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# Let's Focus on Chronic Absenteeism

By Hedy Chang and Robert Balfanz

As states and Congress rethink how to judge a successful school—whether by measuring graduation rates, using standardized-test scores, or judging teacher effectiveness—they should make sure to track another critical piece of information: the number of students missing 20 days or more of school each year.

Obviously, missing so much school is a problem for the absent students: By 3rd grade, the children who missed too much of kindergarten and 1st grade are falling behind in reading, research shows. By 6th grade, chronic absence becomes an early-warning sign that students will drop out of high school.

But these absences also affect other students, when teachers have to slow their instruction to accommodate students who missed lessons the first time they were taught. A studyRequires Adobe Acrobat Reader of New York City 4th graders found that even students with good attendance rates had lower standardized-test scores than their peers when they went to schools where nearly 10 percent of students missed class every day. And in districts where state funding is based on attendance, chronic absence also costs schools money.

Mayors and education leaders in New York City, Chicago, Baltimore, and other cities, large and small, are catching on to this impact and recognizing that a reduction in absences starting in the early grades is one of the more straightforward, actionable steps they can take to improve schools and community health.

Now, it's time for state and federal leaders to recognize as much and pay attention to chronic absences as they broaden the measures for judging schools, either through new legislation or waivers of current provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Absenteeism is clearly tied to a school's effectiveness, yet today many principals can't tell you their schools' chronic absence rates.

It's not that they don't track absences. Every student's report card shows just how many days he or she has missed. But schools and districts rarely look at the data schoolwide and often can't tell you how many students are missing 10

percent of the academic year—or nearly a month.

Instead, school officials focus on average daily attendance, or how many students regularly show up. This statistic can be misleading. For instance, 95 percent average daily attendance is typically considered good; 95 percent is an A, right?

But in 2011, when Attendance Works and the Des Moines, Iowa-based Child and Family Policy Center looked at elementary school attendance in three urban districts, they found that even a 95 percent attendance average often masked a bigger problem with chronic absences.

Think about it like this: If you had 100 students in your school, and 95 percent showed up every day, you'd still have five absences a day. That's 900 absences over the course of the 180-day school year, and that could mean as many as 45 kids missing 20 days of school.

It's rarely that extreme, but the 2011 analysis, "Chronic Early Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight,"Requires Adobe Acrobat Reader found that at elementary schools with that 95 percent average, the proportion of chronically absent students ranged from an acceptable 7 percent to a troublesome 23 percent. Parents and educators should know what the rate is at their school.

Many administrators concentrate on truant students who are skipping school. But a focus on truancy overlooks excused absences, which also cost students valuable time. This is especially true among low-income children, who often miss days because of unreliable transportation, inadequate access to health care, and the disruption caused by foreclosure or homelessness. An absence is an absence, particularly when a student is missing roughly a month of school.

But schools and communities can address the issue of absenteeism once they know the extent of the problem. In New York City, where asthma is the No. 1 health issue behind absences, the schools and the health department have developed an "asthma ambassador" program in 24 pilot schools. Each school has a trained staff member or community volunteer who supports children with asthma. The program draws on physical education teachers, parents, city agencies, and health clubs.

In a Washington neighborhood where fights and bullying on the way to school were keeping some kids home, "safe passage" volunteers now walk with students to school. In Baltimore, where excessive suspensions were squandering instructional time, a new disciplinary code has contributed to a significant reduction in missed days. Instead of suspending students for truancy and minor infractions, schools there are now responding with in-school detention, mentoring, and anger-management or conflict-resolution sessions.

So why doesn't every school look at chronic absences? Simply put, states don't require them to. While there are exceptions, among them Georgia and

Maryland, other states collect some attendance information but rarely calculate chronic-absence rates. A few, including California and New York, collect nothing but test scores and graduation rates. They have no way of knowing whether a given student was even in school long enough to learn anything.

We have an opportunity to change this situation: The U.S. Department of Education is now allowing states to seek No Child Left Behind Act waivers to develop multiple measures of judging schools, rather than relying heavily on standardized-test scores. Chronic-absence rates can help determine why a school is faltering and how much progress it has made.

Beyond that, Congress is in the process of rewriting the nation's main K-12 education law. No Child Left Behind, which is the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, calls for tracking average daily attendance and truancy, but not chronic absence.

As Congress reauthorizes the ESEA, lawmakers should include the percentage of students missing 10 percent of school days as a key metric in grant applications and assessments. States should be required to include the data in annual state report cards. Low-performing schools should be required to calculate the figures and develop strategies for improving attendance.

In many ways, tracking chronic absence reflects the goals Congress has set for increasing graduation rates and improving struggling schools. It also aligns with the goal of involving parents more deeply in their children's education. Parents and communities can help turn around attendance problems. But first, they need to know that they have a problem.

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