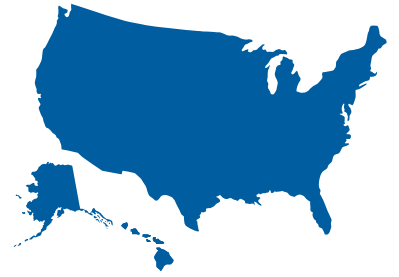


# Stemming the Surge in Chronic Absence: What States Can Do

## A Fourth Annual Review of State Attendance Policy and Practice



A Policy Brief

June 2024

### Executive Summary

As a country, we face a number of urgent educational challenges following the Covid-19 pandemic. The striking rise in chronic absenteeism stands out. After nearly doubling from 16% to 30% of students, chronic absence remains extremely high. Data collected from states for the [2022-23 school year](#) show only modest declines.

Every state in the country is experiencing this dramatic rise in too many students missing too much school. Chronic absenteeism — missing 10% or more of school for any reason — is affecting students and families from every economic level, ethnicity and type of community: urban, suburban and rural. The harmful impacts of absenteeism are well documented. Research shows that chronic absenteeism makes it harder for students to develop proficient literacy and math skills by third grade, achieve in middle school and graduate from high school. Poor attendance also adversely affects educational engagement, and hampers social-emotional development and executive functioning.

Reversing today's chronic absenteeism requires state leaders to make reducing chronic absence a priority. In our work with states, we see how state leadership, especially from governors and state education agencies (SEAs), are building the capacity of districts and schools struggling to implement effective responses to unprecedented chronic absence levels.

To help state leaders respond to today's chronic absence crisis, this brief examines how states are and could make a difference in school attendance with new policies and practices. Conducted for the fourth time, we gathered data from the websites for every state and the District of Columbia; additional information was gathered through a survey completed by 47 states (including the District of Columbia). This year we asked several new questions related to banning suspensions for truancy, as well as enrollment and funding policies, that can affect attendance data collection. Find [the results](#) for every state.

Our analysis resulted in these nine key findings. These appear below along with a brief discussion about why each one matters.

- 1. More states are publishing chronic absence data earlier in the school year.** The dynamic nature of chronic absenteeism makes it essential to have publicly available data as quickly as possible for the planning and accountability.
- 2. Chronic absence data is most often available by district, school and student group, but not by grade.** Disaggregated data is important because it can inform decisions about where additional action and outreach is needed to deepen understanding of the underlying causes of absence and determine how causes and effective solutions might be similar or vary across student populations. The lack of data by grade is especially problematic since it is likely masking higher levels in kindergarten and first as well as the high school grades.
- 3. The vast majority of states continue to define chronic absence as missing 10% of school for any reason.** Attendance Works recommends using 10% of days enrolled to define chronic absence because it supports using absenteeism as an early warning indicator of school disengagement, academic risk and high school dropout. Using a specific number of days absent instead of a percentage of days is problematic because it leads to an undercount of the number of chronically absent students.
- 4. Most but not all states include all absences when calculating chronic absence.** Attendance Works advises against excluding absences, no matter the circumstance. For every day a student is in school there is an opportunity to learn, build relationships and access support.

**5. States continue to use widely varying definitions of a day of attendance for both in-person and virtual settings.**

The lack of a common definition of a day of attendance makes it difficult to interpret and compare data from districts within and across states.

**6. States have widely varying enrollment policies and practices, which are likely affecting chronic absence calculations.**

A few states, however, ensure more extensive outreach occurs before a student is dropped from the rolls. Nonetheless differences in enrollment policies contribute to the challenge of comparing data across states.

**7. The majority of states continue to use chronic absence as an accountability measure for school improvement.**

Since chronic absence was widely adopted as an accountability measure, there has been a dramatic increase in the availability of chronic absence reports as a regular feature of most student information systems

**8. While the majority of states primarily fund based upon average daily membership or student counts, average daily attendance is used in the two largest states.**

The approach to funding can affect how districts pay attention to attendance in various ways. Average daily attendance, can for example, motivate districts to take action to encourage showing up every day while, on a less positive note, creating an incentive to make it as easy as possible to mark students as present. A major concern with average daily attendance is that it fiscally penalizes the districts serving student populations with greater needs who face more significant attendance challenges.

**9. States are taking a variety of steps to promote an effective approach to improving attendance.**

These include investing in real-time data reports, offering comprehensive guidance, requiring a team approach, encouraging cross-departmental work to leverage existing initiatives, shifting away from ineffective punitive practice, including banning suspensions for truancy and monitoring excused vs. unexcused absences. These strategies illustrate how states can make a difference.

To support states, the brief concludes with recommendations for how they can advance local action that can stem the tide of absenteeism. Determining how these recommendations can best be advanced — through legislation, administrative action or technical assistance — depends upon the local conditions in each state. The recommendations are grouped into three priority categories: develop comparable data, ensure public reporting of data and take action.

### Comparable data

- Establish a common definition of a day of attendance.
- Review and invest in data quality.
- Ensure outreach to students and families before they are dropped from enrollment lists.
- Include all absences when calculating chronic absence.

### Public Reporting

- Monitor and publish chronic absence data as early as possible.
- Collect and report on types of absences, and encourage using a common set of codes to classify reasons for absence so data can be reviewed across districts.
- Expand development of real-time data dashboards.

### Taking Action

- Build capacity to adopt effective approaches and consider banning ineffective practices like suspending students for truancy.
- Identify and publicize bright spots.
- Take a sustained, data-informed approach that includes establishing concrete goals for reducing chronic absence over time.

Reversing the unprecedented levels of post-pandemic chronic absenteeism requires state leadership. Governors, state education agencies and policy makers are especially well-positioned to prompt and support local action to improve student attendance and engagement. The stakes are high. Reestablishing daily attendance in school is crucial to nurturing an educated, healthy and skilled next generation with the skills needed for a vibrant and growing economy.

## Introduction

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, we face a number of urgent educational challenges. The striking rise in chronic absenteeism stands out. After nearly doubling, from 16% to 30% of students, during the Covid-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> chronic absence remains extremely high. Data collected from states for the [2022-23 school year](#) is showing only modest declines,<sup>2</sup> and 2023-24 data is generally not yet available.

Research shows that chronic absenteeism — missing 10% or more of school — makes it harder for students to develop proficient literacy and math skills by third grade, achieve in middle school and graduate from high school.<sup>3</sup> Poor attendance also adversely affects educational engagement, social-emotional development and executive functioning.<sup>4</sup> Chronic absence contributes to declines in post-pandemic test scores.<sup>5</sup>

These dramatic increases in chronic absences are affecting everyone. Chronic absence levels nearly doubled in all states regardless of length of school closure during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> More students are chronically absent from every economic strata and ethnicity, and they are found in every type of community: urban, suburban and rural. The highest levels of chronic absence are in districts with the largest number of students and families struggling with poverty and in communities hardest hit by the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

### States Are Critical for Improving Attendance

Reversing these unprecedented levels of post-pandemic chronic absenteeism requires state leaders to make reducing chronic absence a priority. Reestablishing a routine of daily attendance — recognizing that students might miss a day on occasion — in school is crucial to nurturing an educated, healthy and skilled next generation with the hard and soft skills needed for a strong economy. State education agencies (SEAs) and leaders are especially well-positioned to prompt and support action to improve attendance. While reporting chronic absence data on state report cards is required by the federal government, decisions about how that data is reported (frequency and format) are left to SEAs. State rules, guidance and monitoring greatly influence whether attendance is taken at the local level in a consistent and accurate manner on a daily basis. States can also offer guidance, resources, technical assistance and peer learning opportunities to build the capacity of districts to adopt effective strategies for improving attendance.

### About This Brief

This brief highlights how states are and could make a difference through policies and practices by examining the following key questions:

- A. Are states using timely data to publicize how many and which students, schools and districts are affected by chronic absence?**
- B. Are states providing comparable data?**
- C. How do state policies differ with respect to key factors influencing the collection and use of chronic absence data?**
- D. How are states promoting effective approaches to improving attendance?**

This brief is informed by our annual review of state attendance policy and practice. Conducted for the fourth time, our review included an examination of websites for all 50 states and the District of Columbia as well as a survey completed by 47 states (including the District of Columbia). State-by-state data is summarized in [this table](#). This year's review included several *new* questions related to banning suspensions for truancy as well as enrollment and funding policies that can affect collection of attendance data. (See Appendix A: Methods.)

We have also drawn upon insights gained from our ongoing work with states. Attendance Works operates a peer learning forum for states called the Network to Advance State Attendance Policy and Practice (NASAPP), and we work in depth with a number of state education agencies, including those in California, Connecticut, Ohio, Virginia, South Carolina and Washington. In addition, we offer subject matter expertise on chronic absence to the national Student Engagement and Attendance Center (SEAC) and the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center (WEEAC) at WestEd.

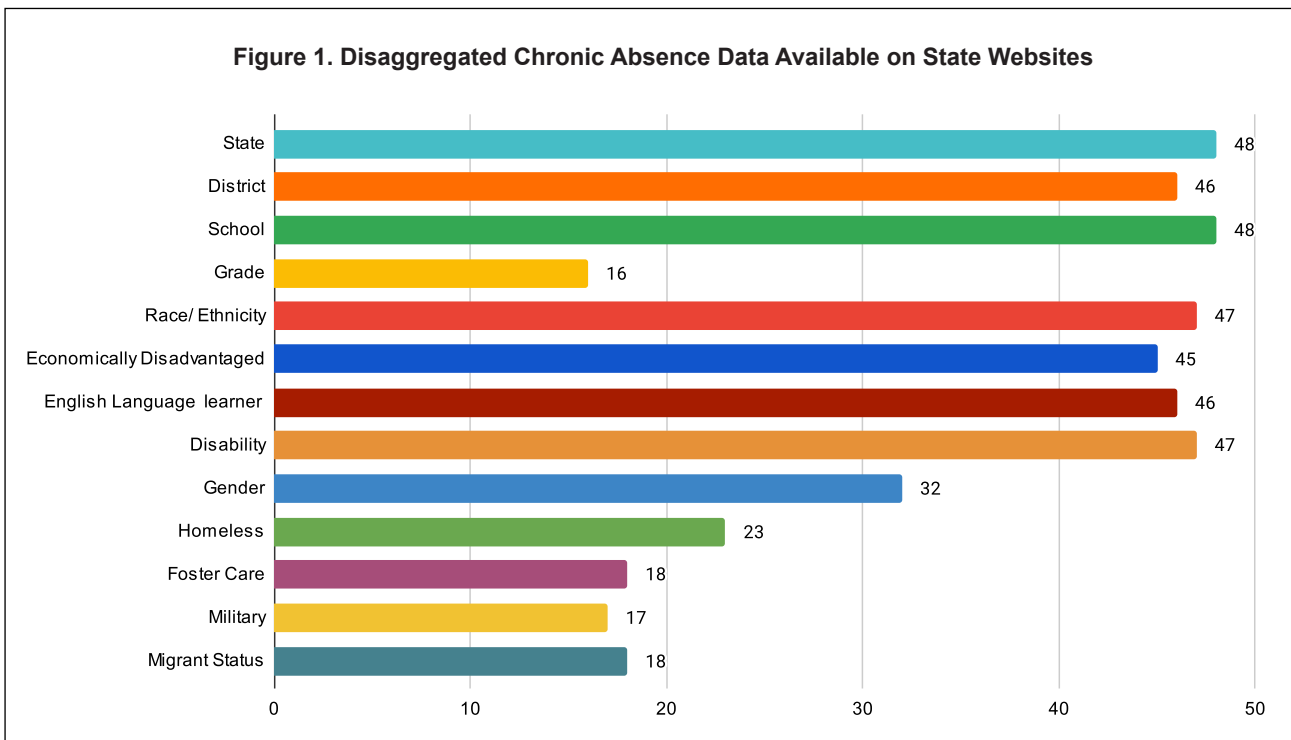
## II. Key Findings

**A. Are states using timely data to publicize how many and which students, schools and districts are affected by chronic absence?** The dynamic nature of chronic absenteeism makes it essential to have publicly available data as quickly as possible. Although chronic absence rates were relatively stable before the pandemic,<sup>8</sup> this is no longer the case. In addition, whether chronic absence is decreasing or increasing not only varies from state to state<sup>9</sup>, it also varies between districts within a state.<sup>10</sup>

Knowing whether chronic absence is improving and for how many and which schools, districts, grades and student populations is critical to informing timely local, regional and state action as well as developing meaningful plans for improving educational outcomes. This is why states should find ways to share chronic absence data as quickly as possible, even if it requires releasing this data early, before a full set of metrics is ready to be shared. Our analysis shows substantial progress, with more states providing earlier access to data.

**1. More states are publishing chronic absence data earlier in the school year.** By the end of March 2024, 43 states had published data for the 2022-23 school year. According to FutureEd, 22 states had released data by early November, and an additional 12 including the District of Columbia had published data by early January. Last year, 41 states had published prior-year data by early April, compared with 25 states in 2022 and nine in 2021.

Four share data publicly on an ongoing basis throughout the school year. Rhode Island has created a [student attendance leaderboard](#) that shows how many students in each school are chronically absent in real-time throughout the school year. Indiana [shared](#) that it is releasing a real-time attendance dashboard which shows attendance data at the grade- and school-level. The dashboard will also show different types of absences (excused or unexcused), as well as chronic absence rates, and allow users to view longitudinal data that can be disaggregated by student population. Connecticut has an extensive [Attendance Dashboard](#). Updated monthly, it has information about chronic absence, average daily attendance and truancy for its schools, districts and the state overall. The data can be broken down by grade and student group. Washington, D.C.'s new data release offers brief [reports](#) on chronic absence and truancy at regular intervals throughout the year.



## 2. Chronic absence data is most often available by district, school and student group, but not by grade.

Disaggregated data is important because it can inform decisions about where additional action and outreach are needed to deepen understanding of the underlying causes of absence and determine how causes and effective solutions might be similar or vary across student populations.

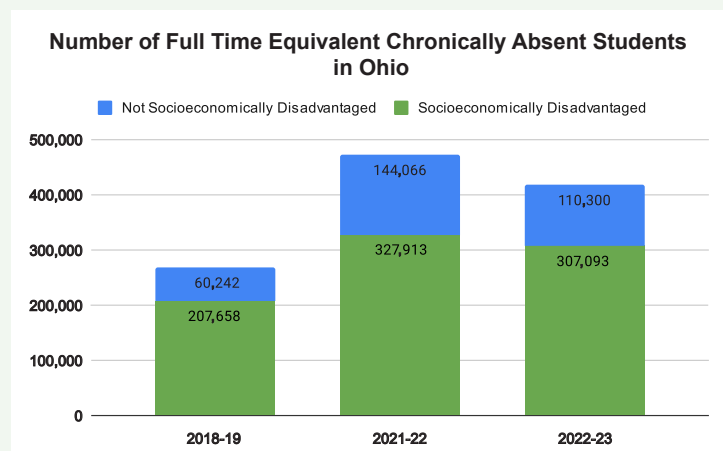
Most states provided chronic absence data by district, school and specific student groups: racial/

ethnic groups, English learners, economic status and students with disabilities. Data by grade, however, is much less available, existing for just 16 states. This can make it difficult to detect or predict elevated levels for a particular grade or grades — which is common in transition years such as kindergarten, 6th, 9th and 12th grades. Having grade-level data allows educators to intervene early in the school year to prevent poor attendance. Programs targeting the transition to kindergarten, middle school or high school can be very effective in improving attendance.

### Understanding Who Is Chronically Absent and Why

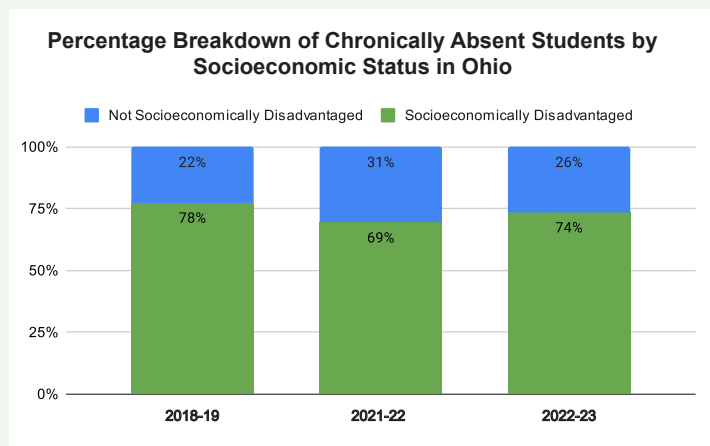
In the aftermath of the pandemic, it is important to use our data to understand who now makes up our chronically absent student population and how that might differ from 2019. We can then deepen our understanding of the reasons driving the increases for different student populations in order to develop effective solutions.

*Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students Are Majority Even Though Rates Doubled for Affluent Peers* [Data](#) comparing trends for socioeconomically disadvantaged and more affluent students from six states (California, Connecticut, Iowa, New York, Ohio, Wisconsin) shows that the number of more affluent students chronically absent more than doubled. As a percentage of the entire chronically absent population, more affluent students saw an increase from 2% to 6%. Despite this increase, socioeconomically disadvantaged students still make up the vast majority of chronically absent students in each of these states. See, for example, the data from Ohio:



### Deepening Understanding of Why

This data points out the critical importance of understanding the drivers of chronic absence for both socioeconomically disadvantaged and more affluent students. [Survey data from Youth Truth](#) suggests that more students than ever are struggling with anxiety, depression and stress. But are the sources and the solutions to anxiety the same for all students? While investments in school climate and anti-bullying might be helpful to all students, those who are anxious because of housing and food insecurity may need something more. Gaining a deeper understanding about the [causes of absences](#) for individual groups of students in each state or district helps decisionmakers identify what is needed universally to help all students, as well as what needs to be tailored to the circumstances of different student groups.



States can offer data, ideally disaggregated and with visualizations that show trends over time, to help districts, schools, community partners and other interested parties see if and how patterns have changed. They can also encourage districts and schools to [use qualitative tools](#) to deepen their understanding of what is driving the increase in chronic absenteeism across and within different groups of students and families.

Another area of action worth exploring is for states to facilitate the creation and use of more standardized codes for reasons for absence. The South Carolina Department of Education, for example, has worked with its districts to develop and agree upon a common set of

codes. After identifying all of the attendance codes used by districts, the department surveyed them for feedback on a standardized list and then provided [professional development](#) to support adoption and respond to questions or concerns. This process builds on the fact that all districts in the state already use the same student information system (PowerSchool) and have a strong history of collaboration to ensure that students were considered absent if they missed at least 50% of the school day. Once in use, this standardized coding can be analyzed to detect commonalities as well as differences in the reasons for absence captured by schools and districts. While further qualitative research is likely to be needed, given challenges in coding reasons accurately, such data will be able to offer an excellent foundation for more

deeply understanding why students are missing school.

**B. Are states providing comparable data?** Having consistently collected and comparable data is extremely important for ensuring that publicly reported data can be used to detect differences between schools and districts. This data can help identify which schools or districts need help and which are “bright spots” getting better results. The good news is that the vast majority of states define chronic absence as missing 10% or more of school for any reason. However, significant differences in definitions about what constitutes a day of attendance can make comparing data across and even within states difficult.

**3. The vast majority of states continue to define chronic absence as missing 10% of school for any reason.** Attendance Works recommends using 10% of days enrolled to define chronic absence because it supports using absenteeism as an early warning indicator of school disengagement, academic risk and high school dropout. It encourages noticing when students are already on track for chronic absence in the first months of a school year (such as having missed two or three days in September) so that early and preventive action can be taken. Research shows that attendance during the first month of school can predict patterns for the remainder of the year.<sup>11</sup>

Using a specific number of days absent instead of a percentage of days is problematic because it leads to an undercount of the number of chronically absent

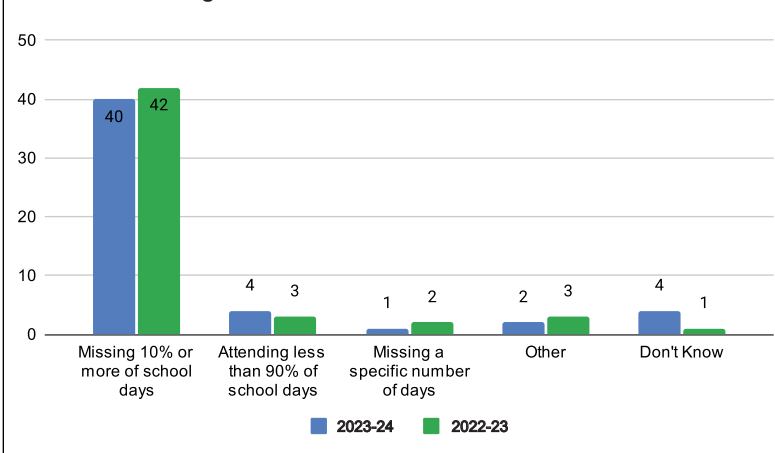


students. Here’s how: Monitoring absences by numbers of days leaves out highly mobile students who do not stay in a single district long enough to accumulate the number of absences needed to be counted as chronically absent. In addition, practitioners may wait to intervene until the absences add up and the student’s attendance has become a crisis. Using the recommended 10% metric prompts practitioners to take early action, such as after missing two days in the first month, to help a student overcome barriers, cultivate a habit of regular attendance and get caught up academically. In addition, when chronic absence is defined as a percentage of days missed, it allows for a fair comparison even if the length of the school year varies from district to district.

Most (40) states have adopted missing 10% of the school year as the definition of chronic absence. Seeking to take a more positive approach but using an equivalent measure, four states monitor when students show up

90% of the time. One state, Alabama, considers students who miss 18 days to be chronically absent. In Montana, chronic absence is defined as missing 10% of school for the purpose of collecting data for ED*Facts*, but for accountability under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) it monitors how many students participate at least 95% of the time. Wyoming leaves the definition up to localities. While definitions of chronic absence have been relatively stable, two states have modified them: Hawaii shifted from a 15-day metric to attending at least 90% of the time, and New Hampshire adopted the 10% definition. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. State Definition of Chronic Absence



#### 4. Most but not all states include all absences when calculating chronic absence.

Attendance Works recommends including all absences (excused, unexcused and suspensions) when calculating chronic absence. For every day a student is in school, there is an opportunity to learn, build relationships and access support. We advise against excluding absences, no matter the circumstance. As we have seen during the pandemic, excessive excused absences can still affect students' connection to school, well-being and academic progress, especially if students do not have adequate access to the materials and resources to help them make up for lost opportunities to learn in the classroom.

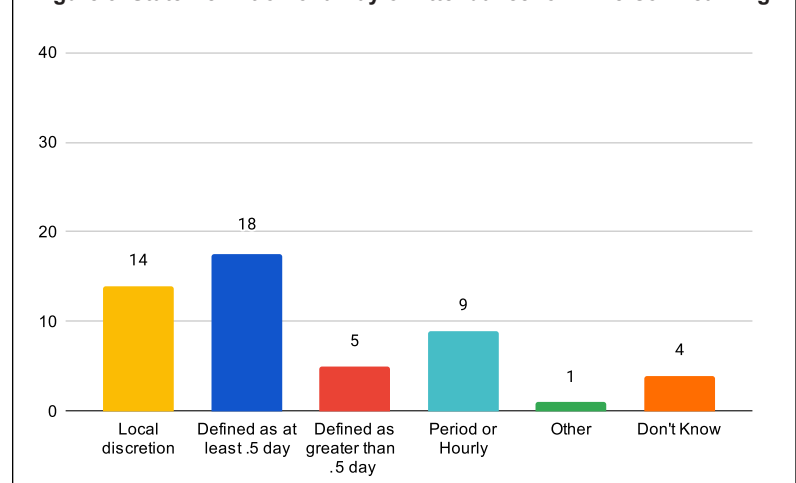
The vast majority of states (at least 42) include all absences in their calculations of chronic absence data. In six, absences can be excluded for varying circumstances. In Oklahoma, for example, medical exemptions can be given in extreme situations, such as when a student is receiving treatment for a chronic or terminal disease or has lost an immediate family

member. New Jersey allows certain excused absences, including religious holidays, and up to three days for college visits, to be excluded from calculations. In Colorado, all absences are included for the purpose of publicly reporting chronic absence data, but for the 2020-21 and 2022-23 school years, data on excused absences was removed from the calculation for ESSA accountability. One state, South Dakota, leaves this decision up to local districts.

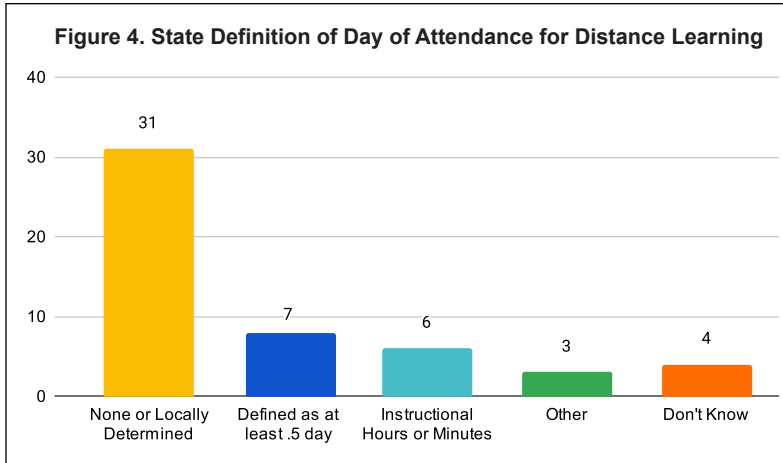
**5. States continue to use widely varying definitions of a day of attendance for both in-person and virtual settings.** Even though chronic absenteeism is defined in a similar manner across the majority of states, the lack of a common definition of a day of attendance makes it difficult to interpret and compare data from districts within and across states. Without a consistent definition, a district may appear to have a lower rate of chronic absenteeism simply because it is easier for its students to be counted as present. For example, if a student is required to show up for only one class period to be considered in attendance for that day, the district is likely to have a lower level of chronic absence when compared with a district that requires students to be in class for multiple periods.

For in-person learning, 18 states define a day of attendance as half a day, while five require students to show up for more than half a day to be counted present. Fourteen leave definitions to local discretion, which makes comparing data across schools and districts difficult. Nine require districts to submit data on the number of hours students are in school rather than days of attendance. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. State Definition of a Day of Attendance for In-Person Learning

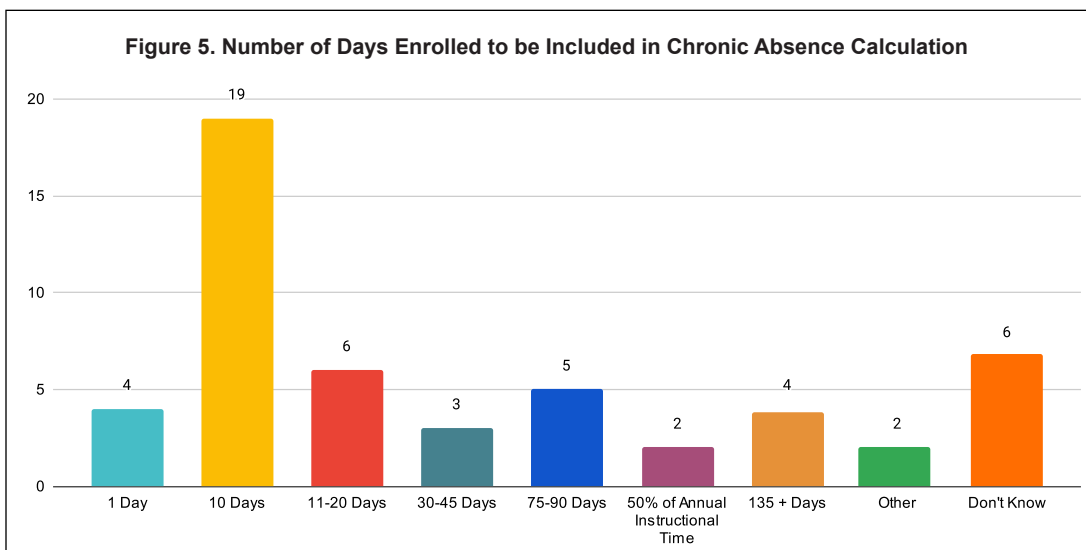


Definitions for what counts as attendance for distance learning are even more variable. Thirty-one states do not offer a definition or leave the decision to local education agencies (LEAs). Seven states require showing up for half of a day or more of instruction, six monitor hours of participation, and three use a variety of approaches. (See Figure 4).



We include information about virtual or distance learning because it remains broadly available as a long-term option in many states and localities even though most students have returned to in-person learning settings.

**6. States have widely varying enrollment policies and practices.** Enrollment policies are influenced by a variety of factors, ranging from funding formulas to ensuring educational access and child well-being. Nonetheless, differences in enrollment policies are likely affecting calculations of chronic absence rates. State policies about how long students must be enrolled to be included in state chronic absence calculations vary tremendously, from 1 day to 181 days! (See Figure 5).



States can take steps to prevent districts from simply dropping students from their rolls if they have accumulated a large number of absences and not appeared at school. Through our scan, we identified three states — Connecticut, New Mexico and Kentucky — that require conducting and documenting more extensive outreach and intervention before a student can be dropped from the rolls if a family has not provided documentation of a move or a transfer.

The Connecticut State Department of Education requires districts to consider all of the following prior to seeking to unregister a student:

1. Have they made a good-faith effort to ascertain the status of the student?
2. Do they have evidence that supports their efforts to locate the student?
3. Do they have documentation of their process leading up to the student's removal through unregistration?

In Connecticut, these recommendations are codified in [Appendix L](#) in their public systems information guide.

Engaging in such outreach before unregistering a student may be even more important in the aftermath of the pandemic. As of 2023, an estimated 230,000 students remained unaccounted for in schools across the country. These students had not moved out of state, enrolled in private schools or opted for homeschooling, according to available data. Finding them is important to ensure student safety and health as well as continued learning.<sup>12</sup>

**C. How do state policies differ with respect to key factors (accountability and funding) that influence the collection and use of chronic absence data?** For this review, we collected information about two key areas: 1) use of chronic absence as a measure of school accountability, and 2) how states count students for allocating funding to districts.





## 7. The majority of states continue to use chronic absence as an accountability measure for school improvement.

Thirty-seven states use chronic absenteeism as a measure of school accountability. Most states gave a modest weight to chronic absence, and some included it as one component of a fifth indicator, also including data related to school climate or college and career readiness.

Since chronic absence was widely adopted as an accountability measure, there has been a dramatic increase in the availability of chronic absence reports as a regular feature of most student information systems. Regular review of the data encourages greater scrutiny, which can improve accuracy.

At the same time, concern over its use as an accountability metric can also fuel efforts to make the data look better (for example, seeking exemptions for particular types of absences). Accountability also makes it even more important for states to actively address concerns that data will be used to blame programs and practitioners. To counteract this situation, states need to emphasize the importance of continuous improvement and offer information about additional support that will be made available to help schools and districts improve attendance and engagement.

## 8. While the majority of states primarily fund based upon average daily membership or student counts, average daily attendance is used in the two largest states.

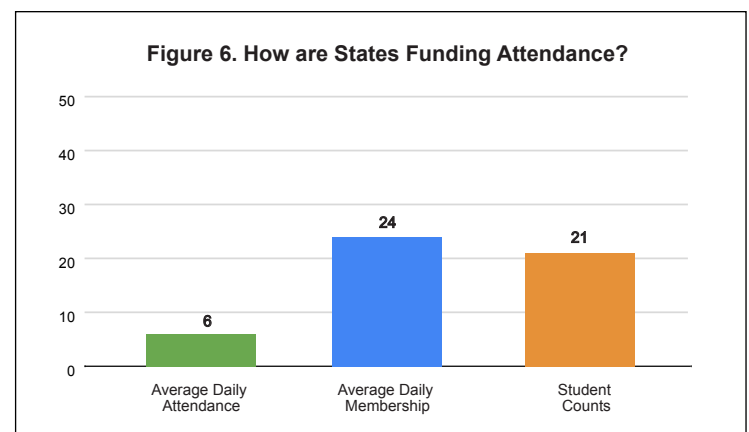
As [this report](#) by the Education Commission of the State describes, states primarily use one of the following approaches to count students for funding purposes<sup>13</sup>:

- **average daily attendance:** States calculate the average number of children in attendance each day for all or most of the school year.

- **student counts:** States collect enrollment or attendance counts either once (typically in the fall) or multiple times during the year. If counts are collected multiple times, the count days are averaged together, and funding allocations are adjusted accordingly.
- **average daily membership:** States calculate the average number of children enrolled in each district for most or all of the year. The average can be based on the previous or current school year.

The approach to funding can shape how districts pay attention to attendance. When average daily attendance is the basis for funding, it motivates paying more attention to improving attendance while also incentivizing taking attendance in a manner that makes it easier for students to be considered present. A major concern with using average daily attendance, however, is that it fiscally penalizes those districts serving student populations with greater needs who face more significant attendance challenges.<sup>14</sup> Districts funded by student counts or average daily membership may not realize that paying attention to attendance also matters for their long-term financial viability. While research is not yet available, common sense suggests chronic absence is an early warning sign that students are disengaging and might not enroll in the district the following year.

According to our review, six states (CA, KY, ID, MS, MO and TX) currently fund based primarily on average daily attendance. Twenty-four states (AL, AZ, AR, FL, IL, MN, NE, NY, NC, NV, NH, ND, OH, OK, OR, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, UT, VT, VA and WY) fund based on average daily membership, and 21 states (AK, CO, CT, DE, DC, GA, HI, IN, IA, KS, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MT, NJ, NM, WA, WV and WI) use student counts. (See Figure 6).



**D. How are states promoting effective approaches to improving attendance?** In the aftermath of the pandemic, states are critical to building the capacity of districts and schools now struggling to implement effective responses to exceptionally high levels of chronic absence.

**9. States are taking a variety of steps to promote an effective approach to improving attendance.** These include investing in more real-time data reports, offering comprehensive guidance, requiring a team approach, organizing attendance campaigns, encouraging cross-departmental work to leverage existing initiatives, shifting away from ineffective punitive practice including banning suspensions for truancy, and monitoring excused vs. unexcused absences. This section examines multiple strategies for building district and school capacity.

### 1. Invest in Real-Time Data Reports

Having access to real-time data is critical to taking timely and appropriate action. It allows schools and districts to determine as early as possible which student or student groups might require additional outreach. It supports continuous improvement by making it easy to identify which places are getting comparatively better outcomes and might have practices worth emulating. Finally, it can support setting realistic short- and long-term goals for reducing chronic absence and monitoring over time whether those goals are being reached overall as well as for particular student groups, schools or districts.

While some states leave it up to districts to develop real-time data reports, others use their resources to ensure that such reports exist for all districts. The how and whether this can be done varies tremendously and is heavily influenced by the size of the state and the nature of the current data infrastructure. In Kentucky, for example, all districts are on the same student information system, which makes it possible for the state department of education to provide immediate and ongoing access to real-time data reports. The Iowa Department of Education has used a different approach. It purchased the Panorama data platform for all districts as part of state investments in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and early literacy. Uploaded daily, data can be analyzed at the student, building and district levels and cross-referenced for behavior, achievement and attendance. South Carolina's



Department of Education adopted a standard data structure in keeping with guidance from the [Ed-Fi Alliance](#) (a national effort to adopt common data standards). This allowed for the creation of real-time, interactive data dashboards with the support of the nonprofit [Education Analytics](#). Attendance and chronic absence reports are the first element of the dashboard, which is now available to districts.

### 2. Offer Comprehensive, Easy-to-Use Guidance

States can also make sure districts and schools have the knowledge to use this data to take meaningful action. The key to improving attendance is putting in place a [multi-tiered system of support](#) that begins with prevention, is supported by the whole school and only turns to legal action as a last resort. Find descriptions of numerous strategies organized by a tiered support system in our [Attendance Playbook](#), which we developed with FutureEd.

To address this lack of knowledge, a growing number of states are publishing comprehensive and easy-to-use state guidance on their websites. The guidance typically explains what chronic absence is, why it matters and how it can be addressed through a tiered approach as well as district and school teams. Tailored to each state, the guidance also provides information on current state attendance laws. By broadly sharing draft guidance across departments within a state's department of education, other key agencies and local intermediaries and districts, states can use the process of development to gain buy-in and support as well as find out where additional technical assistance might be needed to support implementation. Excellent examples include [Connecticut](#), [Ohio](#), South Carolina and [Virginia](#).

### 3. Require a Team Approach

Many districts and schools may not realize that simply assigning a social worker to case manage chronically absent students will not be sufficient when chronic absence affects a substantial percentage of students. As a result, some states ([Connecticut](#), [New Jersey](#), [Maine](#) and [New Mexico](#)) have passed legislation requiring a team approach when chronic absence affects a high percentage of students in either a school or district. Attendance Works has developed [guidance](#) for operating effective district and school teams.

### 4. Organize State Attendance Campaigns

A growing number of states are also investing in statewide attendance campaigns that offer high-quality materials that can be easily tailored to localities. Excellent examples of state campaigns include [New Mexico](#), [Connecticut](#), [Massachusetts](#) and [Rhode Island](#). More resources are available through our national Attendance Awareness Campaign.

It is important to keep in mind that while messaging is an important ingredient of setting an expectation of attendance every day, it needs to be combined with other supports that identify and address when students face challenges inside or outside school that cause them to miss class.

### 5. Encourage Districts to Work Across Departments to Leverage Relevant Existing Initiatives

States can also encourage districts and schools to leverage existing investments in expanded learning, health services, community schools and family engagement, and other ongoing programs to improve attendance. They can use data on chronic absence to prioritize allocation of resources as well as incorporate attendance data into evaluations and continuous improvement efforts. States can make sure districts and others are aware of where chronic absence is already a metric; for example, federally funded full-service community school grantees are required to address and report on chronic absence. The California Department of Education has held webinars highlighting the potential role of expanded learning programs for addressing chronic absence. Multiple evaluations of school-based health centers as well as virtual health care show they help reduce chronic absence.<sup>15</sup> Research has also shown a positive impact of family engagement on chronic absence. Too often,



attendance is treated as a siloed area of work, when working across departments is essential to turning chronic absence around.

### 6. Shift Away From Ineffective Punitive Approaches, Including Suspending Students for Truancy

States can also help districts and schools discard ineffective approaches. As an example, this can involve shifting practice away from punitive actions, which further alienate students rather than allow school communities to understand and address the underlying reasons students are missing school in the first place. Studies<sup>16</sup> show that a large number of absences are caused by challenges experienced in the community that are beyond a student's or family's control (such as a lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, unstable housing, or a lack of safe paths to school) as well as challenges experienced in school (such as bullying or struggling academically). When absences are the result of such challenges, a punitive approach is not likely to be effective and may even undermine strategies that emphasize partnering with students and families to identify and address the underlying reasons that students miss school.

#### *Banning Suspensions for Truancy*

One example of an ineffective approach is suspending students for being truant. Suspensions do not typically help schools identify or address the reasons students miss school in the first place, and they can cause students to fall further behind because they miss even more time in class. Studies show that students who face school suspensions are more likely to experience academic setbacks, repeat grades or even drop out.<sup>17</sup>



Recognizing that suspensions do not help improve attendance, at least 17 states — [Arkansas](#), [California](#), [District of Columbia](#), [Florida](#), [Hawaii](#), [Illinois](#), Maine, [Maryland](#), [New Mexico](#), [Nevada](#), [Ohio](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Rhode Island](#), [Tennessee](#), [Virginia](#), [Washington](#) and [West Virginia](#) — have enacted laws or adopted a policy prohibiting student suspensions for truancy. Passing such legislation is only a first step, however, because without further technical assistance and support to help educators find alternative ways to respond to truancy, local school districts might not change their suspension practice.<sup>18</sup>

## 7. Monitor Excused Versus Unexcused Absences

Another example of finding a way to shift ineffective practice is collecting and monitoring data on types of absences in order to identify where more investment is needed to build relationships and partner with families to identify and address attendance barriers. Currently, 28 states collect data on which absences are excused and unexcused, although few have yet to produce reports encouraging thoughtful analysis of that data.

Monitoring types of absence matters because it can identify practices that affect how a student and their family are treated. When absences are unexcused, students can be denied credit for missed work, excluded from extracurricular activities, and eventually even taken to court, and families can be fined. As unexcused absences accumulate, responses generally become more punitive. Yet punitive responses are unlikely to improve attendance when absences occur for reasons beyond the control of the student and their family. In addition, overuse of the unexcused absence label could undermine efforts to partner with students and families to improve attendance.

Unexcused absences occur when a school determines that a student missed school for a reason not considered legally permissible. The basis for labeling an absence as excused versus unexcused varies by state. Many defer to local school districts to decide if absences should be considered excused or unexcused. Some states regulate what constitutes a valid reason for excusing an absence (such as illness, bereavement, religious holidays and, increasingly, mental health challenges). Anything that falls outside these pre-established categories, as well as an absence lacking a note from a parent/caregiver or doctor, is typically considered unexcused. Even when states have a regulatory definition of excused absences, plenty of room exists for educators to decide whether to categorize an absence as excused or unexcused.

Unfortunately, it is easy for families with fewer resources to accumulate unexcused absences. Consider this common scenario: Two students are sick. Both miss five days of school. One student has a family physician, and their parents are familiar with school policies. This student returns to school with a doctor's note, and their five absences are excused. The other student's family cannot afford to see a doctor. This student returns to school without a doctor's note, and their five absences are unexcused. The family receives a letter stating that their child is truant and that they may be taken to court if absences continue.

The California Department of Education's interactive portal, [DataQuest](#), allows users to analyze and compare the percent of excused versus unexcused absences by student group for every school, district and county in the state. Leveraging that data, [Disparities in Unexcused Absences Across California Schools](#), published by Policy Analysis for California Education, found that socioeconomically disadvantaged students are much more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused. This is also true for Black, Native American, Hispanic/Latino and Pacific Islander students relative to White, Asian American and Filipino students. These disparities could not be fully explained by poverty since they remained across differences in socioeconomic status. Such disparities, however, did not exist in all districts. Those with the least disparities had better attendance.

### III. Recommendations

As states continue to develop and evolve their attendance policy and practice, we offer the following recommendations related to comparable data, public reporting and taking action. How these recommendations can best be advanced — through legislation, administrative action or technical assistance — varies and depends upon the local conditions in each state.

#### Comparable Data

**1) Establish a common definition of a day of attendance.** States should adopt a common definition and publicize it whenever attendance data is shared. A common metric would allow for better comparisons across states. Attendance Works recommends adoption of the *EDFacts* definition: A student counts as present for a full day of instruction if they attend school for 50% or more of the day. At a minimum, each state should create a consistent definition that can measure student exposure to instruction across all districts in the state.

**2) Review and invest in data quality.** Examine data while collecting it from districts to ensure that it is being submitted in accordance with agreed-upon definitions. Identify when definitions need to be clarified or revised in order to ensure consistent and comparable data. Review and audit local data-collection procedures. Use insights gained to improve data collection in subsequent years.

**3) Ensure outreach to students and families before they are dropped from enrollment lists.** When students do not show up for school for an extended period of time, require intentional and extended outreach to verify what has happened before allowing for a student to be taken off the enrollment list.

**4) Include all absences when calculating chronic absence.** When calculating chronic absence, include all absences to ensure an accurate and complete picture of how much school is being missed. If states are concerned about a particular type of absence (such as long-term medical care, quarantine or college visit), they should still track the absence and create a code so it can be monitored separately.

#### Public Reporting

**5) Monitor and publish chronic absence data as early as possible.** Monitor and publish data on the percent and number of students who are missing 10% of school for any reason, over time, in an easy-to-access location on the state education agency's webpage. Share data, broken down by school, grade, race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage, English learner status, home language, disability status, foster care status, homelessness, mode of learning and geography if possible. When publishing data, provide contextual information to help readers understand and use the data, including building awareness of the connection between attendance, behavior and achievement, sharing the definitions for a day of attendance and chronic absence, and describing any challenges related to data collection. Make sure this data is available as early as possible in the school year to inform planning and galvanize timely action.

**6) Collect and report on types of absences and encourage more common collection and reporting of data on reasons for absence.** In order to monitor the impact of disparities in truancy-related practice and policies, collect and publish data showing the percent and number of absences overall and how many are excused, unexcused or due to suspension. Make it easy to examine how types of absence might differ by grade, race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage, home language, disability status, foster care status, homelessness and mode of learning. States can also facilitate the creation and use of more standardized codes for reasons for absence, which offers an excellent foundation for more deeply understanding why students are missing school.

**7) Expand development of real-time data dashboards.** Support the creation of easy-to-use data dashboards with real-time data that can allow educators and their partners to use data throughout the year to engage in continuous improvement. States can invest in the development of a statewide dashboard available to all districts, or provide funding, technical assistance and guidance to help districts develop their own.

## Taking Action

### 8) Build capacity to adopt effective approaches.

Provide guidance and technical assistance that advance a [team approach](#) to understanding why students are missing too much school and building [multi-tiered](#) systems of support tailored to local strengths and challenges that begin with prevention and use legal action only as a last resort. Require the creation of teams when chronic absence reaches high levels in a school or district. Help districts and schools leverage existing resources and partners (such as health services, expanded learning, early childhood, local volunteers) as well as forge new partnerships as needed. States can create training and professional development materials that districts and schools can use to build staff capacity to utilize high-leverage, evidence-based approaches to reducing chronic absenteeism. These approaches include engaging with families and students, addressing health and safety issues, expanding community partnerships and fostering student success systems. Also, consider banning ineffective practices such as suspending students for truancy.

**9) Identify and publicize bright spots.** Use data to identify schools or districts with significant improvements and comparatively lower rates of chronic absence than peers with similar demographics. Keep in mind the value of looking at data for schools within a district as well as groups of students within a school, since improvement could be masked when looking at overall rates of chronic absence. Follow up with more in-depth research to confirm the accuracy of the data and find out what practices or policies may be contributing to these better outcomes. Use presentations, written materials and the media to share the insights gained with practitioners and policymakers.

**10) Take a sustained data-informed approach that includes establishing concrete goals for reducing chronic absence over time.** Use data to set goals and develop a sustained plan for achieving reductions in every district and the state as a whole. As part of this process, states and localities must identify their core strategies for reducing chronic absence given local challenges, available assets and what is known about evidence-based approaches to improving attendance. Data should be used continuously to monitor what is working and what should be changed in order to achieve these goals.

## Appendix A: Methods

This brief seeks to gain an understanding of attendance policies and practices across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The Attendance Works policy team came together in November 2023 to design a questionnaire for state leaders to provide information regarding their attendance policies and practices. Building on previous policy scans, the team removed any questions that may no longer be relevant and added questions that aim to better understand how various aspects of state policy might impact student attendance and data reporting. In January 2024, the policy scan questionnaire was sent to a small group of states to obtain feedback on the spreadsheet used to gather information and ensure that the policy questions were clear. After making adjustments to the questionnaire based on that feedback, [this document](#) was sent to all state contacts in the form of a spreadsheet with multiple-choice and open-ended questions. If a question had been asked and answered in the previous year, we provided that response for reference.

State responses were reviewed weekly by the policy team, and if any additional information or clarity was needed, the team followed up with the state contact to seek additional context. In addition to state responses, the team conducted an extensive review of published data on state websites and of state legislative guidance on school attendance, discipline and funding.

Data spreadsheets from each state were cleaned and analyzed in May 2024, after 47 states (including the District of Columbia) completed the questionnaire. In an effort to provide comparable data, some state responses were coded in a generalized format. An example of this is that a state may have a very detailed definition of a day of attendance. Attendance Works analyzed these definitions and categorized responses into simple categories. If a state did not respond to specific questions and the answers could not be found on state websites, responses were coded as "Don't Know." State contacts were then sent a copy of their responses with our analysis to confirm accuracy for the final brief. A [state table](#) has been created with the list of questions and responses from each state.

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## Acknowledgements

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Attendance Works is pleased to present *Stemming the Surge in Chronic Absence: What States Can Do, A Fourth Annual Review of State Attendance Policy and Practice*. Truly a collaborative effort, the brief reflects the contributions of many people. While Hedy N. Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, is the primary author, Associate Director Inika Williams played a major role in coordinating the process, conceptualizing the content and finding legislation banning suspensions as a response to truancy. Senior Fellow Nick Conner used his impressive database skills, as well as a knack for locating data on state websites, to collect the information needed for our analysis.

We deeply appreciate the thoughtful and constructive comments offered by colleagues who took the time to review an initial draft. These invaluable reviewers include Robert Balfanz, Lane Carr, Aveene Coleman, Stacy Ehrlich Loewe, Sarah Frazelle, Kevin Gee, Michael Gottfried, Cindy Kazanis, Johann Liljengren, Nat Malkus, Laura Pinsonneault, Rosalyn Rice-Harris and Niki Sandoval. The brief also benefited from the insights and feedback from Attendance Works team members Laura Downs, Angela Duran, Sue Fothergill, Lorri Hobson, Susan Lieberman and Cecelia Leong.

The brief would not have been possible without the excellent editorial and organization skills of our Communications Director, Catherine Cooney, who led the editing, design, production and distribution. We are also grateful for the careful copy editing skills of Marylou Tousignant, and the visual communication abilities of our talented graphic designer, Rhonda Saunders. A special thanks to our Program Support Associate, Richard Hahn for his outstanding attention to detail and administrative assistance.

We are also grateful to the Council of Chief State School Officers for helping us to share the findings of this brief with its members prior to its official release.

This brief was made possible by the generous support of the Overdeck Family Foundation and Heising-Simons Foundation. While their support is deeply appreciated, the conclusions are those of the authors alone.



Attendance Works ([www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)) is a national nonprofit initiative that promotes equal opportunities to learn and advances student success by inspiring and catalyzing policies and practices that prevent and reduce chronic absence. Its website offers a wide array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools, districts and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.

Citation: *Stemming the Surge in Chronic Absence: What States Can Do, A Fourth Annual Review of State Attendance Policy and Practice*. Attendance Works, June 2024.