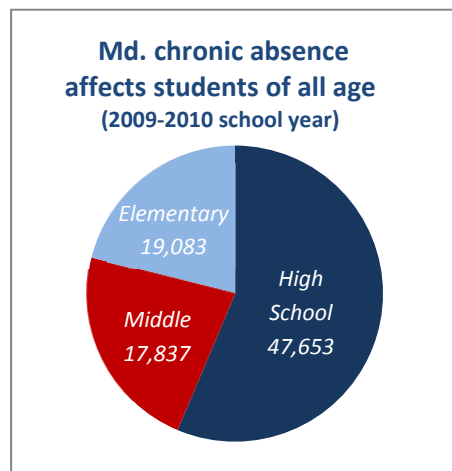


The Power of Attendance: Spurring Achievement, Improving Schools

Maryland has an extraordinary opportunity to close the achievement gap and reduce the high school dropout rate, given the infusion of federal cash from the Race to the Top grant and the commitment of state leaders to turn around troubled schools. Amid the emphasis on improving student test scores and reforming schools, though, one important indicator should not be overlooked: attendance.

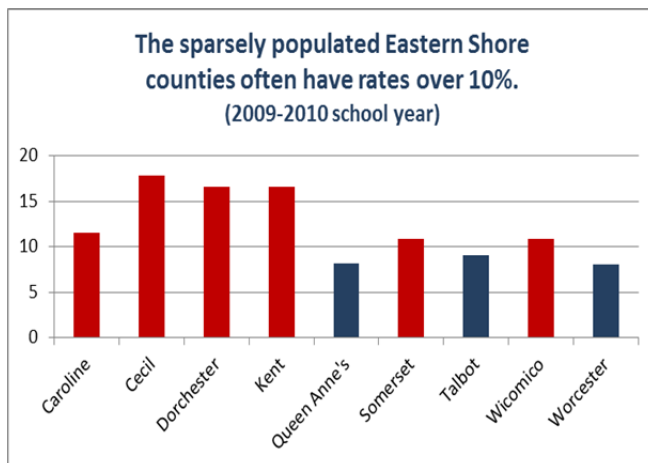
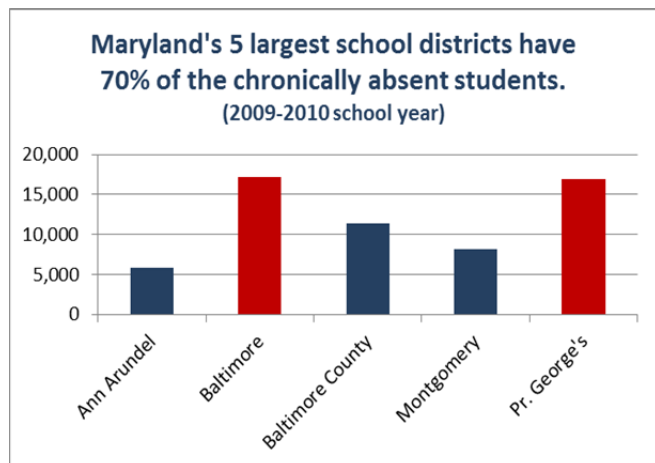
National research shows that too many absences in the early grades can affect whether a low-income child learns to read well. Kindergarten and 1st grade have a remarkable ability to narrow the gap in reading skills—if the children actually show up for school. Yet 10 percent of our youngest students are missing a month of school every year. By middle school, attendance is one of three key indicators that a student will become a high school dropout. Researchers at the Baltimore Education Research Consortium found that the majority of dropouts enter the 9th grade with a pattern of chronic absence that goes back several years.¹ In Baltimore, the city’s intensive efforts to reduce absences have come hand in hand with academic gains. The students who lag behind most, according to an analysis of the test scores last year, are those missing 20 or more days of school.



Last year, across Maryland, more than 80,000 students had 20 or more absences—*excused and unexcused*. Rather than look just at truancy, this measure of “chronic absence” gives schools and districts a fuller picture of what’s going on with a student or a community.

Maryland is ahead of many states in tracking attendance. The State Department of Education:

- requires schools and districts to track students missing 20 days of school in an academic year
- requires schools and districts to track students missing 5 or fewer days
- posts attendance data on the MSDE website
- requires 94 percent average daily attendance to meet state standards for schools serving Kindergarten through 8th grade
- includes some attendance data in its longitudinal student data base



Too often, though, that’s where it ends. The attendance data that schools collect is rarely used to inform school improvement efforts or target increasingly scarce resources. Too often school districts ignore this indicator that could help them zero in on struggling students and troubled schools long before the first test scores are recorded—and long before intervention become more difficult and more costly. As Maryland seeks to turn around its failing schools, the state should harness the power of attendance in its policy and practice to encourage student growth.

Why Does Attendance Matter?

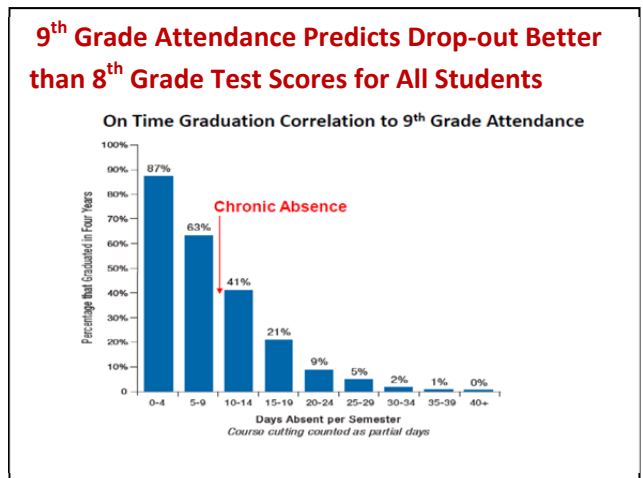
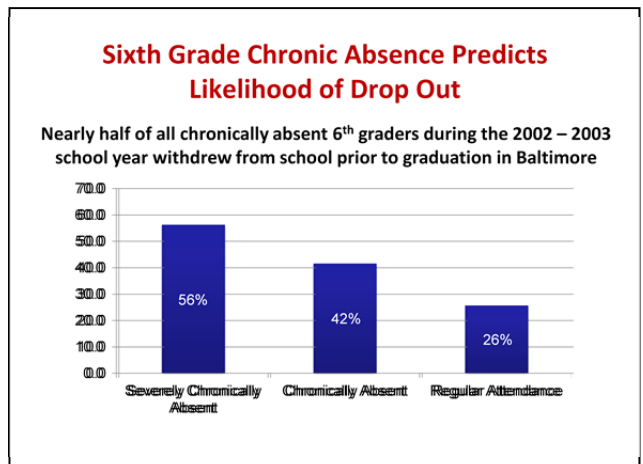
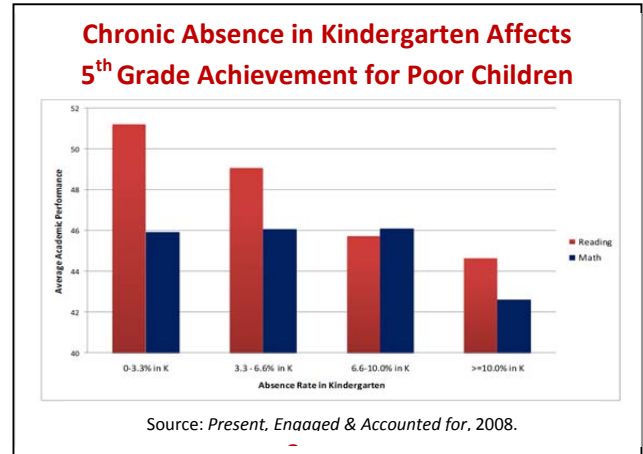
Research backs up the common sense notion that children will do worse in school if they aren’t in class to learn. An analysis of a national sample of chronically absent kindergarten students revealed lower academic performance when they reach 1st grade. Reading scores for Latino children were most affected. Among poor children, who lack the resources to make up for lost time on task, chronic kindergarten absence translated into lower 5th grade achievement.²

By 6th grade, chronic absence begins to predict high school dropout rates, a study of Baltimore students showed.³ By ninth grade, missing 20 percent of school can be a better predictor of dropout than eighth-grade test scores, Chicago researchers found.⁴ Along with behavior problems and failure of core academic courses, poor student attendance is a critical early warning signs of dropout.

Low-income children are disproportionately affected by chronic absence in the early grades: They are more likely to miss too much school and more likely to fall behind academically because of it.⁵ An analysis of Maryland data confirms that chronically absent poor children record lower test scores than poor children attending school regularly.

While national data suggest one in 10 kindergartners are chronically absent, the rates run as high as one in 4 in some districts. The rates only get higher by middle and high school when truancy becomes a bigger concern. When chronic absence is too high, it can affect all students, as teachers spend more time reviewing concepts for children who missed the lessons in the first place. In Maryland, it can adversely affect the attendance measures and graduation rates that are important for schools to make adequate yearly progress.

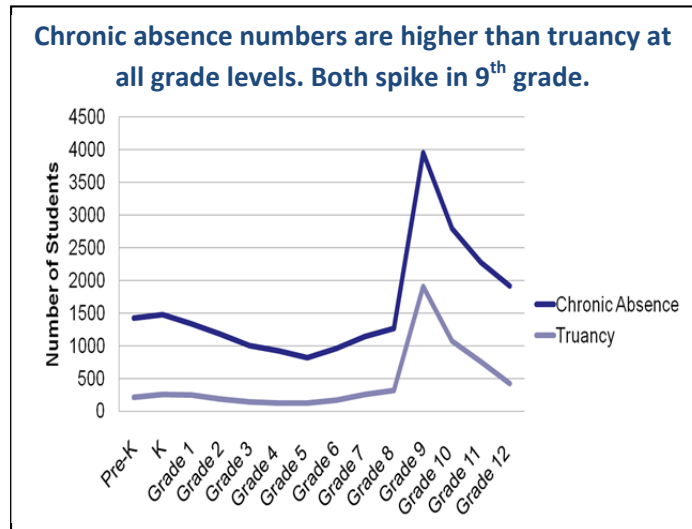
The Race to the Top grant demands an aggressive, data-driven approach to achieving greater student growth. Tracking chronic absence and creating a culture of good attendance at every school should be a key element in the state’s strategy.



Why Is Chronic Absence Overlooked?

Even though Maryland requires schools to report chronic absence, many schools pay far more attention to average daily attendance (the percentage of students who show up each day to school) and unexcused absences (truancy.) Both figures can mask the extent of chronic absence. This chart of Baltimore City Public Schools 2009-10 attendance shows that chronic absence exceeds truancy at every grade level. Unfortunately, the reduction after 9th grade doesn't necessarily reflect better attendance. Many of the worst attenders may simply have dropped out.

Truancy figures are especially misleading in the early grades, because young children typically do not stay home without an adult who may call in an excuse. Truancy also doesn't capture days missed to suspensions, which are often excused absences. Thus an overly punitive discipline code can exacerbate the chronic absence problem. Aggregate data can also be misleading because it does not reveal whether absences are spread evenly, with all students missing a few days, or whether they are concentrated, with a few students experiencing excessive absences. It also doesn't show patterns of absences: such as whether students from an unsafe neighborhood or an unruly classroom are more likely to miss school.

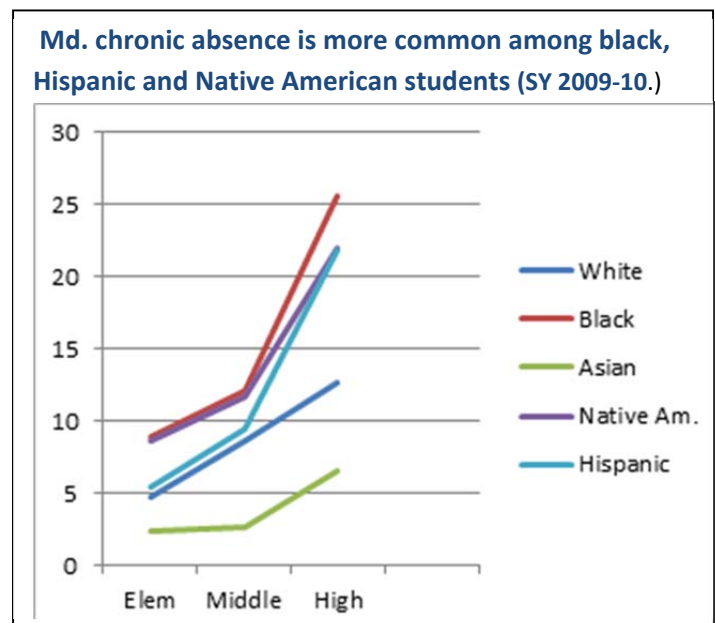


An analysis of Maryland data shows the highest numbers of chronically absent students are found in the five largest school districts, but some of the highest rates exist in the rural communities of the Eastern Shore. Students who are low-income, in special education or learning English also have high levels.

How Can We Improve Student Attendance?

In many ways, attendance reflects the degree to which schools, communities and families adequately address the needs of children and youth. Chronic absence can suggest:

- Families struggling to keep up with school routines given unreliable transportation, unstable housing, community violence, inadequate health care and long, inflexible work hours
- Parents who do not realize the importance of attending school regularly especially if they, did not have a positive school experience
- Students without exposure to quality preschool and routines for on-time attendance
- School disciplinary policies and practices too quick to suspend or expel students.
- Schools that lack rich, engaging learning experiences, experienced and skilled teachers, engaged parents and quality afterschool programs.



- Schools that don't respond adequately to student absences or make significant efforts to let parents know when and how often their children are absent.

The good news is chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools and communities work together and pay attention to the right data. Maryland is already ahead of the curve: Its reporting requirements provide the data needed for careful analysis. Its inclusion of 94 percent ADA in the state standards has helped improve attendance in elementary and middle schools and should be extended to high schools. Maryland must also ensure schools and communities use the data to trigger early interventions, address the causes of chronic absence and harness the power of attendance to ensure every child has an equal opportunity to reach his or her potential.

In Maryland, chronic absence is highest among the low-income, special education and English-language learners. (SY 2009-10)

	Elem School	Middle School	High School	All Grades
Special Ed	11.6	18	28.9	19.0
Non-spec Ed	5.5	8.5	16.8	10.2
LEP	4.2	6.2	19.7	7.2
Non-LEP	6.4	9.7	18.1	11.4
FARMS	10.5	15.9	30.7	17.8
Non-FARMS	2.9	5.4	11.9	7.0

The most effective efforts:

- Use data on chronic absence to identify patterns, set targets for reduction and monitor progress
- Find out the factors contributing to chronic absence from parent and youth perspectives
- Take comprehensive approaches that involve partnering with students, families and communities agencies to build a culture of attendance and overcoming barriers to getting to school
- Pay attention as early as pre-K and during transition years from grades 6 to 7 and 8 to 9
- Work to improve attendance among all children, with special interventions for the chronically absent
- Offer positive supports to promote attendance before resorting to punitive or legal responses

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¹ MacIver, Martha A., *Gradual Disengagement: A Portrait of the 2008-09 Dropouts in the Baltimore City Schools*, Baltimore Education Research Consortium, August 2010.

² Chang, Hedy N. and Romero, Mariajose, *Present, Engaged & Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty: September 2008.

³ Balfanz, Robert et al., "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: Copyright 2007, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

⁴ 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*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research: 2007.

⁵ Ready, Douglas D., Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development, *The Differential Effects of School Exposure*, *Sociology of Education*, October 2010