



# PRESENT and COUNTING

A Look at Chronic Absenteeism  
in Mississippi Public Schools

A good attendance record can mean much more than a handshake and a certificate presented at the end of the school year assembly. In the early years, it can be a predictor of student success for grade level reading and a precursor for drop-out prevention. Yet an estimated one in five U.S. students miss a month of school per year.<sup>1</sup> Missing three or more days per month can set students back one to two full years of learning behind their peers.<sup>2</sup>

Measuring absenteeism can be difficult since there are varying ways to track attendance. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing ten percent or more of the academic year for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences, suspensions and time missed due to changing schools.<sup>3</sup> Based on a 180 day school year, that means a student would miss about 18 days per year. This differs from Average Daily Attendance (ADA), which reveals how many students on average show up each each day, not how many students who have accumulated so many absences that they are academically at risk. According to Attendance Works, schools typically focus on ADA and may mistakenly assume that a high ADA is an indicator of healthy attendance. However, even in a school of 200 students with a 95 percent ADA, 60 students (30%) could miss 18 or more days over the course of the school year.<sup>4</sup> In order to effect academic change, attention must be paid to those students who are missing two or more days of important instruction time per month.

## MEASURES OF ATTENDANCE

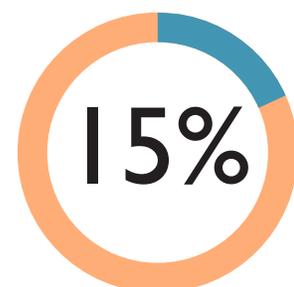
**Average Daily Attendance (ADA):** Average number of enrolled students who attend school each day. In Mississippi, excused and unexcused absences are calculated in the ADA.

**Chronic Absence Rate:** Percentage of students who missed 10 percent or more of the school year, including excused and unexcused absences (about 18 days in a 180-day school year). This threshold is an empirically supported indicator of whether a student is at academic risk due to absenteeism.

**Truancy Rate:** In Mississippi, truancy is defined as the percentage of students with five or more unlawful or unexcused absences in the school year. The truancy rate does not include out of school suspensions.

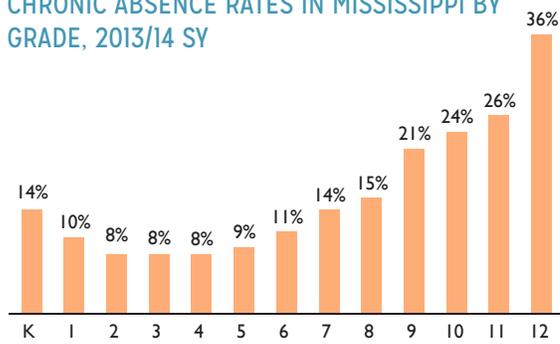
Nationwide, it is estimated that the rate of chronic absenteeism could be as much as 10 to 15 percent each year.<sup>5</sup> That means 5 to 7.5 million students could be missing too much school. Here in Mississippi, 15 percent of Mississippi public school students (74,299) were chronically absent during the 2013/14 school year.<sup>6</sup> Absentee rates were high in kindergarten (14%), tapered off in early elementary years, and increased steadily throughout middle school and high school. The highest was 36 percent in grade 12. Using data provided by the Mississippi Department of Education, researchers at Mississippi KIDS COUNT compared average daily attendance percentages to those of chronic absence in 152 of the state's school districts.<sup>6</sup> Despite an overall state ADA average of 93 percent, there were still 130 school districts with at least ten percent of their students chronically absent and 11 districts with 20 percent or more. (For a detailed look at each school district, go to <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/MS>)

## MISSISSIPPI STUDENTS CHRONICALLY ABSENT, 2013/14 SY



source: Mississippi Department of Education, 2013/14 school year

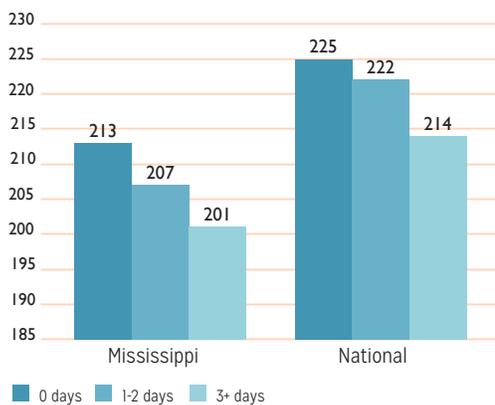
## CHRONIC ABSENCE RATES IN MISSISSIPPI BY GRADE, 2013/14 SY



Chronic absence rates start high in kindergarten, decrease through elementary school years, and increase again in middle and high school. During the 2013/14 school year, 14% of kindergarteners, 15% of 8th graders, and 36% of 12th graders were chronically absent.

source: Mississippi Department of Education, 2013/14 school year

## NAEP SCORES FOR READING, GRADE 4, BY DAYS ABSENT FROM SCHOOL IN THE PRIOR MONTH: 2013



source: NAEP Data Explorer

## MISSISSIPPI STUDENTS WHO WERE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/REDUCED LUNCH WERE MORE LIKELY TO MISS 3 OR MORE DAYS



Eligible



Not Eligible

source: NAEP Data Explorer

While it's obvious that students don't learn as much if they are missing school, many of us don't realize how many students are at risk academically in the early grades due to absenteeism. A 2011 California study revealed that absences in the early years can negatively impact third-grade reading proficiency. Seventeen percent of students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade were reading proficiently in third grade, compared to 64 percent of those with good attendance.<sup>7</sup> Another study by Chang and Romero in 2008 says that chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of education achievement at the end of fifth grade.<sup>8</sup> An estimated one in ten kindergarten and first-grade students nationally are chronically absent.<sup>9</sup> In Mississippi, nearly one in eight (12%) kindergarteners and first-graders were chronically absent in the 2013/14 school year.<sup>6</sup>

An analysis of national testing data released in August 2014 confirmed the correlation between high absenteeism rates and lower scores on national standardized tests. Researchers looked at reading and math scores from the 2013 National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP), a standardized test given every two years to a sample of fourth and eighth graders in all 50 states. NAEP also asks students to respond to a number of non-academic questions including how many days they had missed school during the month before the exam which is typically given between January and March. For purposes of the study, researchers defined poor attendance as missing three or more days in that period. In every state, students with absences scored lower than their peers with better attendance. In Mississippi, 21 percent of the students taking the NAEP tests reported they had missed three or more days in the prior month.<sup>2</sup> Those who had missed no days during that period averaged 213 on the fourth grade NAEP reading test, while their peers who had missed one to two days scored 207, and three or more days, 201.<sup>9</sup> That makes a twelve point difference in NAEP scores. Researchers estimate that ten points on the NAEP scale is the equivalent of one grade worth of skills.<sup>2</sup>

The academic consequences of chronic absenteeism cross socioeconomic lines. Lack of access to health care, housing insecurity and unreliable transportation are a few of the reasons that children living in poverty may be chronically absent in the school year.<sup>3</sup> When they miss class instruction time, they are more likely to suffer academically because their families often lack the resources to help them make up for lost classroom time. But children in poverty are not the only ones affected by chronic absenteeism here in Mississippi. In fact, four of the ten school districts with the highest chronic absence percentages are located in school districts that have poverty rates below the 32 percent state average.<sup>6</sup>

When schools and communities look beyond average daily attendance records and begin to delve into individual student attendance, positive results will occur. Data is key in identifying students who are at risk for poor attendance, and the earlier in the year the students are identified the better their chances are for success. Schools can then partner with parents and communities to support an environment where attendance is recognized as an indicator for future success in the K-12 environment and beyond.

# ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Build public awareness of why chronic absence matters

Adopt a standard definition of chronic absence (missing 10 percent of school for any reason) to be used statewide and by each school district

Identify students who are considered at-risk for chronic absence based on attendance the previous year or within the first two months of the school year

Urge districts to provide families with real-time attendance data along with an action plan for improvement

Develop a plan within the schools and communities to provide support to students and families

# CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN MISSISSIPPI

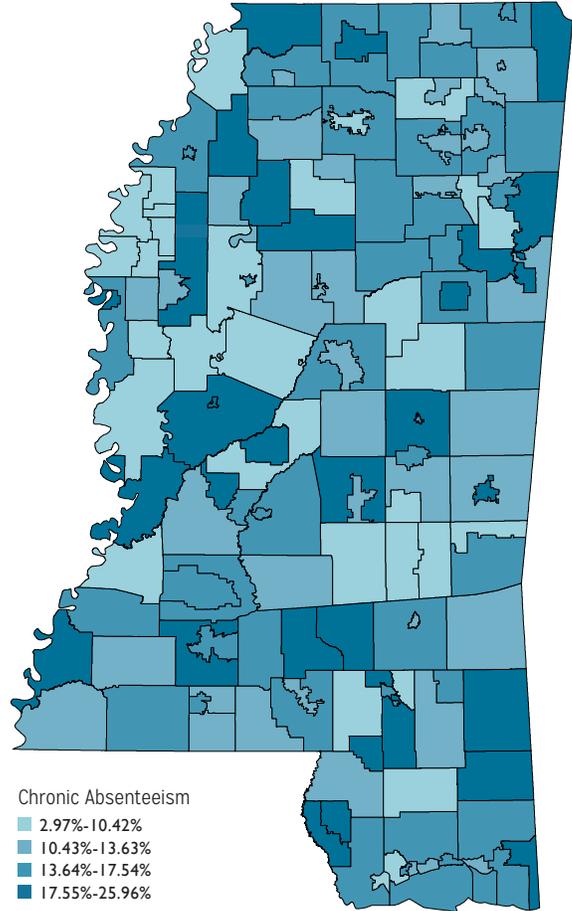
Percentage of Students Chronically Absent by School District, 2013/14 SY

## Highest Percentage Chronically Absent

	Chronically Absent <sup>6</sup>	ADA Percent <sup>10</sup>	Poverty Percent <sup>11</sup>
Natchez-Adams	26.0	91.1	41.1
Moss Point Separate	25.8	91.0	30.5
Monroe County	25.4	91.6	19.4
Hinds County AHS	25.2	89.8	NA
Holly Springs	23.9	91.7	35.8
Lincoln County	22.7	92.5	22.2
Coahoma Co AHS	21.7	92.3	NA
Vicksburg-Warren	21.7	91.2	40.6
Pearl River County	21.5	91.1	27.8
Yazoo County	20.6	92.9	41.6

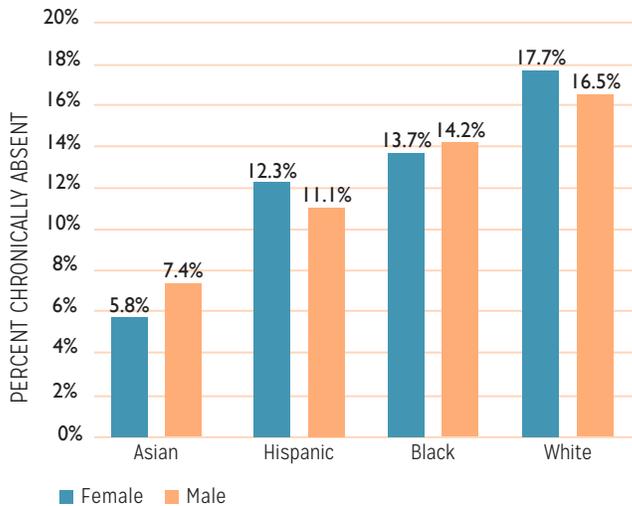
## Lowest Percentage Chronically Absent

	Chronically Absent	ADA Percent	Poverty Percent
Madison County	7.6	95.1	12.1
Mound Bayou	7.5	94.9	51.4
South Delta	7.3	93.6	55.5
Coffeeville	7.0	92.5	35.8
Smith County	6.9	94.7	29.2
Oxford	6.4	92.6	28.5
Pass Christian	5.8	94.5	23.6
Benoit	4.7	89.7	59.9
Hollandale	3.0	93.6	47.7



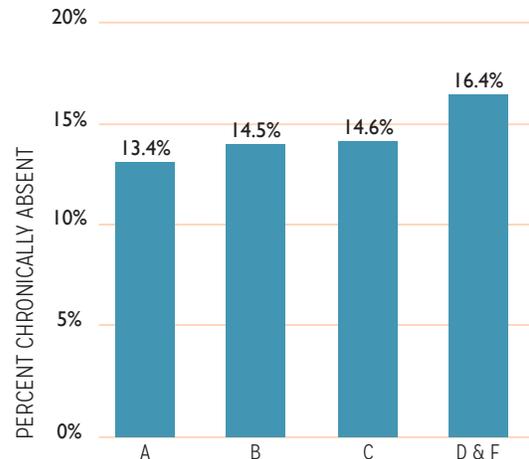
source: Mississippi Department of Education, 2013/14 school year

## PERCENT OF MISSISSIPPI STUDENTS CHRONICALLY ABSENT BY RACE AND GENDER 2013/14 SY



source: Mississippi Department of Education, 2013/14 school year

## MISSISSIPPI SCHOOL DISTRICT ABSENTEEISM BY ACCOUNTABILITY RATING 2013/14 SY



source: Mississippi Department of Education, 2013/14 school year

### Research Team Members

Anne Buffington     John McCown  
Ben Walker         Sarah Gresham Barr  
Laure Bell          Xuan Zhou

### KIDS COUNT DIRECTOR

Linda H. Southward PhD

### GRAPHIC DESIGN

Anna Leigh Richards

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### DATA NOTES

Data was provided by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) for the 2013/14 school. The chronic absence rate was calculated by dividing the number of students in each district who missed 10% or more of the school year by their 2013/14 membership.

**Average Daily Attendance (ADA)** is reported from the MDE's Mississippi Student Information System (MSIS) for months 1-9. ADA is the average number of students present each day that school was in session during a given time frame.

**Average Daily Attendance Rate** was calculated by dividing districts' 2013/14 ADA by their 2013/14 membership.



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