

The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to students gaining the academic and social skills they need to thrive. Chronic absence, no matter its cause, has real life consequences for students, families and society as a whole. [Research shows](#)* that starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence—missing 10% of the academic year—can leave third graders unable to read proficiently, sixth graders struggling with coursework and high school students off track for graduation. Equally important, it affects personal and emotional development and makes it hard to gain the habit of showing up, which is crucial to success in the workplace.

In 2018, 8 million students (one out of 6 students) were affected by chronic absence. During the pandemic chronic absence nearly doubled. While it has started to decrease, it remains elevated. Although chronic absence rose for students of all backgrounds and in all regions, students of color, those living in poverty, those with disabilities and English language learners experienced the highest levels. When schools experience high levels of chronic absence, it affects everyone—making it harder for teachers to teach and set classroom norms as well as for students to learn. Chronic absence, which involves monitoring when and which students miss too much school, is different from truancy (unexcused absences) or average daily attendance (how many students typically show up each day to school).

Reducing absenteeism is an essential, but often overlooked, strategy for responding strategically to the academic, social and emotional loss experienced by millions of students. School and district attendance data can be used to identify which student groups have lost out the most on opportunities to learn and ensure they are prioritized in planning. At the same time, effective strategies to improve engagement and attendance can benefit the entire community.

The good news is that chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture engagement, promote regular attendance and routines, and address hurdles that keep children and youth from getting to school regularly. Partners can help to remove these barriers, such as a lack of food, clothing and access to physical and mental health care; unhealthy environmental conditions, unreliable transportation, housing instability or the lack of safe paths to school.

Why we should care: Chronic absence represents both a symptom and a cause of many problems that foundations and donors are working to solve. High rates of absenteeism can:

- Flag a child or family in distress due to bullying, unstable housing, violence, illness or other healthcare needs;
- Signal a community with scarce resources and large challenges, such as high rates of asthma, violence, substance abuse or unstable housing, and lack of food stores, safety, transportation and healthcare;
- Reflect poor school climate or ineffective schools or school districts;
- Erode initiatives to improve schools and graduation rates; and
- Undermine efforts to provide post-secondary and employment opportunities and to boost local economies.

Because effective strategies to reduce chronic absence benefit entire communities, they can be attractive investments for local and national philanthropies. Local funders are well positioned to help schools and districts to uncover local challenges and identify solutions, and funders with a broader geographic reach can support state and regional policies and initiatives to address chronic absence.



Chronic absence is a problem we can solve. We can build a strong culture of attendance in every community. We can ensure that school districts are tracking the right data to identify the students and schools headed off track. And we lend our voices and devote our resources to addressing the challenges that keep too many students from getting to school.

How philanthropy can make a difference:

Build public awareness

- Support a public messaging campaign to convey that every school day counts. Posters, billboards, handouts and stickers can help communities understand the importance of reducing chronic absence, by promoting regular attendance and emphasizing the adverse impact of missing too much school. See these [key messages](#) and [promotional materials](#).
- Join with your superintendent and mayor to encourage an appropriate existing coalition with an aligned mission to help spearhead a community-wide approach to reducing chronic absence. See if your community is involved with the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#).
- Create a toolkit for your grantees and other community organizations providing [handouts](#) and tips for improving attendance.
- Recognize and appreciate good and improved attendance. Support school efforts and reward students and families who are turning the corner on attendance.

Promote data-driven solutions

- Fund an in-depth analysis of chronic absence data that shows the prevalence and patterns in your community or state.
- Publish a report card. Publicize the ESSA required-school performance reports, highlighting chronic absence rates and other data for local schools and districts. Point to bright spots and spell out strategies for turning around attendance.
- Support training for teachers and principals to understand how to use chronic absence data to uncover the issues underlying chronic absence and choose the most effective interventions.

Encourage grantees to use chronic absence as a metric

- Build chronic absence data into your grant making. High rates can tip you off to a community in distress. Use the data when deciding where to invest in childcare, early education, summer and after-school programs.
- Use chronic absence as an accountability metric. Make sure your education grants include improved attendance as an outcome. Ask grantees applying for funding to explain how they will reduce chronic absence. Tackling chronic absence is a smart strategy for improving your community and reaching your goals. It can also be a yardstick for measuring grantee results. Attendance and chronic absence are common sense metrics, already recorded by teachers and understood by parents. It's essential to other education reforms, and it's a winnable strategy. Schools, districts and communities that work together to reduce chronic absence often see attendance increase quickly.

*A growing body of research has shown the prevalence of chronic absence, its critical role in student achievement, and how it can be addressed. Access a research summary: <https://awareness.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/Research2016.pdf>

Click here to find a full list of research: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/research/>

For more information, go to Attendance Works at www.attendanceworks.org.

