



# Reducing Early Grade Chronic Absence: Insights From GLR Communities

DRAFT Prepared for Discussion and Development

PRACTICE BRIEF #1

## THE PROBLEM

As discussed in *Attendance in the Early Grades, Why it Matters for Reading*, missing too much school in the early grades is a key indicator that children are off track for learning to read proficiently.

The good news is chronic absence can be reduced when schools and community partners:

- monitor when students are chronically absent (typically defined as missing 10% or more of school days);
- partner with families with young students to promote a culture of attendance; and
- address barriers to getting to school.

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading's (CGLR's) partnership with Attendance Works has helped to inspire communities throughout the country to take on the challenge of chronic absence in the early grades.

Chronic absence is defined as missing

**10%  
OR MORE**

of school days in a year

**5** key ingredients of systemic change: actionable data, capacity building, positive engagement, strategic partnership and shared accountability.



**TWO-THIRDS OF THE STORIES  
OFFERED EVIDENCE OF  
MEASURABLE IMPROVEMENT**

These successes helped lay the foundation for the adoption of chronic absence as an accountability metric under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) by 36 states and the District of Columbia.

[Five key ingredients of systemic change](#) (actionable data, capacity building, positive engagement, strategic partnership and shared accountability) guide the work in CGLR communities and the efforts of Attendance Works more broadly.

## SOLUTIONS: WHAT'S WORKING IN COMMUNITIES

This brief shares our analysis of 33 What's Working Community Challenge (WWCC) stories, generated by 28 different campaigns. Each campaign identified addressing school attendance as a priority issue. As the summary charts reveal (below), two-thirds of the stories offered evidence of measurable improvement, the majority involved local United Ways and all employed strategies reflecting one or more of Attendance Work's *Five Key Ingredients of Systemic Change*.

### POSITIVE SIGNS OF CHANGE/IMPROVEMENT

Key Characteristic	Number
Provided data showing measurable progress in reducing chronic absence and/or improving attendance.	21 of 33
Used evidence-based practices (see the <a href="#">Attendance Playbook</a> ) such as nudge letters, mentors, after-school programs or breakfast in the classroom.	12 of 33
Included a local United Way as a Community Lead or Partner.	20 of 28
Served a rural community.	6 out of 28

The strategies reflected in the WWCC submissions reflected the *Five Key Ingredients of Systemic Change*. As the breakdown below shows, positive engagement strategies were the most commonly adopted.

### STRATEGIES OF SYSTEMIC CHANGES

	<b>Positive Engagement</b>	<b>Actionable Data</b>	<b>Capacity Building</b>	<b>Strategic Partnerships</b>	<b>Shared Accountability</b>
# of WWCC stories (Total 33)	21	12	13	13	5

The section below shares different examples, drawn from the WWCC submissions, of how various communities carried out each key ingredient of change.

**Strategy 1: Positive Engagement** refers to the use of caring relationships with students and families, effective messaging and a positive school climate to motivate showing up to school every day. Two-thirds of the stories used positive engagement. Below are a few illustrations.

- In Mississippi, the local campaign serving rural Lafayette County School District and Oxford School District helps motivate better attendance through an array of engaging activities including breakfast at the bus-stop events, a month-long Be There Attendance Awareness Campaign, “Must Be Present to Win” parent nights and Prevention Picnics for families. Both counties have seen reductions in chronic absence. Read more [here](#).
- In San Mateo County, California, the Big Lift Initiative sent monthly attendance “nudge” letters during the 2016-17 school year to 6,683 families of PK-3 students. The positive letters addressed the tendency to underestimate the number of days missed and their impact on learning. The result? An additional 7,500 days of children attending school. Read more [here](#).
- At the Early Works demonstration sites in Oregon, the attendance improvement approach emphasized building relationships with families. The two sites offered learn and play groups, high-quality preschool, health supports and other resources to meet a variety of needs. Family engagement is a focus for rural [Yoncalla](#) as well as the more urban [Earl Boyles Elementary School](#) located in Portland, Oregon.

**Strategy 2: Actionable Data** means that educators, and ideally key community partners, have access in a timely manner to chronic absence and attendance data that helps them take action. The data should be accurate and easy to understand. It should inform the development and implementation of practice and policy as well as the strategic targeting of resources. As the examples below show, actionable data can be advanced in a variety of ways.

- In Broward County, Florida, the district created a Data Snapshot for Attendance webpage that provides attendance data for every public and charter school. Parents and other stakeholders can examine which schools and populations of students are affected by chronic absence and whether data is improving. Read more [here](#).
- In Sacramento, California, three analytical data tools now exist. The most popular is the Early Identification and Intervention System (EIIIS) that operates as an early warning system for targeting supports. The second data tool is an accountability system for principal and district leadership, and the third data tool provides a view of attendance trends and patterns at school sites over time. Read more [here](#).
- In the Suncoast Region of Florida, The Patterson Foundation addressed the lack of capacity to produce timely data reports by funding data management positions in three districts. The resulting data dashboards cover academics and attendance and depict emerging patterns and trends. Read more [here](#).

**Strategy 3: Capacity Building** involves expanding the ability to interpret data, engage in positive problem solving and adopt effective practices. When such skills are developed among school staff and their community partners, it equips teams to work together across traditional departmental or agency divides. Such capacity building is possible at multiple levels.

- In Hartford, Connecticut, the school district strengthened its capacity by reestablishing attendance teams at the district level and at all of its schools. In the highest-need schools, student engagement specialists help coordinate school attendance teams, utilize data and support outreach to students and families.

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# GAMECHANGER

related to shared accountability

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The local campaign and other key stakeholders also meet with the district staff to review data, lessons learned and assess how resources can best be used to support attendance. Read more [here](#).

- In rural Appalachia, the United Way of Southwest Virginia employed a combination of \$2,500 mini grants, an [online attendance resource compass](#), as well as group and individual technical assistance to build the capacity of the 17 districts. Participating districts were required to submit monthly chronic absence reports and complete an online survey showing their progress and how the funds were used. Read more [here](#).
- In Kansas City, Turn the Page-KC, the United Way of Greater KC and SchoolSmart co-hosted a community summit during which they shared a regional chronic absence report and offered a keynote and workshops aimed at highlighting and sharing best practice for improving attendance. The summit is laying the groundwork for more in-depth capacity building in local school districts. Read more [here](#).

**Strategy 4: Strategic Partnerships** between districts, schools and community partners are essential to overcoming attendance barriers that fall beyond the purview of educators to address. These partnerships also draw upon the assets of the entire community, especially families. Communities engaged a wide array of different partners to improve attendance.

- In rural Grinnell, Iowa, a former elementary school principal and now AmericaCorps volunteer partnered with other key stakeholders to create a community task force that has helped reduce chronic absence. The task force created a late bus to pick up students and peer coaching for families. See the story [here](#).
- In Omaha, Nebraska, the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC) collaborated with the United Way of the Midlands to bring together stakeholders for the fifth annual Attendance Awareness

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CHRONICALLY ABSENT**

Campaign. This kick-off event was combined with Attendance Awareness Kits, a messaging video and letters from superintendents sent to local health clinics about the importance of attendance. Read more [here](#).

- In Hickman Mills, Missouri, the school district partnered with LINC, Turn the Page KC and the United Way of Greater Kansas City to co-locate enrollment, laundry services, legal aid and free books in an effort to reduce homelessness and remove barriers to school attendance. Read more [here](#).
- In Pennsylvania, the Lehigh Valley United Way, local colleges and local districts and schools have partnered together to create an Attendance Ambassador program. Ambassadors are college students who help collect data, connect with families and assist school faculty to implement key activities. See more [here](#).

## HEALTH-RELATED CHALLENGES SUCH AS ASTHMA AND DENTAL DISEASE ARE MAJOR CAUSES OF ABSENCES IN THE EARLY GRADES.

**Strategy 5: Shared Accountability** ensures chronic absence data is monitored on a regular basis and addressing it is supported by policy. As the examples below reveal, the federal ESSA was a gamechanger on this front.

- The Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading leveraged its work with districts to encourage the Arkansas Department of Education to use the state data system to produce reports aligned with Attendance Works' School and District Attendance Tracking Reports. Following ESSA, the state also adopted chronic absence as an accountability metric and designated university-based Educational Renewal Zone offices to help districts interpret and use data. Learn more [here](#).
- In February 2019, the Attendance For Success Act was passed unanimously by the New Mexico legislature and signed into law by the governor. The new law, which required a shift from truancy to a focus on using chronic absence to support prevention, was greatly informed by the United Way of Central New Mexico's Mission Graduate initiative. Read more [here](#).

## TAKEAWAYS

Below are key insights gained from our review of these stories:

- 1** Positive partnerships with parents are essential for improving attendance. The key to establishing authentic partnerships is listening to families to understand the real barriers, going the extra mile to build trust and believing families have the best interests of their children in mind.
- 2** Being part of the national [Attendance Awareness Campaign](#) can accelerate local action. Rather than expending scarce resources on reinventing the wheel, local communities piggybacked on the annual national campaign.
- 3** Comparable, transparent and timely data can drive action. Whether it came in the form of local data, state reports or a review of local data drawn from the Office for Civil Rights, data helped local communities make the case that chronic absence was a problem. It also helped to identify where resources could be used strategically to engage in prevention.
- 4** Local funders are uniquely positioned to help initiate, sustain and expand efforts to improve attendance by leveraging their capacity to convene, make grants and offer technical assistance. They can also help move communities beyond responding to an immediate crisis to planning for the long term and pushing for public investment and policies that sustain and take to scale effective practices. United Ways are especially likely to play a leadership role around the issue of attendance.
- 5** As the stories from New Mexico and Arkansas illustrate, communities can leverage big policy changes, such as ESSA, to open doors.

As the current school year ends and planning begins for the fall, communities will need to take stock of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. An especially important challenge will be finding new ways to monitor which students are missing too much school, regardless of whether schools are in person, virtual or blended. Data is essential to detecting equity gaps that need to be addressed and identifying schools or populations that might need more support.

Having consistent data is essential to examine which communities and schools fared better or worse, so we can unpack what needed to be expanded, changed or stopped. For example, did it make a difference that certain practices were in place, such as family engagement, developing community schools, building partnerships with health providers, and taking a whole child/whole family trauma-informed approach?

As communities plan for the coming school year, they can ask themselves: What helped some schools and communities do a better job of staying in contact with families and keeping children engaged in learning? Under what conditions might such strategies work in your community?

- The GLR *What's Working Practice Briefs* are designed to be an actionable resource for GLR coalitions and leaders in communities and states across the network that are looking for relevant examples and ideas about what to implement, adapt, improve and expand as they seek to move the needle on key measures of early school success.
- The Briefs in this collection contain curated content from 112 communities that filed more than 320 stories in early 2020 about what's working well and why. Each of the six Briefs is organized around one of the key impact areas that have been part of the GLR Campaign's Community Solutions Action Plan (CSAP) framework used by 300+ communities since 2012.
- The authors of each brief have both subject-matter expertise and extensive experience working with and supporting GLR communities. In compiling these Briefs, we view our roles as that of active listeners, aggregators and guides to the rich reservoir of content thoughtfully submitted by GLR coalitions. Our aspiration is to add value by making the lessons learned from communities involved in this work more accessible to and usable by others across the country.
- The Briefs are part of an overall strategy of the GLR Support Center to play an active role in lowering the geographic barriers to learning and reduce the high costs of duplicative trial-and-error that currently exist within the network.
- The Briefs contain a range of on-the-ground, illustrative examples of strategies, practices and programs that have been implemented in all types and sizes of communities across the network. CGLR values both what can be learned from empirical research evidence as well as the wisdom derived from lived experience. The Briefs tilt more toward the latter.
- Rather than serving as an exhaustive, how-to guide on implementation, the Briefs should be used to prompt further exploration and inquiry. We anticipate that the content will be used to instigate a series of Roundtable Conversations and Communities of Practice in the months ahead as we delve deeply into the What's Working question and encourage more ongoing rigorous analyses of what we've done, what we've accomplished, and what we've learned as a network.
- We intentionally include a "draft" stamp on all of the Briefs to signal our commitment to continue to refine and strengthen these publications over time.