

## National Association of State Boards of Education

### FIFTH INDICATOR:

## ➔ Chronic Absenteeism

By Maya Boddie

**Chronic absenteeism from school is linked with lower student achievement, disengagement, and increased risk of dropping out. State boards of education that want to address these issues should consider adding chronic absenteeism as the added measure of school quality that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires. Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia have already indicated they plan to do so or are considering it.<sup>1</sup>**

U.S. students on average miss 15 school days a year. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent of school days (about 18 days) within one academic year for any reason, including suspension. As the number

of days missed rises, student achievement measures fall. The most recent data from the Civil Rights Data Collection puts the number of students at risk each year of falling behind or dropping out of school at as many as six million nationally.<sup>2</sup>

According to Hedy Chang and Robert Balfanz, chronic absenteeism is one of the earliest signs that schools are failing to provide an equal opportunity to learn.<sup>3</sup> Whether excused or not, chronic absence from class predicts lower levels of numeracy and literacy by third grade, class failure in middle school, higher levels of suspension, and higher levels of high school dropouts.

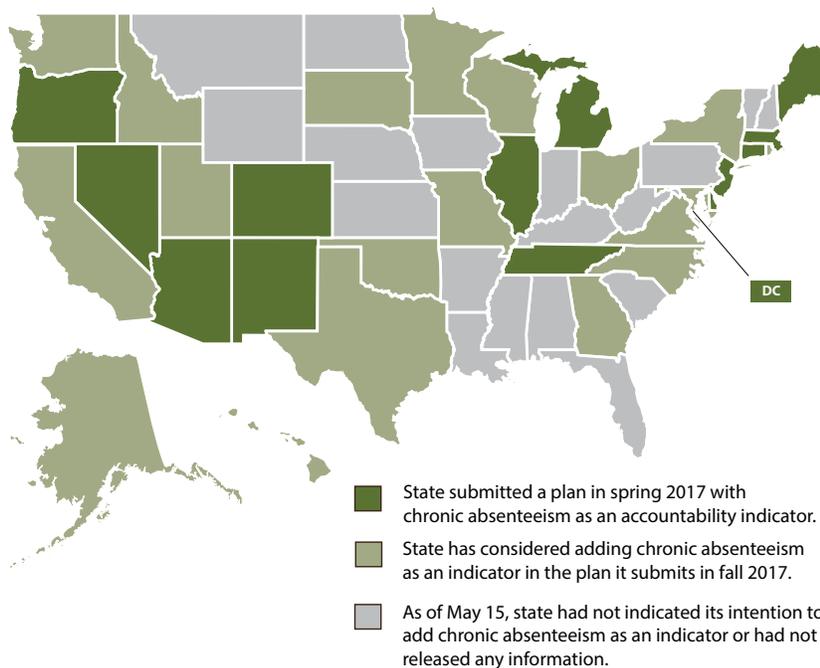
Children who are chronically absent from preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are much less likely to read at grade level by the third grade. They are then four times more

likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school. By high school, irregular attendance is a better predictor of school dropout than test scores. A study of public school students in Utah found that a student who is chronically absent in a single school year between the eighth and twelfth grades is over seven times more likely to drop out of school than a student who is not chronically absent.<sup>4</sup>

Chronic absenteeism tends to be more prevalent among students from low-income households, students of color, students with disabilities, students who are highly mobile, and those who have been involved in the juvenile justice system.<sup>5</sup> Tracking and combating absenteeism thus addresses the needs of students with the most challenges and those most likely to be facing problems of inequitable access to a quality education.

Completing high school is a strong predictor of adult success as well as physical and mental health in adulthood and reduced risk of involvement with the criminal justice system.<sup>6</sup> Students who do not graduate have greater health risks and more frequent and negative contact with law enforcement. These outcomes contribute to a cycle of poverty, poor health, homelessness, and incarceration.

### 33 Pick Chronic Absenteeism as Indicator of School Quality



### ESSA STATE PLANS

Out of 17 states that submitted ESSA plans in spring 2017, 12 states and the District of Columbia chose chronic absenteeism as a school quality indicator. For **Connecticut**, chronic absence is one of nine school quality indicators that together receive 35 percent of the weighting in its planned accountability system. The number of chronically absent students in Connecticut has already dropped to 9.6 percent in 2015–16, down from 10.6 percent the year before and a high of 11.5 percent in 2012–13. About 10,000 more students are attending school daily than were four years ago.<sup>7</sup>

**New Jersey**, in contrast, named chronic absenteeism as its only school quality indicator, counting for 10 percent of an overall score. But state officials are considering adding

other measures eventually. The state's plan says chronic absenteeism was chosen based on public input, research showing that addressing it can boost student success, and because an individual school can take steps to improve attendance.

In **Washington** state, which is submitting its ESSA plan in September, chronic absenteeism has already been a focus of the state board and its Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Washington had an average rate of 16.7 percent of students chronically absent in 2016 and wide variation among its districts. The state developed a website with tools for reducing absenteeism, lists events promoting awareness of chronic absenteeism, and includes information on the importance of school attendance. According to Washington State Board of Education member Connie Fletcher, Washington has also undertaken such programs as the Takoma Initiative, which mails notifications to parents on the importance of regular attendance.

The U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice launched a project in June 2016 to support communities' efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism. Dubbed "Every Student, Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism," the project called upon states and local education, health, housing, and justice agencies and organizations, in partnership with community stakeholders, to join forces to create or enhance coordinated, cross-sector systems for identifying and supporting students who are, or are at risk of becoming, chronically absent. The agencies jointly released a "Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism" to support communities that are trying to eliminate barriers to students' daily school attendance and increase meaningful engagement.

The toolkit recommended that state and local leaders take the following steps:

- generate and act on absenteeism data;
- create and deploy positive messages about school attendance and measures to increase it; and

- raise public awareness and ensure responsibility across sectors by regularly communicating that chronic absenteeism is a problem that affects the whole community, not just students who are chronically absent and their families.

State boards should ask questions to ensure that chronic absenteeism will be a reliable, valid measure. States are already required to report the percentage of students missing 15 or more days to the U.S. Department of Education. Boards in states considering chronic absenteeism as an accountability measure—as well as those who include it only in reporting systems or school report cards—will want to know how many days a student needs to miss to be considered chronically absent.

One factor that states may want to weigh is student mobility. Research indicates that homeless students, for example, change schools more often, are at higher risk of chronic absenteeism, and are more likely to be held back or drop out compared with their peers. If states and districts are not prepared to provide the necessary educational supports for these students, chronic absenteeism will not be a fair measure of school quality.<sup>8</sup>

Boards will also want to ask how the state will ensure the collected data are accurate. Because any absence affects student achievement outcomes, all absences from classrooms should factor into measures of chronic absence—excused and unexcused, for disciplinary reasons or not. Some states currently do not count in-school suspensions as absences, for example.

With these data in hand, state boards can better understand where the areas of greatest need are and advocate for targeted resources to address those needs, identify and celebrate places that are getting results, share data with key stakeholders, equip stakeholders to unpack barriers to attendance and take action, and create a shared sense of accountability.

*Maya Boddie was publications and communications intern at NASBE.*

## NOTES

1. This count includes states that submitted ESSA plans in the spring, as well as those that had included chronic absenteeism in discussions of their plans before May 15, 2017.
2. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, "2013–2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, June 2016).
3. Robert Balfanz and Hedy Chang, Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence (Baltimore: Attendance Works, Everyone Graduates Center, September 2016).
4. "Chronic Absenteeism," Research Brief (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah, Utah Education Policy Center, July 2012), <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/UTAH-Chronic-AbsenteeismResearch-Brief-July-2012.pdf>.
5. U.S. Department of Education, Every Student Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism, national conference, Arlington, Virginia, June 9–10, 2016.
6. U.S. Department of Education, "Key Policy Letters Signed by the Education Secretary or Deputy Secretary" (October 7, 2015), <https://ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secletter/index.html>.
7. U.S. Department of Education, "Chronic Absenteeism in Our Nation's Schools," <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>.
8. Hannah Johnson et al., "ESSA and Supporting College and Career Readiness and Success for Youth Experiencing Homelessness" (Washington, DC: College and Career Readiness & Success Center, American Institutes for Research, April 20, 2017).