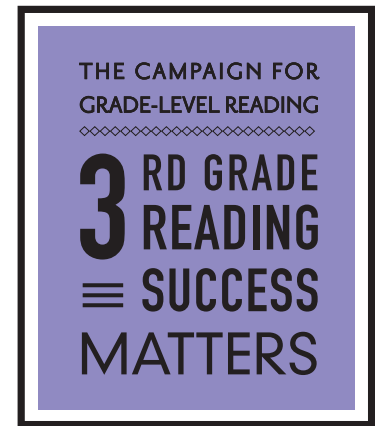


CHRONIC ABSENCE

Working Paper



The Data

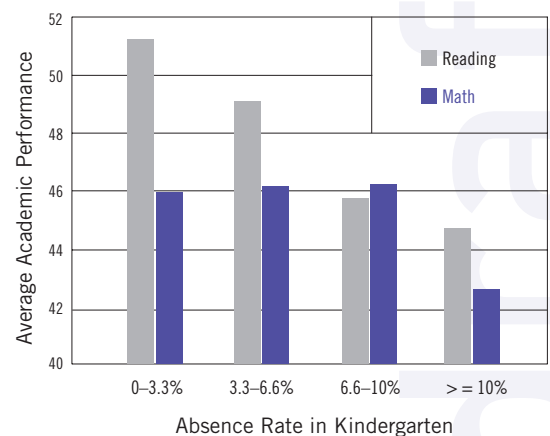
- **High levels of early absenteeism:** One in 10 kindergartners misses a month of school every year. In some districts, it runs as high as 1 in 3.
- **Demonstrated effect on academic performance:** Kindergartners who miss 10 percent of school days have lower academic performance when they reach first grade. Reading scores for Latino children were most seriously affected.
- **Academic impact on low-income children:** Among poor children, who lack the resources to make up lost time, chronic absence in kindergarten translated into lower fifth grade achievement.
- **Higher prevalence among poor children:** Poor children are four times more likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten than their more affluent peers.
- **Long-term connection to graduation rates:** By sixth grade, chronic absence can predict high school dropout rates, a study of Baltimore students showed. By ninth grade, missing 20 percent of school can predict dropout better than eighth-grade test scores for students of all socioeconomic groups, Chicago researchers found.

The Issues

A powerful effect on early literacy: Because teaching reading is frontloaded in the early years, early absences have a strong impact on early literacy. This is particularly true for low-income children, who aren't exposed to language-rich environments at home. The negative impact of school absence on literacy learning is 75 percent larger for a poor child than a more affluent peer.

An often-overlooked data point: Most schools don't track chronic absence, paying attention instead to average daily attendance (the percentage of students who show up each day to school) and unexcused absences (truancy). Both figures can mask the problem of chronic absence. Average data don't

Chronic Absence in Kindergarten Affects 5th Grade Achievement for Poor Children



convey how many children are missing extended periods. Truancy figures underestimate the number of days students are actually missing due to illness or other excused absences.

A signal of student or community distress: While parents are often blamed for absences, the missed days can be a sign of health, safety, or transportation issues in a community. It can lead service providers to a family in distress, before the situation reaches a crisis.

An indicator of poor educational quality: If chronic absence reaches high levels in a particular classroom or school, it can be a sign of the lack of engaging, high-quality curriculum and teaching or an unsafe, chaotic learning environment. It can also affect all students, as teachers spend more time reviewing concepts, and it will reduce available resources in states where funding is tied to attendance.

Options for Communities

- **Help school districts use data on chronic absence to identify patterns:** The Oakland Unified School District just completed an analysis of attendance data that maps chronic absence patterns by neighborhood, by ethnicity, and by grade. The district, with backing from the mayor's Education Cabinet, has set goals for improvement and is monitoring data regularly.
- **Take comprehensive approaches involving students, families, and community agencies:** In Baltimore, the mayor's office, school district, and philanthropic leaders launched a citywide attendance initiative that makes chronic absence a focus. Separate programs address transportation needs, health concerns, and outreach to homeless and foster children.
- **Bring public and private resources to bear on attendance problems:** The mayor's office in New York City tapped businesses, local universities, services organizations, and celebrities to support an attendance initiative in 25 pilot schools. Businesses provided incentives; universities and AmeriCorps provided mentors; and celebrities taped wake-up calls.
- **Examine factors contributing to chronic absence:** A Providence school interviewed parents and found that those who worked overnight shifts were coming home and falling asleep before bringing their children to school. The school opened an earlier day care program and saw attendance improve.
- **Pay attention to attendance early,** ideally starting in pre-K, with special attention to transition years: kindergarten, sixth, and ninth grades. Chicago Public Schools, for example, have started tracking attendance in their preschool programs.

Resources

- **Attendance Works** (www.attendanceworks.org)
- **Baltimore Education Research Consortium** (<http://baltimore-berc.org>)
- **Children's Aid Society** (www.childrensaidsociety.org)
- **Coalition for Community Schools** (www.communityschools.org)
- **CFLeads** (www.cfleads.org)
- **Perfectly Punctual** (www.learningandleadership.org)