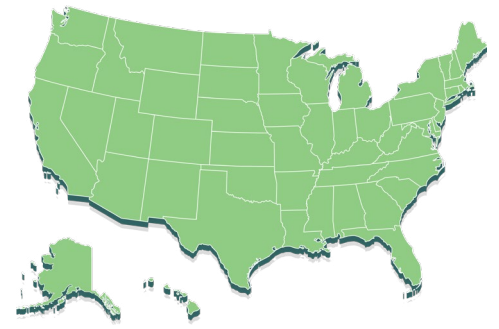# More Essential Than Ever:
States Taking Action to Improve Attendance

A Policy Brief   **June 2025**

Executive Summary

Ensuring a routine of regular attendance in school is crucial to nurturing an educated, healthy and skilled next generation with the hard and soft skills needed for a strong economy. Improving student well-being and academic achievement requires addressing the high levels of chronic absence which remain elevated even five years after the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic.

A majority of schools (compared to less than a quarter before the pandemic) experience 20% or higher levels of chronic absence. High levels of chronic absence affect the academic achievement and well-being of all students, not just those who are chronically absent. The churn in the classroom from students being absent makes it harder for teachers to teach and set classroom norms while students must wait for their absent peers to catch up.

Turning around this situation requires state leadership, as well as districts, schools and community partners working together over time to create an engaging learning experience and partnerships with students and families to overcome barriers to getting to school. State leaders, especially in state education agencies (SEAs) are especially well-positioned to prompt and support action to improve attendance. While states have always been critical, we expect them to have even more autonomy in education than they have had in decades. States can take action through a variety of mechanisms (e.g., regulations, administrative actions, guidance, board policy, funding and legislation).

Written especially for state policy makers, administrators and advocates, this brief is our fifth annual examination of state attendance data, policy, and practices. It is based on a review of websites for all 50 states and Washington, D.C., as well as a survey completed by 49 states and Washington, D.C. See this state-by-state results table.

This year's brief focuses on how states are:

- Making data available in a more timely manner
- Continuing to promote accountability for chronic absence
- Leading with prevention

Our analysis resulted in the following key findings

Finding 1: All states but one publish chronic absence data on their department of education website.
When Attendance Works was founded in 2010, only one state published data showing students missing substantial amounts of school for any reason. Now, in 2025, chronic absence data can be found on the websites of *all states* with the exception of one.

Finding 2. States are publishing chronic absence data in a more timely manner.
As of mid-April 2025, the majority of states (43) published their chronic absence data for 2023-24. This represents a significant improvement since 2021. Four states, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Washington, D.C. share data publicly before the end of the current school year. Some states have developed

internal data dashboards that are accessible to school and district staff even though they are not available to the general public.

Finding 3. The collection of attendance data varies by state. While nearly half (24) of states reported collecting data annually, the remainder collected it more frequently with five collecting data three or four times each year, six monthly, and 13 collecting daily. While most states (39) allow each district to choose its own student information system (or software for managing student data), this is not the case for all states.

Finding 4. While states are generally publishing a comprehensive set of chronic absence data, more should be making data available by grade. Most states provide chronic absence data by district, school, grade level (e.g., elementary, middle, high and K-12) and specific student groups. Data by grade, however, is much less available, which can make it difficult to detect when chronic absence is elevated for particular grades, as is often the case for kindergarten, 6th, 9th and 12th grade.

Finding 5. Most, but not all, states use missing 10% as the definition for publishing chronic absence data. Thirty-nine states have adopted missing 10% of the school year as their definition of chronic absence when publishing on their state website. Seeking to present a more positive approach, a few states monitor students who attend 90% of the time, although the terms states used to refer to this measure (e.g., regular attendance or consistent attendance) varies.

Finding 6. Most states include all absences when calculating chronic absence. Attendance Works advises against exclusions for any reason in order to ensure that the data fully reflects the lost opportunities to learn and develop in the classroom. Excluding absences could result in states and districts underestimating how many students are at risk due to chronic absence.

Finding 7. **States continue to use widely varying definitions of a day of attendance.** The lack of a common definition of a day of attendance continues to make it difficult to interpret and compare data within and across states.

Finding 8. Differences in state enrollment policies and practices are likely affecting calculations of chronic absence rates. A few states, however, ensure more extensive outreach occurs before a student is dropped from the roles. Nonetheless, differences in enrollment policies contribute to the challenge of comparing data across states.

Finding 9. In 2025, 37 states plus Washington D.C. used chronic absence as a metric for school accountability under ESSA. 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.

Finding 10. A few states are adjusting how chronic absence is used as part of school accountability. Six states (AR, CO, HI, NJ, NY, VA) indicated that they adjusted or are in the process of revising this metric.

Finding 11. Twenty-one states have set a measurable target for chronic absence. Sixteen of these states (AL, AR, CA, CO, CT, DC, IA, MD, NE, NM, NV, OH, RI, VA, WA, WV) are participating in The 50% challenge to reduce chronic absence, jointly issued in July 2024.

Finding 12. Twenty-one states currently offer guidance on adopting a multi-tiered system of supports. Attendance Works recommends adopting a multi-tiered system of supports approach to improving attendance. Beginning with prevention and early intervention, tailored to local realities, is key to improving attendance. More states should invest in developing and disseminating guidance.

Finding 13. Several states are engaging in prevention by conducting attendance awareness and messaging campaigns. Communication campaigns raise awareness about the critical importance of regular school attendance for well-being, engagement and learning and engage a range of partners in sending these messages.

Finding 14. States are not yet leveraging data on excused versus unexcused absences to ensure responses begin with prevention. Currently, 32 states collect data on which absences are excused and unexcused. Having such data is necessary for examining the truancy-related practices related to coding and responding to unexcused absences, and assessing if they need to be adjusted in order to be aligned with a multi-tiered system of support for attendance.

Finding 15. While one state bans the use of the courts, it is required in 20 states. In general, state responses reveal that local school districts exercise significant discretion regarding when and how to use courts for intervening due to an accumulation of unexcused absences.

Using courts as a last resort is important for a number of reasons. Courts are a much more costly intervention than engaging in school- or community-based prevention. Moreover, in our experience, when courts are seen as the solution, it can cause school staff to feel they do not have a role in supporting school attendance aside from documenting when students are truant. If early intervention and prevention activities are not in place, it is easy for courts to become overwhelmed with cases.

Recommendations

Attendance Works offers the following recommendations related to public reporting, comparable data and taking action.

A. Reporting on chronic absence

1. Monitor and publicly report chronic absence data as early as possible, ideally within the first quarter of the following school year.
2. Maintain comprehensive public reports offering data by school, district, student group, grade, geography and trends over time.
3. Expand the development of real-time attendance data dashboards available to educators throughout the year. Such dashboards ideally provide a more complex data set, showing attendance data by bands: satisfactory (missing less than 5% of school), at-risk (missing 5-9%), as well as moderate (missing 10-19%), and severe (missing 20% or more), as well as data by school, student group, grade, geography and trends over time.
4. Encourage student information systems to offer attendance reports with data by attendance bands as well as by school, student group, grade, geography and trends over time.

B. Comparable Data

5. Continue to define chronic absence as missing 10% of the school year.
6. Establish a common definition of a day of attendance.
7. Ensure outreach to students and families before they are dropped from enrollment lists.
8. Include all absences when calculating chronic absence.

C. Taking Action

9. Publish state guidance on improving attendance that emphasizes taking a team approach to implement a multi-tiered system of support.
10. Ensure legal action is only used as a last resort.
11. Monitor chronic absence data as regularly as possible throughout the school year to identify trends, potential success stories and notice when additional action is needed to address attendance declines.
12. Identify and publicize schools, communities, districts or states achieving meaningful reductions in chronic absence.
13. Use chronic absence data to prioritize the allocation of relevant resources from departments and agencies to the schools and districts needing help with improving attendance.
14. Take a sustained, data-informed approach to reducing chronic absence, including establishing goals for improvement over time.

I. Introduction

Ensuring a routine of regular attendance in school is crucial to nurturing an educated, healthy and skilled next generation with the hard and soft skills needed for a strong economy. Improving student well-being and academic achievement requires addressing the high levels of chronic absence, which remain elevated, even five years after the onset of the Covid pandemic.

After nearly doubling during the pandemic to affect nearly one out of three students nationwide, chronic absence (missing 10% or more of school) began to decline, though it has remained elevated. This pattern holds true whether the analysis is based on federal data for the 2022-23 school year (Attendance Works and Johns Hopkins University) or data available from states for the 2023-24 school year (American Enterprise Institute). Currently, there isn't sufficient data for the 2024-25 school year to know if this decrease is continuing.

In addition, our analysis shows that during the 2022-23 school year, at least 20% of students were chronically absent in 61% of schools, compared with 65% in 2021-22, but only 28% pre-pandemic. High levels of chronic absence affect the academic achievement and well-being of all students, not just those who are chronically absent. The churn in the classroom from students being absent makes it harder for teachers to teach and set classroom norms, while students must wait for their absent peers to catch up.[1] According to the Education Recovery Scorecard, "a widespread rise in absenteeism is slowing the recovery, especially in high poverty districts."

Turning this situation around requires state leadership as well as districts, schools and community partners working together over time to create an engaging learning experience and partnerships with students and families to overcome barriers to getting to school.

States Are More Essential Than Ever

State leaders, especially in state education agencies (SEAs), are especially well-positioned to prompt and support action to improve attendance. While states have always been critical, we expect them to have even more autonomy in education than they have had in decades. States can take action through a variety of mechanisms (e.g., regulations, administrative actions, guidance, board policy, funding and legislation).

Decisions about how data is collected and reported (frequency and format) are left to SEAs. States can make data available to galvanize preventive early action and mobilize key players to get involved. State rules greatly influence whether attendance is taken at the local level in a consistent and accurate manner on a daily basis. Having consistent, accurate, accessible data is essential for ensuring that actions are guided by a deeper understanding of why students miss school, and promotes documentation of those reasons, which might differ across localities and student groups.

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. Such support is crucial to ensuring that all districts, not just a few innovators, have the tools and skills to support excellent attendance.

About This Brief

Written especially for state policymakers, administrators and advocates, this brief is our fifth annual examination of state attendance data, policy and practices. It assesses how states are taking action to improve attendance based on the following key questions:

   A. Are states publicly sharing data in a manner that supports transparency and promotes action?
   B. Are states providing comparable data?
   C. Are states using chronic absence as a measure of school accountability?
   D. Are states advancing a comprehensive, multi-tiered approach that begins with prevention?

We also highlight inspiring examples of how states can make a difference.

This brief is based on a review of websites for all 50 states and Washington, D.C., as well as a survey completed by 49 states and Washington, D.C. State-by-state data is summarized in this table.

II. Key Findings

This report presents key findings organized by the four key questions.

A. Are states publicly sharing data in a manner that supports transparency and promotes action?

When states make chronic absence data publicly available, parents, educators, community partners and policymakers can see the challenge it represents and for whom. This transparency supports public accountability. It can be used to help motivate action as well as keep everyone informed about whether progress is being made.

Although chronic absence rates were more manageable and relatively stable before the pandemic, this is no longer the case. In addition, whether chronic absence is decreasing or increasing not only varies from state to state, it also can vary between districts within a state as well as schools within the same district. This makes monitoring chronic absence levels on an ongoing basis extremely important.

Our analysis shows substantial progress in the sharing of chronic absence data in a manner that is transparent and meaningful. This progress is critical. Knowing whether chronic absence is improving or worsening — and for how many and which schools, districts, grades and student populations — is critical to informing timely local, regional and state action. Chronic absence also is central information for developing meaningful plans to improve educational outcomes.

Finding 1. All states but one publish chronic absence data on their department of education website.

When Attendance Works was founded in 2010, only one state, Maryland, had a metric showing students missing substantial amounts of school for any reason,[2] and published this data on its website. Now, in 2025, chronic absence data can be found on the websites of *all states* except New Hampshire. (See Figure 1). The availability of data in almost all states is an important development. States can release data more quickly than the federal government, and it allows for chronic absence levels to be monitored, even if disruptions occur in federal data collection. As discussed later in this report, data presented on state websites can differ from what states report to the federal government. Federal collection of chronic absence data occurs through ED*Facts,* a U.S. Department of Education initiative that has established common data standards and is congressionally mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

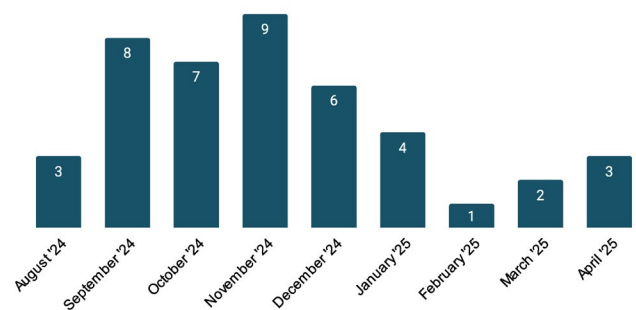**Figure 1: States Publishing Chronic Absence Data in March 2025**
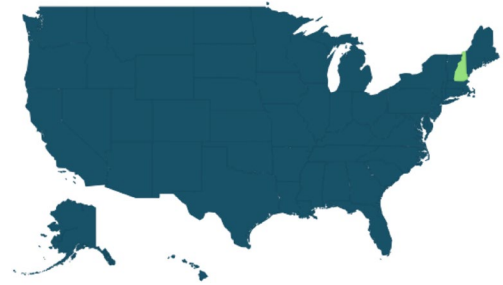
Chronic absence data can be found on the websites of all states except New Hampshire.

Finding 2. States are publishing chronic absence data in a more timely manner.

This year, Attendance Works began tracking the month in which data was made available. In the majority of states (33), chronic absence data had been published by December 2024. As of mid-April 2025, 43 states had published their data for 2023-24. (See Figure 2). As a comparison, in 2022 only 25 states had published prior-year chronic absence data by early April, and in 2021 only nine had made it available.

Figure 2: When States Are Publishing Data

Month	Value
August '24	3
September '24	8
October '24	7
November '24	9
December '24	6
January '25	4
February '25	1
March '25	2
April '25	3

Four states — Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Washington, D.C. — share data publicly before the end of the current school year. Rhode Island's Student Attendance Leaderboard shows real-time data, with the number of students chronically absent by school. Updated monthly, Connecticut's Attendance Dashboard

offers a comprehensive array of data on chronic absence, attendance rates and truancy at all levels and is easily broken down by grade and student group. Washington, D.C., and Massachusetts both release reports in the spring offering insights about progress to date for the current school year.

In addition, a number of states — including Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky and South Carolina — have developed internal data dashboards that are accessible to school and district staff, though not the general public. How this is done varies tremendously.

- The Iowa Department of Education 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.
- In Kentucky, 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.
- Indiana and South Carolina's departments of education have used the adoption of standard data structure in keeping with guidance from the Ed-Fi Alliance to allow for daily uploads of attendance data from their districts. Ed-Fi Alliance is a national effort to adopt common data standards.

In addition to showing breakdowns by grade and student group, such internally facing dashboards can offer a more complex picture of attendance. They can show attendance by bands: satisfactory (missing less than 5% of school), at-risk (missing 5-9%), moderate (missing 10-19%) and severe chronic absence (missing 20% or more). Seeing data by bands can help educators anticipate the level of support needed to improve the situation.

These examples show how developments in technology can help accelerate access to data that is easy to use and understand. It is also worth noting that the investments in data dashboards are occurring regardless of whether a state adopted chronic absence as an accountability measure for schools. This reflects a growing understanding of the value of such data for any effort to improve outcomes for all students.

Finding 3. The collection of attendance data varies by state. To better understand the extent to which data could be available for publication, this year's brief asked new questions about the collection of attendance data from districts. Responses revealed a wide range of practice.

a. Although most states only publicly report data annually, data collection happens much more frequently. While nearly half of the states (24) reported collecting data annually, the remainder collected it more frequently, five collecting data three or four times each year, six monthly, and 13 collecting daily. (See Figure 3). Given this situation, a large number of states could have the capacity to report chronic absence data on a more frequent basis, at least internally if not externally. It is likely that releasing data more frequently would require states to make additional investments in auditing and verifying the data as well as producing meaningful data reports.

b. The infrastructure for collecting data varies, with the majority of states (39) allowing each district to choose its own student information system (or software for managing student data). This is not the case for all states. Five states maintain data on a single student information system. In another five states, all districts use the same type of student information system program. One state, Delaware, is shifting from each district being on its own

Figure 3: Frequency of State Attendance Data Collection

Annually	3-4 times	Monthly	Daily	Other	No response
24	5	6	13	2	1
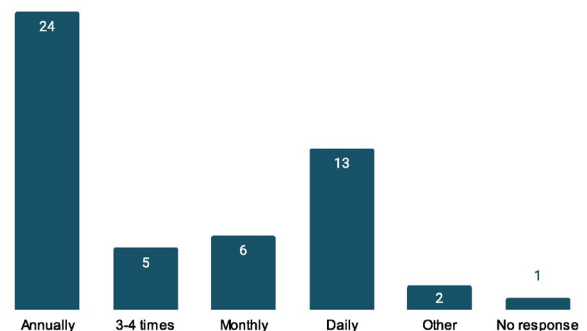
student information system (SIS), to all districts using the same system. (See Figure 4).

Historically, the use of different student information systems by districts across a state has made uploading data on a frequent basis challenging and onerous. Addressing this challenge is why the Ed-Fi Alliance seeks to establish a common set of rules about how data is collected and organized, so that multiple systems can seamlessly and securely share actionable information. The use of such rules along with a data application is what helped Indiana establish a real-time attendance dashboard. It is helpful to keep in mind, however, that such data typically is not audited and "official" until the end of the year.

Figure 4: Infrastructure for Statewide Attendance Data Collection
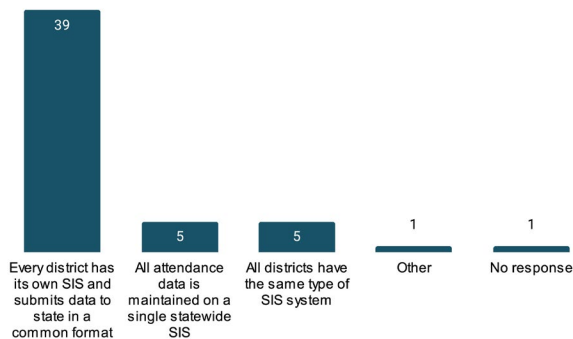
Finding 4. While states are generally publishing a comprehensive set of chronic absence data, more should be making data available by grade. Most states provide chronic absence data by district, school, grade level (e.g., elementary, middle, high and K-12) and specific student groups. Data by specific grade, however, is much less available, existing only for 17 states, which is a slight improvement from the prior year. The lack of such data can make it difficult to detect when chronic absence is elevated for particular grades — a common challenge during the traditional transition grades such as kindergarten, 6th, 9th and 12th grade. (See Figure 5). The availability of grade-level data can help call attention to the need to establish and monitor the results of programs targeting the transitions to a new school.

We were also pleased to see that the majority of states now offer a chart showing trends over time. This information is extremely valuable for helping states and localities assess at a glance whether chronic absence

Figure 5: Disaggregated Data Availability 2024 vs. 2025
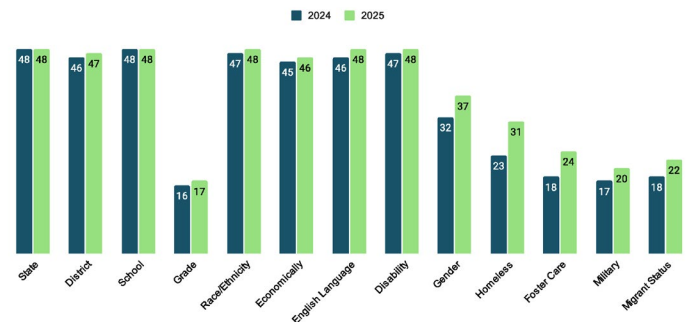
is decreasing or growing, and for whom. The more sophisticated state websites allow for reviewing trends for different grades, schools and student groups, as well as statewide or by district.

B. Are states providing comparable data?
Having consistently collected and comparable data is extremely important for understanding whether publicly reported data can be used to detect differences between states, districts and schools. When data is comparable, it can help identify which schools or districts need help and which are "bright spots" getting better results. It also helps to assess the impact of different policies and practices across different states, districts and schools. When states do not define chronic absence or a day of attendance in the same way, it is challenging to make comparisons. If definitions are left to the discretion of districts or have changed over time, it is also not advisable to draw conclusions about patterns within a state.
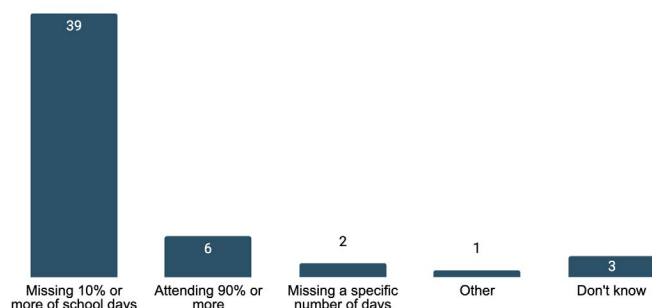
Finding 5. Most, but not all, states use missing 10% as the definition for publishing chronic absence data. Thirty-nine states have adopted missing 10% or more of the school year as their definition of chronic absence when publishing on their state website. Seeking to

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present a more positive approach, a few states monitor students who attend at least 90% of the time, although the terms states use to refer to this measure (e.g., regular attendance or consistent attendance) vary. (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: State Definition of Chronic Absence

Missing 10% or more of school days	39
Attending 90% or more	6
Missing a specific number of days	2
Other	1
Don't know	3

Attendance Works recommends using 10% of days enrolled to define chronic absence because this supports viewing 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.[3]

For data collection under ED*Facts*, the U.S. Department of Education requires submitting data on the number of students who missed 10% or more of school and have been enrolled for at least 10 days. ED*Facts* defines a student as absent if they missed more than .5 of a day (e.g., 4 hours of an 8-hour school day). States, however, have discretion about how they define absences when data is published on their websites. Differences in these definitions include, for example, how long students must be enrolled and whether all absences are included in calculations, which may explain why data on state websites typically shows slightly lower rates of chronic absence.

Finding 6. Most states include all absences when calculating chronic absence. The majority of states (42) include all absences, while seven exclude absences for a variety of reasons. (One state does not publish chronic absence data and another state did not respond).

Attendance Works advises against exclusions for any reason in order to ensure that the data fully reflects the lost opportunities to learn and develop in the classroom. Excluding absences could result in states and districts underestimating how many students are at risk due to chronic absence.

When comparing data between two states, it is important to know if exclusions exist and for what purpose. The state-by-state table includes what our survey collected about the nature of the exclusions.

Finding 7. States continue to use widely varying definitions of a day of attendance. The lack of a common definition of a day of attendance continues to make it difficult to interpret and compare data from districts within and across states. For in-person learning, six states require students to show up for more than half a day to be counted present, while 18 states define a day of attendance as half a day. Eight require districts to submit data on the number of hours students are in school rather than days of attendance, and sixteen leave definitions to local discretion. Two states have definitions that have several factors and are not easily categorized; one state did not respond. (See Figure 7).

Leaving definitions to local discretion creates challenges since a district may appear to have a lower rate of chronic absence 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.

Figure 7: State Definition of a Day of Attendance for In-Person Learning

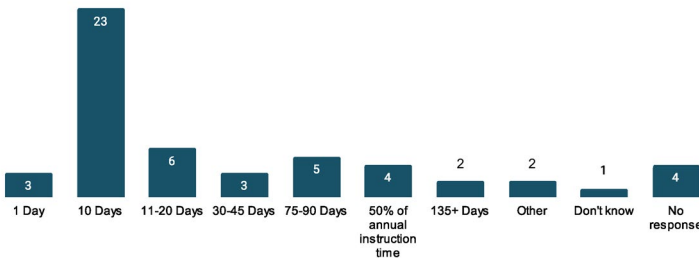|	
Period or hourly	8
At least .5 day	18
Greater than .5 day	6
Local discretion	16
Other	2
No response	1
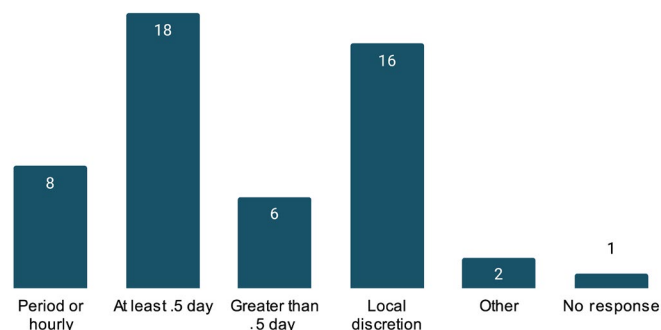
In the case of distance learning, variations appear to be even greater, with eight states defining chronic absence at half (.5) a day, and five states by instructional minutes. The remaining states use a wide range of approaches, particularly local discretion.

Finding 8. Differences in state enrollment policies and practices are likely affecting calculations of chronic absence rates. As part of last year's policy brief, Attendance Works found that state policies about the minimum number of days students must be enrolled to be included in calculations varied tremendously, from one day to 181 days (or essentially the entire school year)! Notably, the largest number of states (23) use the federal guidance suggesting a minimum of 10 days, while more than half have a different policy. (See Figure 8).

Figure 8: Minimum Number of Days Enrolled to be Included in Chronic Absence Calculation

Category	Value
1 Day	3
10 Days	23
11-20 Days	6
30-45 Days	3
75-90 Days	5
50% of annual instruction time	4
135+ Days	2
Other	2
Don't know	1
No response	4

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. At least three states — Connecticut, New Mexico and Kentucky — 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. For example, Kentucky law states that "students cannot be dropped without the district knowing where the student has moved/re-enrolled. If there is no data, a district can withdraw the student as 'whereabouts unknown' but this will result in a dropout for the district, so districts make every effort to find where the student has gone. Any student with over 10 days of enrollment will be included in the district's chronic absenteeism count regardless of the drop or disenrollment."

C. Are states using chronic absence as a measure of school accountability?

When states submitted their plans for implementing the federal Every Student Succeeds Act in 2017, 36 states and the District of Columbia included some form of chronic absence metric. Most states gave a modest weight to chronic absence, and some included it as one component of a fifth indicator along with data related to school climate or college and career readiness.

As discussed in the Future*Ed* Report [Who's In](#), chronic absence was seen as an ideal metric because the data was already collected and easily understood. It met the technical requirements for the school quality and school success indicator and was backed by research showing it had the potential to make a difference, especially for disadvantaged students. Nine years later, this brief finds that the use of chronic absence as a metric for school improvement remains widespread, even in the aftermath of a global pandemic.

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.

Finding 9. In 2025, 37 states plus Washington, D.C., used chronic absence as a metric for school accountability under ESSA. All 37 states and Washington, D.C. continued to use chronic absence as an accountability metric under their state ESSA plans, and Iowa added it this past year. Attendance Works commends policymakers for standing firm about keeping chronic absence as

an accountability metric even though they may be experiencing greater pressure to change it in light of the challenging levels of absenteeism post-pandemic. The map below shows the states that included it as well as the 13 states that did not. (See Figure 9).

Figure 9: States With Chronic Absence as a Metric for School Accountability under ESSA

Included in state ESSA plan

Not included in state ESSA plan
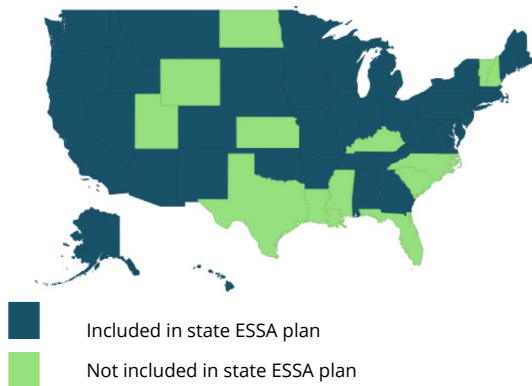
Finding 10. A small number of states are adjusting how chronic absence is used as part of school accountability.

Six states (AR, CO, HI, NJ, NY, VA) indicated that they adjusted or are in the process of revising this metric.

Colorado education officials removed unexcused absences for school accountability during the pandemic but have added them back into their calculation. Hawaii is shifting from a chronic absence to a regular attendance measure. New Jersey seeks to change the minimum days enrolled to be included in its accountability measure from 45 to 90 days.

While the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) will continue to publicly report chronic absence, it is removing it from its school accountability calculation as part of an overall process of simplifying its formula for school letter grades. When calculating student engagement in the earlier formula, the ADE had awarded a student a full point if that student missed less than 5% of school days, and .5 if the student missed 5-10% of school.

For the 2025-26 school year, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) is replacing chronic absence with a new attendance indicator aimed at shifting the focus

toward improving attendance for all students. NYSED will, however, continue to monitor, track and report on chronic absence, defined as missing 10% or more of school.

These examples illustrate the fact that school accountability and public reporting on chronic absence are deeply interrelated but do not always need to be the same. The purpose of school accountability is to evaluate school performance based on student performance measures,[4] while public reporting seeks to increase transparency so that everyone can understand whether desired outcomes are being achieved. As a result, even if states choose to create a more complex set of attendance metrics for school accountability, we recommend continuing to report on chronic absence, defined as missing 10% of school, so data can be compared over time and is easy to understand.

Finding 11. Twenty-one states have set a measurable target for chronic absence.

Whether or not states adopt chronic absence as an accountability metric under ESSA, they can hold themselves accountable by setting a measurable target for reducing chronic absence and using data to engage in continuous improvement. Sixteen of these states (AL, AR, CA, CO, CT, DC, IA, MD, NE, NM, NV, OH, RI, VA, WA, WV) are participating in The 50% challenge jointly issued in July 2024 by Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works; Denise Forte, CEO of The Education Trust; and Nat Malkus, senior fellow with the American Enterprise Institute. By joining this call to cut chronic absence in half in five years, these states recognize that our country's unacceptably high post-pandemic chronic absence rates will not simply go away on their own, but require persistent, strategic action involving everyone working together to message the importance of attendance while identifying and addressing underlying causes. These states are now part of an ongoing peer learning community that benefits from resources created by Attendance Works that are also broadly available, including a state road map and toolkit and a chronic absence goal calculator. Two excellent examples of states that have made measurable, data-informed progress are Virginia and Colorado.

Another five states have set a variety of measurable goals for reducing chronic absence (IN, LA, MA, MI, UT). See the state-by-state table for more information.

D. Are states advancing a comprehensive, multi-tiered approach that begins with prevention?
Attendance Works recommends adopting a multi-tiered system of supports approach to improving attendance. This is based on our experience and research that demonstrates that beginning with prevention and early intervention, tailored to local realities, is key to improving attendance.[5] Our Attendance Playbook, produced in partnership with Future*Ed*, offers detailed descriptions of tiered strategies and the evidence behind them. To examine if this is happening, this brief explores the extent to which states are publishing guidance, using data on unexcused versus excused absences to improve truancy practice, and ensuring that courts, if used, are employed as a last resort.

Finding 12. **Twenty-one states currently offer guidance on adopting a multi-tiered system of supports**. Attendance Works recommends adopting a multi-tiered system of supports approach to improving attendance. Beginning with prevention and early intervention, tailored to local realities, is key to improving attendance. More states could take action by publishing comprehensive and easy-to-use state guidance on their websites.

This guidance typically explains what chronic absence is, why it matters and how it can be addressed through a multi-tiered system of support backed by district and school teams. Tailored to each state, the guidance also provides information on current state attendance laws and regulations. By broadly sharing draft guidance across departments within a state's department of education and with other key agencies, local intermediaries and districts, states can use the process of developing the guidance to gain buy-in and support, as well as find out where additional technical assistance might be needed to support implementation. Examples of guidance offered by state departments of education include Connecticut, Ohio, New Mexico, South Carolina and Virginia.

To equip state education agencies — as well as external partners and advocates — to examine the strengths and gaps of their state's attendance guidance for districts and schools, Attendance Works developed this rubric in consultation with the members of its Network to Advance State Attendance Policy and Practice, a forum for state-level colleagues.

Finding 13. **Several states are engaging in prevention by conducting attendance awareness and messaging campaigns.** Communication campaigns raise awareness about the critical importance of regular school attendance for well-being, engagement and learning. They are an invaluable strategy for engaging parents, educators and a range of community partners in sending messages at key moments throughout the year. Especially post-pandemic, such campaigns are important for conveying the benefits of showing up to school as well as helping families make good decisions about when to keep their children home due to illness. Inspiring examples of current campaigns include Connecticut, Ohio, Rhode Island and Virginia. States can also build on materials developed by Attendance Works for the annual Attendance Awareness Campaign. *Here Today, Ready for Tomorrow* is the slogan for our 2025 campaign.

Finding 14. **States are not yet leveraging data on excused versus unexcused absences to ensure responses begin with prevention.** Currently, 32 states collect data on which absences are excused versus unexcused. (See Figure 10). Having such data is necessary for examining the truancy-related practices associated with coding and responding to unexcused absences, and assessing if they need to be adjusted in order to be aligned with a multi-tiered system of supports for attendance.

Figure 10: Number of States that Track Excused vs. Unexcused Absences

Yes	No	No response
32	18	1
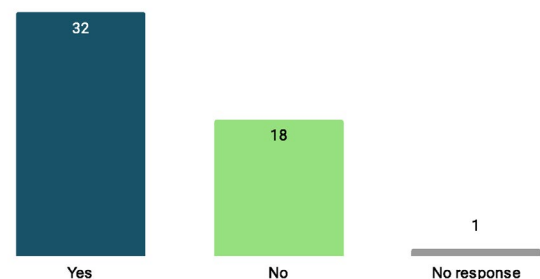
A focus on truancy (unexcused absences), as part of enforcing compulsory education, predates the concept of chronic absence by hundreds of years. It is rooted in the idea that students and families should be held responsible for showing up to school, and if they do not attend, they are to blame. In contrast, when Attendance Works advanced the concept of chronic absence starting in 2010, our goal was to help educators refrain from blame when

an absence occurs. Rather, we advocate responding with relationship building and engagement in order to partner with students and families to identify and address the underlying barriers to school. Efforts to address chronic absence, however, now co-exist with the pre-existing approaches to truancy, or the coding and responding to unexcused absences. States and localities must now assess whether truancy-related practices and policies need to be updated to reflect current knowledge about what works to improve attendance.

The legal and policy basis for determining whether an absence is excused versus unexcused varies by states and localities. While a few states entirely defer to local school districts to make that determination, many states have legislation establishing 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 defined excused absences, localities have much discretion to decide whether to categorize an absence as excused or unexcused.

When absences are unexcused, students typically face consequences. They can be denied credit for missed work, excluded from extracurricular activities, and eventually even taken to court; families can be fined. As unexcused absences accumulate, responses generally become more punitive.

Yet punitive responses can be ineffective, and counterproductive, when the root causes of absences are not addressed. In addition, overuse of the unexcused absence label could undermine efforts to partner with students and families to improve attendance.

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.

Unpacking Unexcused Absence in Maryland

Because data coded by excused versus unexcused absence exists in Maryland, researchers from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, were able to partner with Attendance Works to analyze patterns of unexcused absences and how Maryland's 24 districts responded. This analysis found:

- The majority of absences in Maryland are coded unexcused, with unexcused being the default absence assigned if the student does not produce a legitimate excuse.
- Economically disadvantaged, Black, Hispanic, Native American and multilingual learner students have their absences disproportionately coded unexcused.
- Large variability exists across districts in what defines excused absences. District policies established a variety of additional reasons for why an absence could be excused, including college visits (excused in 12 districts), vacations (in 10 districts), civic engagement (in four districts) and family illness (in one).
- Most districts' policies spell out more exclusionary responses to unexcused absences. Exclusionary practices are actions (such as denying credit for a class or prohibiting a student from taking part in class or extracurricular programs) that prevent students from participating in academic and social learning.
- Exclusionary practices often begin after a single unexcused absence.
- Inconsistencies and lack of clarity within the unexcused absence policies make it difficult for parents to support their children's attendance and avoid exclusionary discipline. For example, unclear parent/caregiver notification policies may inhibit schools and families from working together to improve attendance.

The Maryland State Department of Education has established an attendance task force that will consider the implications of these findings for the development of state attendance guidance.

Finding 15. While one state bans using courts to address truancy, court involvement is required in 20 states. In general, state responses reveal that local school districts exercise significant discretion regarding when and how to use courts for intervening due to an accumulation of unexcused absences.

Using courts as a last resort is important for a number of reasons. Courts are a much more costly intervention than engaging in school- or community-based prevention. Moreover, in our experience, when courts are seen as the solution, it can cause school staff to feel they do not have a role in supporting school attendance aside from documenting when students are truant. If early intervention and prevention activities are not in place, it is easy for courts to become overwhelmed with cases.

Research has not shown relying on court action to be effective. Using data from South Carolina, a report from the Council of State Governments Justice Center found it could even make matters worse. In addition, the study pointed out that punitive measures such as barring students from attending in-person classes, enforcing automatic suspensions or expulsions, or requiring attendance in alternative schools make it even harder for students to engage in school and improve their attendance.

Advancing Prevention in Georgia

Signed into law April 28, 2025, Georgia Senate Bill 123 exemplifies how legislation can promote taking a prevention-oriented approach to reducing chronic absence. Introduced and passed with the strong support of Sen. John F. Kennedy (R), president pro tempore of the Georgia State Senate, the legislation introduces significant reforms to the state's approach to student attendance.

Key Provisions of SB 123:

- **Prohibition of Expulsion for Absenteeism:** Public schools are prohibited from expelling students solely due to absenteeism, promoting a more supportive approach to attendance issues.
- **Definition of Chronic Absence:** A student is considered "chronically absent" if they miss 10% or more of the school year.
- **Mandatory Attendance Review Teams:** School systems with a chronic absence rate of at least 10%, or individual schools with rates at or above 15%, are required to establish *attendance review teams*. These teams — comprising administrators, counselors, teachers, social workers, parents and other staff — are tasked with creating intervention plans for chronically absent students.
- **School Climate Committees**: Each county's Student Attendance and School Climate Committee shall meet by November 1, 2025, and at least twice annually thereafter. By June 1, 2026, these committees shall adopt written student attendance protocols detailing procedures for identifying, reporting and addressing attendance issues, including chronic absenteeism and tardiness.
- **Reporting Requirements**: Starting in 2026, the Georgia Department of Education is mandated to submit biennial reports to legislative committees, detailing county-level compliance, attendance rates and discipline data.
- **Military-Related Absences**: The bill updates language to ensure that students taking military service tests are credited as present and not counted as absent.

Kennedy's successful legislative effort was the result of a collaborative effort among the Georgia Department of Education, the Get Georgia Reading Cabinet and other key partners. The effort drew heavily on the Cabinet's work to raise awareness about the critical importance of regular school attendance — particularly its impact on third-grade reading proficiency — while also addressing the complex causes of chronic absence and identifying effective strategies to improve attendance. Building on this foundation, Kennedy is also introducing a study committee to further examine the root causes of chronic absence, evaluate existing interventions, and develop additional policy recommendations to support student success across Georgia. See Get Georgia Reading Cabinet Student Attendance Subcommittee Report and Recommendations.

✎ Recommendations

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

A. Reporting on Chronic Absence

1. Monitor and publicly report chronic absence data as early as possible, ideally within the first quarter of the following school year.
2. Maintain comprehensive public reports offering data by school, district, student group, grade, geography and trends over time.
3. Expand the development of real-time attendance data dashboards available to educators throughout the year. Such dashboards ideally provide a more complex data set, showing attendance data by bands: satisfactory (missing less than 5% of school), at-risk (missing 5-9%), moderate (missing 10-19%) and severe (missing 20% or more), as well as data by school, student group, grade, geography and trends over time.
4. Encourage student information systems to offer attendance reports with data by attendance bands as well as by school, student group, grade, geography and trends over time.

B. Comparable Data

5. Continue to define chronic absence as missing 10% or more of the school year.
6. Establish a common definition of a day of attendance.
7. Ensure outreach to students and families before they are dropped from enrollment lists.
8. Include all absences when calculating chronic absence.

C. Taking Action

9. Publish state guidance on improving attendance that emphasizes taking a team approach to implement a multi-tiered system of supports.
10. Ensure legal action is used only as a last resort.
11. Monitor chronic absence data as regularly as possible throughout the school year to identify trends and potential success stories, and notice when additional action is needed to address attendance declines.
12. Identify and publicize schools, communities and districts or states achieving meaningful reductions in chronic absence.
13. Use chronic absence data to prioritize the allocation of relevant resources from departments and agencies to the schools and districts needing help with improving attendance.
14. Take a sustained, data-informed approach to reducing chronic absence, including establishing goals for improvement over time.

Endnotes

[1] H. May, L. Bailes and D. Riser, "Absenteeism and Achievement in Early Elementary Grades: A Multilevel Organizational Analysis," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* (October 2024) 1-25; https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2024.2413483; M. Gottfried and A. Ansari, "Classrooms With High Rates of Absenteeism and Individual Success: Exploring Students' Achievement, Executive Function, and Socio-Behavioral Outcomes," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 59* (2022): 215-227. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.11.008.

[2] During the 1990s, the Maryland State Department of Education under Superintendent Nancy Grasmick collected and published data on how many students in grades 1 through 12 missed 20 days of school for any reason. MSDE has since shifted to publishing data on chronic absence, defined as missing 10% or more school.

[3] L. Olson, "Why September Matters: Improving Student Attendance." (Baltimore Education Research Consortium, 2014.) http://baltimore-berc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/SeptemberAttendanceBriefJuly2014.pdf.

[4] D. Figlio and S. Loeb (2011). "School Accountability," a chapter in *Handbook of the Economics of Education, Vol. 3;* edited by E. Hanushek, S. Machin and L. Woessmann (San Diego, North-Holland Publishing Co.), pp. 383-423.

[5] N. Gage, K. Salomonson, T. Ballew, et al., "The Impact of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) on Student Attendance and Behavior" (WestEd, 2023), https://wested2024.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/11175318/Impact-of-MTSS-Brief-Report_5-21-24_FINAL-ADA-2.pdf; C. Kearney and P. Graczyk, "A Multidimensional, Multi-tiered System of Supports Model to Promote School Attendance and Address School Absenteeism," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 23* (2020) 316-337; H. Chang, D. Osher, M. Schanfield et al., "Using Chronic Absence Data to Improve Conditions for Learning." (Research article by Attendance Works, September 2019.) https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Attendance_Works_Using_Chronic_Absence__091619.pdf.

Appendix

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 identified key questions for state leaders to provide information regarding their attendance policies and practices. Building on previous policy scans, the team removed some questions that seemed less relevant and added a few new questions. The questions were moved into a survey (administered as a Google spreadsheet) for each state, with multiple-choice options and opportunities for open-ended responses. If a question had been asked and answered in the previous year, we provided that response for reference. In addition, the team conducted an extensive review of data published on state websites. Another spreadsheet was used to confirm the accuracy of our review of state websites.

In January 2025, the survey (in the form of spreadsheets) was sent to colleagues in a small group of states to ensure that the process was clear and took less than 15 minutes to complete. Starting in February, spreadsheets were sent to contacts in all 50 states and Washington, D.C.

State responses were reviewed weekly by the policy team, and if additional information or clarity was needed, the team followed up with the state contact through April. The team occasionally categorized responses to facilitate a better understanding of the data. By mid-April, Attendance Works had received responses from 49 states and Washington, D.C. (Florida was the lone nonparticipant.) The response rate for this year's survey is the highest since its inception.

This state table was created based on the responses we received. Prior to the release of the brief and the table, state contacts were asked to review their state's responses for a final check on accuracy.

Acknowledgements