

UNITED WAY COMMUNITY SCHOOL BEST PRACTICES IN ATTENDANCE



Key Facts:

- Schools with an average daily attendance rate as high as 94% can still have 20% of their students chronically absent.
- Chronic absenteeism contributes to poor academic performance and causes many chronically absent youth to fail 3rd grade reading benchmarks.
- Only 41% of youth who were chronically absent in either kindergarten or first grade are reading at grade level by 3rd grade; only 17% of students who were chronically absent for both kindergarten and 1st grade read at grade level.
- Youth chronically absent the school year before tend to continue this pattern of excessive absences.
- Youth who are chronically absent the first month of school (2–4 absences) tend to continue this pattern of excessive absences throughout the school year.
- High absenteeism in middle school is a key predictor for high school drop out rates.

Absences Add Up, by Alan Ginsburg, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang of *Attendance Works*.

Common Definitions

Average Daily Attendance: The percentage of a school's student body that attends on a typical day. The definition is the same nationwide, but does not provide student-level data.

Truancy: A measure of how many students miss school without an excuse. The definition varies from state to state.

Chronic absence: A measure of how many students miss a certain percentage or number of days, including excused and unexcused absences and suspensions. Researchers often track 10 percent of the school year, or 18 days.

Attendance Works Toolkit, *The Power of Positive Connections* at www.attendanceworks.org.

Strategy: Effective Use of Absenteeism Data and Student Mentoring, NYC Success Mentors

With *Race To The Top* grant funds, NYC School District purchased new, more interactive data software, which allowed each school to track chronic absenteeism (by student, classroom, grade and various other demographic factors as well). Each school in the district was mandated to track and publically report their chronic absenteeism rates. In NYC's Every Student, Every Day pilot schools, chronically absent students (based upon data from the previous school year) were matched with a Success Mentor

(a City Year mentor, a school teacher, or a community volunteer). Each Success Mentor was assigned 10–20 chronically absent students, and was responsible for calling home when the child was absent or did something good at school, and for meeting with the student each week. Each Success Mentor had access to their mentee's academic, behavioral and attendance data, and participated in weekly meetings with key school staff to discuss student concerns and progress. Success Mentors maintained their mentoring relationship for an entire school calendar year. With this model in place (use of a mentor, access to student data, partnered with school leadership team), targeted students gained, on average, a full month of school days.



Strategy: Early Warning Systems – Effective Use of Data in School Team Meetings Allentown School District (and Chula Vista, CA) Allentown School District requires each school (ES-MS-HS) to form an attendance team, comprised of the school nurse, a school administrator, the school counselor, the community outreach worker or parent liaison, the school attendance secretary, the district home school visitor, and other individuals as needed. In the Allentown Community Schools, the Community School Coordinator/Director, any social workers or social

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work MSW interns, as well as family case management service providers and mentoring agencies also participate in this team meeting. Depending upon the severity of the attendance issues at a given school, this team might meet weekly, bi-weekly or monthly. During these team meetings, the attendance secretary or the district home school visitor brings a list of students exhibiting warning signs for chronic absenteeism (absent 10% of the school year at current point in time, with either excused or unexcused absences). All relevant information on the student and/or student's family situation is shared. In general, students with high numbers of unexcused absences are targeted for case management services; students with high numbers of excused absences may require consultation from the school nurse or support from a community health partner. Targeted and tiered interventions are put in place for at-risk students, including:

- In-school or community mentor
- Attendance tracker (weekly tracking sheet with incentives for meeting goals)
- Celebrity wake up calls
- Alarm clock, rain coat, umbrella donated to the student/family
- Referral for outside case management
- Assignment to school social worker or MSW intern for family needs assessment, goal planning and supports
- Incentives for parents/caregivers for improved attendance
- Visit by home school visitor
- Court notices and fines

With this system in place, Roosevelt Elementary School saw a drop in chronic absenteeism from 17% in 2012–13 to 6% in 2014–15. South Mountain Middle School saw a decline from 20% in 2012–13 to 14% in 2014–15.

Strategy: Start Messaging Early in the School Year and Target the Early Grades (kindergarten–1st grade)

Start early with a heavy emphasis on pre-school and kindergarten parents. Patterns of chronic absenteeism start early and tend to continue unless interventions are put in place. Use consistent and clear messaging at the start of the school year with frequent messaging for the first month of school. Recent research in Baltimore found that half of the students who missed 2–4 days in September went on to be chronically absent for the remainder of the school year. In Oakland, Calif., elementary schools like PLACE @ Prescott and Garfield have dramatically reduced chronic absenteeism rates with the following strategies: positive attendance messaging (early and often), special events for families where attendance messages would be emphasized, weekly recognitions for perfect attendance in kindergarten, home visits, providing alarm clocks, a monthly Breath Mobile (asthma mobile health van), a hallway photo display of students with perfect attendance, and targeted case management for the most at-risk families.

Strategy: Targeted Health Interventions, Supporting Students With Asthma

According to national data, asthma is a leading cause of absenteeism. Across high-needs schools in Bethlehem, Allentown and Easton, one in four students report suffering from asthma. NYC runs “Asthma Friendly Schools Campaign” where each school is assigned an “Asthma Ambassador,” or a community health partner, who can assist with asthma trainings and supports for students, caregivers and schools. Schools with higher rates of asthma run parent summits to increase awareness of asthma and provide training on asthma management. Physical education teachers are being trained to identify students with asthma. Schools are utilizing the American Lung Association’s *Open Airways for Schools* Program (for students ages 8–11 years) which trains students on how to recognize their asthma triggers and successfully manage their asthma in a fun, engaging manner. American Lung Association provides all of the materials at no cost.

