



Pre-K Attendance – Why It’s Important and How to Support It

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State education agencies are increasingly prioritizing the issue of school attendance. Many are interested in the causes of chronic absenteeism and developing approaches to reduce and prevent it through policy and practice. In the early grades (pre-K – 3rd), children with inconsistent or unstable school attendance miss out on adult support and guidance to help them master foundational skills that are essential for success in later grades.ⁱ

Absenteeism is a concern for all ages and grades, but different factors impact absenteeism in the early years. Pre-K (and Kindergarten) in some states is not mandatory and parents play a strong role in ensuring attendance in the early years, therefore strategies to reduce absenteeism must consider the role of the family. Several states and cities offer promising practices to decrease chronic absenteeism. Across these settings and approaches, partnership with families is a critical factor for success. This *FastFact* provides information on potential causes of absenteeism, examples from cities and states to address it, and available resources.

Why is this question important?

When absenteeism at school or in another formal learning environment becomes chronic (missing 10 percent or more of days in a school year),ⁱⁱ children can lose many hours of potential learning. There is strong evidence that more time (e.g., higher dosage¹) in quality early care and education is associated with positive outcomes for children, especially for disadvantaged children.ⁱⁱⁱ Research also finds that chronic absence in the early grades is associated with lowered proficiency in reading and math, and increased retention.^{iv} Chronic absences in the early years of schooling often set a pattern of absenteeism that continues into later grades.

¹ Dosage is used here to describe the amount of time a child is exposed to an intervention, in this case pre-K. Dosage can refer to frequency (how often), intensity (how much of an intervention is delivered in a session), duration, session (i.e., full or half day), or cumulative dosage. For more information, see *Synthesis of Preschool Dosage: Unpacking How Quantity, Quality and Content Impacts Child Outcomes* at <https://www.humancapitalrc.org/news-and-events/2015-conference/conference2015-agenda>



In addition to focus at the local and state levels, reducing chronic absenteeism has become a national issue. Several federal agencies have come together to not only build awareness, but also offer ideas to combat it. The [Federal Joint Letter on Chronic Absenteeism](#) is a joint statement from the U.S. Departments of Education (ED), Health and Human Services (HHS), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Justice (DOJ), designed to raise awareness and provide potential solutions.

What are states and cities doing about it?

CEELO found examples of several states and localities that are tackling the issue by raising awareness, making attendance a key priority, and/or conducting studies to determine root causes and potential solutions. Examples include:

- **California's** Office of Attorney General is focusing on attendance in the elementary grades as a key approach to improved public safety. This [report](#) discusses the importance of attendance and steps to improve it, with local examples.
- **Chicago Public Schools (CPS)** explored the relationship between absenteeism and learning outcomes, as well as the extent of and reasons behind absenteeism in CPS pre-K in [this report](#).
- **Rhode Island** has also elevated the importance of improved attendance. In 2014, Rhode Island's KIDS COUNT and other sponsors hosted an event [The Importance of Reducing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades](#). It also has an [absence fact sheet](#).
- **Montana's** Office of Public Instruction has an attendance [campaign](#) for P-12 in coordination with Graduation Matters Montana.
- **Washington, DC's** Early Childhood Education Division (ECED) in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) made attendance a key school readiness goal. ECED commissioned [a study](#) to identify patterns they could target to improve attendance.

Further information is available in the resources section of this document.

What are the roots of chronic absenteeism?

Understanding *why* a child is absent provides a pathway to identifying effective solutions. Chronic absenteeism typically is a result of parental or familial influences or circumstances. While many may feel these contributing factors are “common sense” to an early education professional, practices and results often indicate otherwise. Potential reasons include:

- **Beliefs** - Families don't think the amount of preschool time matters and believe it won't harm children to miss this time. A [report](#) by the California Attorney General's Office identified several misconceptions families had about absenteeism in elementary school, including that early grade attendance isn't as important as high school, children will catch up before they get to high



school, only absences on consecutive days have negative impact, and absences are acceptable as long as the parent informs the school.

- **Illness** – The child or a family member may have chronic health problems that keep the child from attending.
- **Language differences**- For a family whose skill with the English language is limited, effective two-way communication is compromised. Often these families rely on the children to interpret despite their limited vocabulary or expressive skills, and this may lead to misunderstandings that result in keeping the child at home.
- **Schedule conflict** - Family work schedule may be an issue, particularly for families with “non-traditional” work hours or inconsistent schedules. Unpredictable work schedules may also affect transportation arrangements.
- **Transportation** - The family can’t get the child to the setting because of unreliable transportation or lack of an affordable public transit system.
- **Unstable living conditions** – Families experience multiple moves prior to kindergarten for a variety of reasons--migrant worker status, homelessness, natural disaster, etc. When at-risk families live on the edge, a steady, safe residence may be difficult to maintain, causing erratic school attendance patterns.
- **Values** – Families may feel that their child is growing up quickly and prefer spending as much time as possible before the child is subject to compulsory school attendance. Quite simply, they may value spending time with family as being more important than preschool during this developmental period.

To design effective strategies for implementation, professionals need to be part of a systemic approach that involves training and resources to collect and understand the basic information about the root causes of the problem affecting that particular family in relation to the child’s district, school, or classroom.

Promising Strategies

Once the issues contributing to chronic absenteeism are better identified and understood, various approaches can be taken to address the problem. Following are a few strategies that work:

- **Ensure programs have strong reciprocal family engagement strategies in place, including frequent two-way communication.** Staff and teachers should be prepared to positively interact with families regardless of the context unless one’s safety is compromised. By talking with the family about the possible barriers to getting the child to class, it creates a welcoming and safe environment to mutually construct a solution. Washington, DC found [attendance improved](#) after increased communication and supports were provided to families.



- **Engage families in proactive, rather than punitive, conversations to combat misconceptions around absenteeism.** Further, emphasize the positive aspects of the program for the child, especially if she enjoys attending and being with her peers. Rather than taking regular attendance as a given value for everyone, acknowledge the parents when the child attends the program consistently. The California Attorney General's Office offers [tips](#) in a report on absenteeism and plans to produce a toolkit. [This report](#) highlights how some districts are working with families to prevent chronic absenteeism.
- **Use attendance promotion approaches that are linguistically and culturally appropriate and sensitive.** Families need to relate to the teachers and staff in programs before they feel part of the school community and invest their child's time. [This report](#) from the National Center for Children in Poverty highlights the importance of communicating in a linguistically and culturally appropriate way.
- **Address absenteeism as a community-wide concern that crosses multiple sectors and engages stakeholders** from education, social services, community, faith-based centers, business, and others. Parent participation is perhaps most critical of all. Steps include creating a task force that spans multiple sectors (e.g., education, housing, health, justice system, homeless service providers, leaders in community and philanthropy) to better understand absenteeism patterns, identify strategies to improve attendance, and create community action plans. [Attendance Works](#) identifies four [key ingredients](#) for systemic change: positive messaging, actionable data, capacity building, and shared accountability.
- **Collect and use data on absenteeism to better understand root causes, develop strategies to improve attendance, and track progress.** This can be done on the classroom, program, community, and state levels to improve outreach and engagement.

Concluding Thoughts

Research demonstrates that chronic absenteeism, especially in the early years of one's development and learning, correlates highly with undesirable short- and long-term education and social outcomes. Prevention and early identification with intervention can be effective in reducing absenteeism and associated costs. With multiple reasons contributing to chronic absenteeism, policies and practices based on a better understanding of contributing family and community factors are likely to produce improved results.



Resources

This section is organized by: nationally focused resources, state-focused resources, locally focused resources, research briefs, and tools. Note that some resources appear in more than one section.

National

[Attendance Works](#) offers numerous resources on research and best practices that target chronic absenteeism.

[Federal Joint Letter on Chronic Absenteeism](#) is joint statement made by the leaders of the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice. It includes the following action steps for communities: Generate and act on absenteeism data, create and deploy positive messages and measures, focus communities on addressing chronic absenteeism, and ensure responsibility across sectors. Additional details on each action step are provided.

State

California: [In School and On Track 2015](#) - This report from the California Office of the Attorney General identifies common misconceptions families have about absenteeism. It also provides tips on how to proactively engage families in conversations to address the misconceptions. It is also available in [Spanish](#).

Montana: [Montana](#) - The Office of Public Instruction has a campaign for P12 in coordination with Graduation Matters Montana.

Rhode Island: [Focus on Reducing Chronic Early Absence](#) - This fact sheet from Rhode Island KIDS COUNT shares why attendance is important and offers recommendations to reduce chronic absences.

City

Baltimore, MD: [Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten](#) - This brief looks at attendance in the early grades with particular focus on Pre-Kindergarten (PreK) and Kindergarten (K) and follows these young children over time. The study finds that children with low attendance in both Pre-K and K often continue to have low attendance, are more likely to be retained by grade 3 and on average have lower academic outcomes than peers with better attendance. The impact can be minimized, however, by improved attendance in later grades.

Chicago, IL: [Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences: Research Summary](#) - This report highlights the critical importance of consistent preschool attendance. Children who attend preschool regularly are significantly more likely than chronically absent preschoolers to be ready for kindergarten and to attend school regularly in later grades, the report finds.



Washington, DC: [Insights into Absenteeism in DCPS Early Childhood Program](#) - This report details research focused on absenteeism of children in the District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) early childhood program. The report includes recommendations about steps that the DCPS Early Childhood Education Division could consider to limit absenteeism.

Research Briefs

[Attendance in the Early Grades: Why it Matters for Reading](#) - This brief summarizes a growing body of research which documents how many youngsters are chronically absent, meaning they miss 10 percent or more of the school year due to excused or unexcused absences. The research also shows how these missed days, as early as preschool, translate into weaker reading skills and makes a clear case for engaging families to reduce chronic absenteeism.

[Can Center-Based Childcare Reduce the Odds of Early Chronic Absenteeism?](#) - This study inquired as to whether attending center-based care predicted differential odds of early absence patterns. Using a newly released national large-scale study of children (the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Class of 2010-11), the findings indicated that children who attended center-based care in prekindergarten had lower odds of being chronically absent in kindergarten.

[Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting a Course for Student Success](#) -This report shows how disparities in school attendance rates starting as early as preschool and kindergarten are contributing to achievement gaps and high school dropout rates across the country. The report also highlights the connection between health and attendance and the power of states to tackle absenteeism by tapping key champions, leveraging data, and learning from places that have improved attendance despite challenging conditions.

[Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades](#) – This report explains the importance of attendance in the early years, contributing reasons for absences, and implications for action.

Tools

[Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism](#) -This Toolkit offers information, suggested action steps, and lists of existing tools and resources—including evidence-based resources—for individuals, leaders, and systems to begin or enhance the work of effective, coordinated community action to address and eliminate chronic absenteeism. It includes a session for early learning providers. The toolkit is from the U.S. Departments of Education (ED), Health and Human Services (HHS), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Justice (DOJ).

[In School and On Track 2015](#) - This report from the California Office of the Attorney General identifies common misconceptions families have about absenteeism. It also provides tips on how to proactively engage families in conversations to address the misconceptions. It is also available in [Spanish](#).



ABOUT CEELO:

One of 22 Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) will strengthen the capacity of State Education Agencies (SEAs) to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. CEELO will work in partnership with SEAs, state and local early childhood leaders, and other federal and national technical assistance (TA) providers to promote innovation and accountability.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Attendance Works. (2014). *Why attendance matters in early education programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/early-elementary-handout.pdf>
- ⁱⁱ Chang, H.N. & Romero, M. (2008) *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty. Retrieved from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ Zaslow, M., Anderson, R., Redd, Z., Wessel, J., Tarullo, L. & Burchinal, M. (2010). *Quality dosage, thresholds, and features in early childhood settings: A review of the literature* (OPRE 2011-5). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/quality_review_0.pdf; In research on part-day versus full-day participation in pre-K in a district, NIEER found that extended day quality pre-K had “dramatic and lasting effects on children’s learning across a broad range of knowledge and skills”, see Robin, K.B., Frede, E.C., & Barnett, W.S. (2006). *Is more better? The effects of full-day vs. half-day preschool on early school achievement: Executive summary*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from <http://nieer.org/resources/research/IsMoreBetter.pdf>; Wasik, B. A. & Snell, E.K. (2015). *Synthesis of preschool dosage: Unpacking how quantity, quality and content impacts child outcomes*. Presentation at the Human Capital Research Collaborative National Invitational Conference Agenda in Minneapolis, MN. Retrieved from <https://www.humancapitalrc.org/news-and-events/2015-conference/conference2015-agenda>.
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