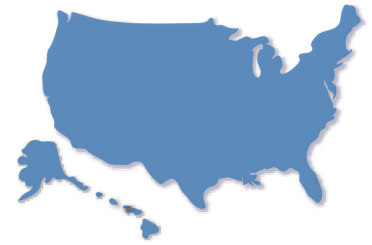


# Chronic Absence: Our Top Pick for the ESSA School Quality or Student Success Indicator



*A Policy Brief*

September 2016

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives states the responsibility of choosing at least one indicator to measure school quality or student success. This brief makes the case that the chronic absence rate, either alone or as a part of an index, is among the best measures that states could choose to fulfill this requirement. Chronic absence, defined as missing 10 percent of school days within one academic year for any reason, is a powerful early warning predictor of student performance. It also meets or exceeds all of the rigorous criteria ESSA has established for accountability measures. Finally, and importantly from a cost standpoint, it is a measure which school districts must already report to the U.S. Department of Education and is based upon data that they already maintain in their systems.

## What is Chronic Absence and What is its Impact?

Most children miss a few days of school each year without long-term consequences. However, when they miss many days, the effects are almost always negative. Researchers have defined absences as “chronic” when they reach the level at which a child’s school success is at significant risk. Chronic absence is different from truancy, which counts only unexcused absences, and average daily attendance, which reports the average number of students who attend school each day.

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.<sup>i</sup> Chronically absent kindergartners are also less likely to develop the social skills needed to persist in school.<sup>ii</sup> The problems multiply for students who are chronically absent several years in a row.<sup>iii</sup> By

sixth grade, absenteeism is one of three early warning indicators that influence whether students will graduate from high school.<sup>iv</sup> By ninth grade, it’s a better predictor of graduation than eighth grade test scores.<sup>v</sup> And, even if they manage to graduate, high school students with a history of chronic absence are less likely to enroll and persist in college. Importantly, chronic absenteeism, especially when defined as a percentage of days missed, is a leading indicator and can reveal that a student needs help long before test scores or grades do.

## Why Choose Chronic Absence as the ESSA School Quality or Student Success Indicator?

Chronic absence is one of the few metrics available now to all states and that meets or exceeds the rigorous ESSA selection criteria for indicators. We have summarized these requirements below:

ESSA Indicators Must:	
<b>Be applicable to every student</b>	All enrolled students are included in attendance counts; no students are excluded.
<b>Provide summary and disaggregated data</b>	Chronic absence rates can be reported separately for all subgroups of students in a school, district, and state.
<b>Be comparable across a state’s school districts</b>	States already have protocols that standardize attendance taking and reporting. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights has recently required states to track and report a standard measure of chronic absence. As a result, chronic absence rates will be comparable within states and, unlike many indicators, across the nation.
<b>Be able to distinguish differences in performance among schools</b>	Chronic absence levels vary substantially among students and schools within any district or state. These variations are not random; they represent meaningful differences in student engagement, achievement, and success. <sup>1</sup>
<b>Be valid</b>	Test scores are measures of test success, which can be strongly or weakly related to subject matter mastery. Chronic absence, on the other hand, measures how much school has been missed.
<b>Be reliable</b>	Counting errors aside, taking attendance and computing chronic absence repeatedly will yield a consistent result.
<b>Have a proven Impact on Achievement</b>	An abundance of studies link chronic absence to academic achievement. Click <a href="#">here</a> for a compilation of research on chronic absence and its relationship to student success.

<sup>1</sup> See CORE district experiences at <http://coredistricts.org/why-is-core-needed/>

Beyond meeting the requirements of federal law and being currently available to all districts, chronic absence offers additional advantages to state education officials. First, by adopting chronic absence as an ESSA indicator, the officials will ensure that schools and districts include this proven measure in their needs assessments and school improvement processes. Second, chronic absence data can provide guidance to schools about how to use hard-to-quantify characteristics, such as school climate and youth and parent engagement to direct their efforts. Typical school climate data are collected from student, parent and/or teacher surveys. The surveys provide extensive information, but results often are hard to distill and interpret, particularly when they are not completed by large numbers of participants. Their utility can be enhanced, however, if they are used purposefully to add nuance to assessments of students' attendance barriers, and to identify the reasons for, and solutions to, poor student and family engagement.

### **The School Quality Improvement Index: A Holistic Approach to School Accountability**

The School Quality Improvement Index is an innovative, holistic approach to measuring how well a school supports student achievement. It is being closely watched as a possible model to comply with the new federal ESSA reporting requirements. Piloted by a set of nine districts in California, this index augments test scores with data on chronic absence, school climate, and student growth. Read more [here](#).

Indeed, as states develop their accountability systems, they should consider combining chronic absence with other measures of engagement and school climate. Incorporating rates of suspension, expulsion, student mobility and school climate measures along with chronic absence is a holistic approach that can offer important insights to schools about how to improve student achievement. It might, for example, clarify the extent to which high levels of absence are due to excessive suspensions or the lack of a welcoming, engaging school environment. Given recent research showing the interrelationship among chronic absence, school discipline, climate, mobility, and achievement, districts would be well advised to incorporate all of these measures in improvement plans.

### **What are the Solutions?**

First and foremost, it is critical that educators and community stakeholders use a problem-solving, rather than blaming, approach to addressing chronic absence. States and districts should

use chronic absence rates to identify those schools and districts that need support and technical assistance. Next, districts and schools should analyze their chronic absence data and use the results to engage community partners in efforts to remove attendance barriers, solicit resources, and spread positive messages about the importance of daily attendance. The Attendance Works website ([www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)) offers a wealth of additional strategies to help districts, schools, and communities reduce chronic absence. One of the most effective ways to address chronic absence is with a comprehensive, multi-tiered system of supports that combines prevention with early and consistent interventions –as determined by individual students' needs. Legal action should be used only as a very last resort.

### **Every Student Succeeds Act Timeline<sup>vii</sup>**

Considering these options and choosing the most appropriate measures is a time-consuming, time-limited process. Education stakeholders and administrators would be well advised to keep the following timeline at top of mind:

#### **September 2016-December 2016**

- During this period, states should consider the legislative, regulatory, and policy changes needed to align with ESSA and its final regulations.
- Competitive grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education after September 30, 2016 will be governed by ESSA, rather than by NCLB, statutes.
- The U.S. Department of Education will issue its final ESSA regulations by December 10, 2016.

#### **January 2017-September 2017**

- State legislatures must enact changes to law that are necessary to execute their plans and comply with final ESSA requirements.
- With community input, state departments of education must complete their plans and submit them to the U.S. Department of Education in March of 2017, with an as-yet unconfirmed option for states to request an extension until June 2017.
- The U.S. Department of Education must approve state plans. States must implement plans to meet ESSA's expectation that most provisions are operational in the 2017-18 academic year.

#### **September 2017 and beyond**

- The implementation and impact of the ESSA accountability rubric should be monitored. States must modify the rubric over time to ensure that the measures provide meaningful and actionable data for schools.

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- i Connolly, Faith and Olson, L. S., [Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten](#), Baltimore Education Research Consortium, Baltimore, Md., March 2012, and Ehrlich, Stacy B., et al., [Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences](#), University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research, May 2014.
  - ii Gottfried, Michael, [Chronic Absenteeism and its Effects on Students' Academic and Socio-emotional Outcomes](#), The Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, Vol. 19, Issue 2, pp. 53-75, 2014.
  - iii [Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes](#), Applied Survey Research. May 2011.
  - iv Balfanz, Robert, Herzog, L., and MacIver, D.J., [Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions](#), Educational Psychologist, 42(4), 223–235.
  - v Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q., [What Matters for Staying On-track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year](#), University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2007.
  - vi [High School Absenteeism and College Persistence](#), Rhode Island Data HUB, 2015.
  - vii NACS. ESSA Implementation Timeline, Retrieved from: <http://www.qualitycharters.org/research-policies/archive/essa-implementation-timeline/>, August 2016.



Advancing Student Success By Reducing Chronic Absence

Attendance Works is a national initiative dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, studies and success stories about reducing chronic absence.

Sign up to receive updates at: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/>

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