations it is disproportionately affecting. Creating statewide, standard definitions of chronic absenteeism and truancy is also key. Unlike truancy, chronic absenteeism counts both excused and unexcused absences—taking into account frequent doctor's visits and other excused absences that still affect a student's ability to be present and learn.

"We can hold schools accountable that way," Chang said, citing Connecticut, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee and Washington as some of the states that are leaders in collecting data and using it to support schools in addressing the problem.

The Connecticut State Department of Education, or CSDE, created **EdSight**, a publicly accessible portal to store and manage their data on school performance. The portal's chronic absenteeism data is searchable by district, school and grade, so users can easily track data trends. They've also included chronic absenteeism as an indicator in their Next Generation Accountability Model, a holistic, multifactor perspective of district and school performance that incorporates student growth over time.

"The schools are collecting data in real time so they can have real-time interventions rather than addressing the problem postmortem," said Charlene Russell-Tucker, chief operating officer at the CSDE.

Because the causes of chronic absenteeism are often complicated and varied—from chronic disease to unreliable transportation to homelessness to neighborhood violence—parsing out why students are missing school is often done on a community-based or even individual level by the schools. The CSDE helps the schools partner with state and community resources to address attendance barriers.

"We got a call (from a school) concerned about kids not having the health screenings and immunizations to be able to come to school," said Russell-Tucker. "We were able to help the school connect to resources to help. We are able to be matchmakers and help make those connections."

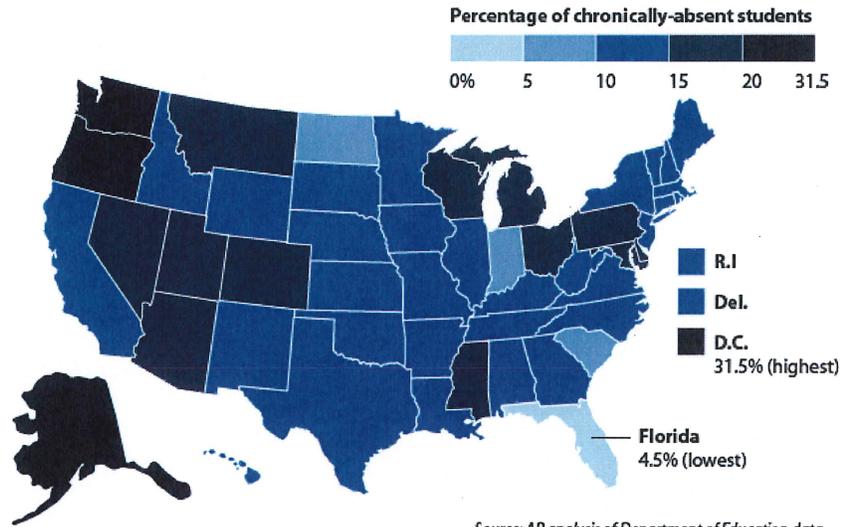
Another Connecticut school found from their data that kids from a particular housing area were having trouble making it to school because they relied on walking to get there—and their neighborhood sidewalks were not cleared in time after a snowstorm. "The district was able to work with other city departments and prioritize getting sidewalks cleared after the snowstorm to facilitate safe and easy access to walking to school," said Russell-Tucker.

When officials at Connecticut's Consolidated School District of New Britain realized that 30 percent of kindergartners and 24 percent of first graders were missing at least 10 percent of the school year, they partnered with Attendance Works to identify ways to reduced chronic absenteeism, including hiring outreach workers to educate parents on the long-term effects of missing school—even at the kindergarten level—and connect families with social services and other resources to remove barriers to attendance. They assembled attendance review teams that include teachers, administrators, social workers, guidance counselors and school nurses to meet weekly to discuss individual cases and plan interventions. Their efforts cut chronic absenteeism rates nearly in half since the 2011-2012 school year and substantially improved their students' reading levels in the process.

In 2015, the Connecticut General Assembly passed **legislation** that defined chronic absenteeism and required schools to track data on chronic absenteeism and establish attendance review teams to address it when needed. The legislation also required that the CSDE create a chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention plan.

"The Committee on Children in the legislature initiated the CT Kids' Report Card—a policy tool designed to help track the well-being of Connecticut's children," said Russell-Tucker. "Chronic absence is a headline indicator in the report card. Legislation coupled with CSDE policy and practice are driving strategic actions at the district level."

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES BY STATE



Source: AP analysis of Department of Education data.

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ATTENDANCE WORKS

Advancing Student Success by Reducing Chronic Absence

ABOUT ATTENDANCE WORKS



Attendance Works is a national and state initiative that promotes better policy, practice and research around school attendance. Our goal is to ensure that more districts track chronic absence, an often overlooked metric, and partner with communities to improve attendance.

Executive Director Hedy Chang is a national expert on chronic absence and co-author of the seminal research on early chronic absence, *Present, Engaged and Accounted For*. The Attendance Works team has extensive expertise in attendance policy, technical assistance and communications.

THE CHRONIC ABSENCE PROBLEM

Today, in a country where more than one in 10 students miss nearly a month of school every year, improving student attendance is an essential, cost-effective but often overlooked strategy for ensuring our students are on track to learn and succeed.

Put simply, if students don't go to school they can't benefit from what is taught in the classroom. This is as true for kindergartners as it is for high school students.

What is chronic absence?

Chronic absence is missing too much school for any reason, excused or unexcused, including suspensions. Attendance Works recommends defining it as missing 10% or more of school or about 18 days a year, or two days a month.

How big a problem is it?

- As many as 7.5 million students are chronically absent nationwide. That includes one in 10 kindergartners.
- As early as preK, chronic absence predicts poor attendance and academic performance in later grades.
- Poor children are more likely to be chronically absent and more likely to lose ground academically.
- By 6th grade, chronic absence is a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school.
- By 9th grade it becomes a better predictor of dropout rates than 8th grade test scores.
- Classroom churn from too many absences affects all students, even those who attend regularly.

Why is the problem overlooked?

Schools and districts often don't look at all the right data. They track how many students show up every day and how many are skipping school, but not how many students are chronically absent. Parents and teachers don't realize how quickly absences can add up to academic trouble.

“Students, especially those at risk, will not be at school and engaged unless we work together to uncover and remove the barriers to good attendance. In Connecticut, we see this work as the responsibility of multiple community partners. By sharing their knowledge, research and ready-to-use resources, Attendance Works is helping us use chronic absence data as an early warning indicator that triggers supports and actions to prevent students from missing school and falling behind academically.”

- **Charlene Russell-Tucker**

Chief Operating Officer, Connecticut State Department of Ed.
Co-Chair, Chronic Absence Strategic Action Group, Committee on Children: RBA Children's Report Card

OUR RESPONSE

The good news is chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families and community partners work together to monitor data, promote good attendance and address hurdles that keep children from getting to school every day. Attendance Works embraces a range of strategies:

Promoting effective policy: We are forging a national consensus about the need to track, report and address how many students are chronically absent.

- Catalyze national and state attention to chronic absence, prompting legislative and regulatory change
- Align with influential national organizations to launch Attendance Awareness Month
- Sponsor a Call to Action asking school superintendents to make attendance a priority starting in the early grades
- Muster unanimous support for a U.S. Conference of Mayors resolution on reducing chronic absenteeism

Sharing tools and best practices: Our website offers easy online access for teachers, school districts and communities.

- Free tools for crunching chronic absence data
- Inspiring examples of schools and communities that are improving attendance
- Handouts for working with parents
- The latest research on chronic absence

Providing effective technical assistance:

- Peer learning webinars reaching nearly 2,000 practitioners and policymakers in the past year
- Ongoing support for the more than 230 communities working with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading
- Targeted assistance on a fee-for-service basis working with districts and peer networks to build capacity

WHY ATTENDANCE WORKS

- **It matters for student success:** Students need to attend school to achieve academically and to build the good habits they need to graduate, attend college and succeed in a job. Study after study shows that students who don't show up regularly don't succeed.
- **It's a smart use of resources:** The best investments in instruction and curriculum won't matter much if students aren't showing up to benefit from them. Focusing on attendance allows schools and funders to make the most of their resources and leverage community support.
- **It's data driven and it's simple:** Data-driven approaches to education often meet resistance because of their complexity. By contrast, attendance is a simple, common-sense measure already recorded by teachers and understood by parents.
- **It's a winnable strategy:** Schools, districts and communities that work together to track chronic absence and improve attendance often see the numbers move quickly. This can not only improve academic performance but can boost morale for teachers and administrators as they see measurable progress.



ATTENDANCE WORKS

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How Can Attendance Works Help Us?

Attendance Works is a national and state level initiative promoting better policy, practice and research on chronic absence. The goal of our technical assistance is to help build capacity to monitor and address chronic absence. Many of our services are available for free on our website where you can, for example, download our tools or sign up to participate in our webinars that emphasize peer learning. If additional support is needed to advance the work, we offer a range of support on a fee-for-service basis. We charge \$1,600 per day plus expenses.

	Free Tools on our website	Fee for Service
Data Analysis	School districts can use our tools or their own data systems to conduct a chronic absence analysis for all grade levels.	Attendance Works can help conduct the analysis, interpret the results, craft a presentation based upon the findings and develop an appropriate plan for action.
Professional Development	PowerPoints and other materials to help communities develop their own training sessions are available on our website.	Attendance Works can provide keynote presentations, training sessions and materials to help partners understand why it's crucial to address and monitor chronic absence.
Public Messaging	Our Count Us In! toolkit and other publications offer ideas for customizing flyers, PSAs, bumper stickers, billboards and talking points to launch an attendance campaign in your community.	Attendance Works can offer more tailored support with communications materials or strategies. Assistance in branding our free materials is available for a small fee -- simple changes begin at \$100.
Peer Learning	Archived webinars, PowerPoints, and other materials are available for Peer Learning support on local and state levels. Sign up for free webinars at http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/technical-assistance-resources/peer-learning-network/	Attendance Works can help local, regional or state networks of communities and school districts work together to develop strategies to reduce chronic absence. This approach, which emphasizes peer learning and collective policy actions, can be funded by a local foundation or contributions from various partners. Ideally, Attendance Works would partner with a local entity that can serve as the ongoing local source of coordination and technical assistance.
Case Studies	Most communities have at least one school that is beating the odds and maintaining high levels of attendance despite challenging circumstances. We offer tips for conducting site visits to build local capacity to document what works.	Attendance Works can help a local team interview staff and parents to determine what the school is doing right and how its efforts can be replicated, as well as document and share insights gained.
Surveys and Focus Groups	Attendance Works has developed surveys of older students, parents and principals to assess attitudes about absenteeism and strategies for getting students and schools back on track.	Attendance Works can administer, tailor, analyze or present the results for additional costs.

For more information on fee for service consulting services, contact :
 Associate Director of Programs, Cecelia Leong: Cecelia@attendanceworks.org
 Visit www.attendanceworks.org for available tools and written materials.