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# Governance Brief

## Seize the Data: Using Chronic Absence Data to Boost Achievement

A joint publication of CSBA and Attendance Works

For the first time in California, data is available that can help districts and schools better understand the academic impact for students of missing too much school. As a school board member, awareness of the scale and concentration of chronic absences in your district and schools is essential to implementing effective strategies to improve overall achievement and close opportunity gaps. Chronic absence data available through Dataquest on the California Department of Education (CDE) website and through the chronic absence story map from the University of California, Davis, can help trustees determine to what extent students might be struggling simply because they are not in class.

### Examine Your School or District's Chronic Absence Data

DataQuest makes educational data publicly available. You can use this interactive data portal to find the chronic absence rates for schools, districts, and student populations in your community. Attendance Works has created guidance on accessing and analyzing chronic absence data from DataQuest, found [here](#).

Use this UC Davis-created [Data Story Map](#) to see maps showing chronic absence rates in California schools, and the prevalence of schools with high levels of chronic absence by county and region.

### What is chronic absence and why does it matter?

Chronic absence, defined in California as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason,<sup>1</sup> is an early warning sign of academic risk for students from pre-school through high school. Chronic absence is different

### In this brief you will find:

- » **A definition of chronic absence and information about why it is important**
- » **Barriers to student attendance**
- » **How to access chronic absence data for your district and schools**
- » **How to use the data to prevent chronic absence**

from truancy (unexcused absences) in that it includes both excused and unexcused absences.<sup>2</sup> Chronic absence has an especially adverse impact on students living in poverty. They are more likely to face attendance barriers at an earlier age and lack access to resources to make up for lost instructional time.

High levels of chronic absence in a school are a red flag signaling that barriers to daily attendance may exist at home, in the community, within the school, or a combination of these factors. Such absenteeism is an indicator that additional support is needed from the district, other public agencies, and nonprofits to address these barriers. Even moderate levels of chronic absence can signal that schools should look into what supports are necessary to prevent escalating absence issues. When many students in a school have poor attendance rates, this can serve as an early warning sign that efforts to engage and meet the needs of students and families are not succeeding.

The good news is that chronic absence can be turned around, especially when schools, students, families, caregivers, public agencies, and other community partners take a data-driven approach to comprehensive support, starting with prevention and early intervention.

## How can chronic absence data help?

Chronic absence data is an essential tool for boosting student success. Such data bolsters existing efforts by providing insights on student achievement and what might be needed to achieve more equitable student outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable students.

Chronic absence data sheds light on which schools need support for increasing attendance. It also informs school districts' Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) goals to improve attendance and allocate resources to meet those goals. Further, districts, schools, and communities are now held accountable for chronic absence through the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) legislation and are required to make this information transparent.

## When did chronic absence data become easily available?

When the Every Student Succeeds Act became law in December 2015, chronic absence data became a required reporting element. The CDE began including chronic absence statistics in the data publicly available through DataQuest in December 2017 after collecting it for the first time in Spring 2017. Previously, California only collected data on truancy (unexcused absences). Relying on truancy data, however, only offers a partial picture and can overlook a large number of students, especially those in the early grades, who are academically at-risk because they have missed instruction due to an accumulation of excused absences.

## Analyzing school level chronic absence

Chronic absence data offers invaluable insights into what is needed improve poor attendance and boost achievement. Attendance Works identifies four major causes of chronic absence: barriers to attendance, negative school experiences, lack of engagement, and misconceptions (see table 1).

## Chronic Absence in California

Drawn from DataQuest, these facts from the 2016–17 academic year paint a picture of the scale of chronic absence and the student populations most affected in terms of percentages and overall numbers.

- » One in 10 California students (an unduplicated count of 694,030) is chronically absent.
- » The highest levels of chronic absence are found in kindergarten (14%) and high school (15.4%).
- » Our most vulnerable students—foster youth and homeless youth—are more than twice as likely as the statewide average to be chronically absent. One in four foster youth—25.1% or 13,879—and 21.2% or 252,525 homeless youth are chronically absent.
- » Other student populations of concern include socioeconomically disadvantaged youth (13.5% or 529,250) and students with disabilities (17.7% or 136,556).
- » Also disproportionately affected are American Indian/Alaska Native (20.9% or 7,124), African American (18.8% or 69,566) and Pacific Islander (15.5% or 4,724).

## Conclusion

High levels of chronic absence in schools are important indicators that districts should invest in analyzing its causes, reallocate district personnel and resources where they are most needed, and enlist the expertise and help of public agencies and other community partners to identify and remedy barriers to attendance.

Table 1: Four major causes of chronic absence			
Barriers to attendance	Negative School Experiences	Lack of Engagement	Misconceptions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Illness, both chronic and acute</li> <li>» Lack of health, mental health, vision or dental care</li> <li>» Trauma</li> <li>» Unsafe path to/from school</li> <li>» Poor transportation</li> <li>» Frequent moves or school changes</li> <li>» Involvement with child welfare or juvenile justice systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Academic or social challenges</li> <li>» Bullying</li> <li>» Suspensions and expulsions</li> <li>» Negative attitudes of parents due to their own school experience</li> <li>» Undiagnosed disability</li> <li>» Lack of appropriate accommodations for disability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Lack of culturally relevant, engaging instruction</li> <li>» No meaningful relationships with adults in school</li> <li>» Stronger ties with peers out of school than in school</li> <li>» Unwelcoming school climate</li> <li>» Failure to earn credits/no future plans</li> <li>» Many teacher absences or long-term substitutes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused</li> <li>» Missing two days per month does not affect learning</li> <li>» Sporadic absences are not a problem</li> <li>» Attendance only matters in the older grades</li> </ul>

## Questions for boards to consider

1. Have you seen chronic absence data for your district and schools?
2. Is chronic absence a moderate or severe problem in particular schools in your district?
3. What strategies and resources are included in your Local Control and Accountability Plan to either prevent future or address current chronic absences?
4. What strategies does the district and the board use to communicate the importance of school attendance to students and their families?

### For more information, please see the full report:

[Seize the Data Opportunity in California: Using Chronic Absence to Improve Educational Outcomes](#)

Attendance Works is a national initiative dedicated to improving the policy, practice, and research around attendance. Find research, policy analysis and resources at [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org).

