



National Center for Homeless Education
Supporting the Education of Children and
Youth Experiencing Homelessness
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BEST PRACTICES IN HOMELESS EDUCATION BRIEF SERIES

In School Every Day: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Among Students Experiencing Homelessness

This NCHE brief

- provides an overview of the issue of chronic absenteeism,
- explains the effects of chronic absenteeism on school and student performance, and
- suggests strategies to address the issue of chronic absenteeism among students experiencing homelessness.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. education system is founded on the idea that students are in class every weekday; simply put, to benefit from school, a student must be in attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 3). Nevertheless, many students miss school on a regular basis, thereby missing out on valuable instruction. Statistics on absenteeism among homeless students are particularly concerning, with researchers estimating that homeless students are chronically absent at a rate that is at least double that of the overall student population (da Costa Nunez, Erb-Downward, & Shaw-Amoah, 2015, p 1; Utah Education Policy Center [UEPC], 2012, p 4). Missing school isn't without consequence, as research correlates chronic absenteeism with lower standardized test scores and grade point averages (UEPC, 2012, p 5) and higher rates of grade retention and dropping out (ICPH, 2015, p 1). Research and practice also demonstrate that efforts that lead to increased student attendance yield dividends in the form of greater student success in school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 3). This brief explores the issue of

McKINNEY-VENTO DEFINITION OF HOMELESS 42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
 - i. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;
 - ii. children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...;
 - iii. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 - iv. migratory children...who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

chronic absenteeism among homeless students, and suggests strategies to prevent and address this hidden epidemic. Briefs on additional homeless education topics are available for downloading at <http://nche.ed.gov/pr/briefs.php>.

UNDERSTANDING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

THE DEFINITION

While no single definition exists, *chronic absenteeism* is often defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason, whether excused or unexcused (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 3; Chang & Jordan, 2015, p 1). Chronic absenteeism is not the same thing as truancy, which typically measures unexcused absences only and underestimates total absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 7). Chronic absenteeism also differs from measures of attendance, which focus on students who are present in, rather than absent from, school, and may obscure troubling patterns of absenteeism among subsets of students (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 3).

COMMON CAUSES

While individual students may be absent from school for any number of reasons, common causes of absenteeism include illness, housing instability, and responsibilities that compete with school attendance. Health issues, such as colds, the flu, asthma, dental problems, and mental health challenges due to trauma and toxic stress, are the foremost causes of all students missing school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 30; Chang & Jordan, 2015, pp 1-2). Compounding this challenge is the fact that many low-income students lack access to the healthcare needed to remedy these problems (Chang & Jordan, 2015, p 3). Housing instability is another common cause of absenteeism, as the mobility associated with homelessness, changes in foster care placements, and dislocation due to foreclosure or eviction may keep students from school while parents or guardians work to re-establish a stable living arrangement and, possibly, enroll their children in a new school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 30). Additionally, competing responsibilities, such as providing emergency daycare for younger siblings while parents go to work, caring for elderly relatives in multi-generational households, and working to help meet basic family needs may pull a student away from school (p 30). Finally, misconceptions about the importance of regular school attendance may cause students and parents to underestimate the negative

effects of missing school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 5; Chang & Jordan, 2015, p 2).

THE INCIDENCE AND PREVALENCE OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Despite the importance of regular school attendance, chronic absenteeism is surprisingly widespread. It is estimated that one in seven U.S. students, or 14% of the student population, was chronically absent during the 2013–2014 school year (U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2016). Certain students are more likely to miss school than others. Balfanz and Byrnes assert that the primary characteristic of students who are absent from school regularly is that they live in or near poverty (2012, p 22). Rates of chronic absenteeism among economically disadvantaged students are consistently higher than rates for the overall student population, with researchers estimating that low-income students are chronically absent at rates double or even triple those of students who are not economically disadvantaged (UEPC, 2012, p 3; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 20).

Given the effects of housing instability on school attendance, it is not surprising that students experiencing homelessness are even more likely to miss school than their housed, low-income peers (da Costa Nunez, Erb-Downward, & Shaw-Amoah, 2015, p 1), with researchers in Utah estimating this greater likelihood at 80% (UEPC, 2012, p 4). Of particular relevance to highly mobile students, including students experiencing homelessness, are the data on the relationship between school transfers and absenteeism. Data from the New York City Department of Education demonstrate a positive correlation between school moves, which are more frequent among homeless students, and missing school; simply put, the more times a student changes schools, the more likely she is to be chronically absent (ICPH, 2015, p 4). Cross-sectional and longitudinal data from the Utah State Office of Education reinforce the relationship between school mobility and absenteeism, estimating that students who change schools one or more times during a school year are four times more likely to be chronically absent than students who do not change schools (UEPC, 2012, p 4).

In addition to being more likely for certain students, absenteeism is more likely during certain parts of a student's K-12 educational career. Younger and older students tend to miss school the most (Balfanz &

Byrnes, 2012, p 4), with rates of chronic absenteeism being higher in early elementary grades, decreasing during later elementary years, rising again in middle school, and reaching their highest level during high school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 4; UEPC, 2012, p 8; ED, 2016).

Finally, while widespread data on this issue currently is lacking, data from the Florida Department of Education indicate that chronic absenteeism is not distributed evenly across all schools, but rather is concentrated in a subset of schools. Indeed, half of all chronically absent students in Florida were concentrated in only 15 percent of schools, while 29% of chronically absent students were concentrated in only 5 percent of schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 21).

Information about where, when, and for whom chronic absenteeism is most likely to occur can help States and school districts target efforts and interventions to the students and schools where they are most needed.

EFFECTS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM ON STUDENT AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

As mentioned, missing school is not without effect on student performance, with chronically absent students having lower standardized test scores and grade point averages (UEPC, 2012, p 5), and higher rates of grade retention and dropping out (ICPH, 2015, p 1). Data from the New York City Department of Education found the following specific effects on students experiencing homelessness:

- Chronically absent elementary students experiencing homelessness repeated the same grade at over three times the rate of students experiencing homelessness who missed fewer than five days of school (ICPH, 2015, p 1).
- Elementary students experiencing homelessness who missed fewer than five school days passed State assessment tests at approximately the same rate as their low-income housed classmates (38% compared to 37%), while only 12% of chronically absent elementary students experiencing homelessness achieved proficiency on State assessment tests (p 1).

The above statistics suggest that lower standardized test

scores and higher rates of grade retention cannot be attributed to homelessness alone; rather, chronic absenteeism intensifies the educational challenges experienced by homeless students.

Taking a longer-range perspective, chronic absenteeism is linked with negative outcomes over the course of a student's life, including a decreased likelihood of enrollment in a post-secondary education program (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 27-28) and an increased likelihood of experiencing poverty and criminal justice involvement in adulthood (ED, 2016).

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Because data used to evaluate school and district performance are an aggregate measure of the combined performance of individual students, it follows that chronic absenteeism affects not only student performance, but also that of broader school systems. Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), State accountability systems must include student proficiency rates on State assessment tests and graduation rates for high schools [20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)]. Further, State report cards must disaggregate data on student achievement on State assessment tests and high school graduation rates by homeless status starting with the 2017-2018 school year [20 U.S.C. § 6311(h)(1)(C)]. Additionally, beginning with the 2016-2017 school year, States must report rates of chronic absenteeism among their student populations disaggregated by race, disability status, Limited English Proficiency (LEP) status, and homeless status (ED, 2017a, pp 2-3).

While data on absenteeism and attendance measure different things, the former is inextricably linked with the latter, with ramifications for district funding, as districts often are awarded funds based on student attendance data. As such, district efforts that succeed in reducing student absenteeism will yield positive results not only in student achievement gains, but also gains in district funding. One Colorado school district estimates that by re-engaging 51 chronically absent students, it increased district funds by \$350,000 (National Forum on Education Statistics [NFES], 2009, p 20). Conversely, one San Diego-area California school district forfeited approximately \$350,000 in funding due to the chronic absenteeism of 473 students (Faryon, 2011). At the district level, the numbers are staggering: During the

2009–2010 school year, public schools in San Diego County forfeited at least \$102 million in State funding due to student absences, with this figure reaching \$624 million over a five-year period (Faryon, 2011).

STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Given the effect of chronic absenteeism on student and, by extension, district performance and funding, schools cannot afford to overlook the issue of absenteeism. Fortunately, schools are not without recourse. Balfanz and Byrnes assert that one of the most effective strategies schools can employ to help students living in poverty perform better in school is to do what it takes to get these students to school every day. “This alone, even without improvements in the American education system, will drive up achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates (2012, p 4).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

An effective response to chronic absenteeism begins with robust data collection and analysis. Until recently, only a handful of States systematically collected and analyzed data on chronic absenteeism; and what is not measured is not acted upon (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 3). Conversely, leveraging insights from data collection and analysis, schools can understand which students are struggling the most to maintain regular school attendance and target interventions to where they are needed (ED, 2016).

STUDENT-LEVEL INTERVENTIONS

Informed by data, schools can consider a variety of student- and family-level interventions to support regular school attendance, including

- pairing at-risk students with mentors who encourage them to attend school every day, and provide accountability through attendance monitoring and follow-up when students miss school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 35), and
- following up promptly with parents whose children miss school to understand what caused the absence and how that barrier might be overcome (ICPH, 2015, p 7).

DISTRICT-LEVEL STRATEGIES

Districts and States also can encourage regular school attendance by

- offering before- and after-school activities that increase students’ desire to attend school (ICPH, 2015, p 7),
- incentivizing school attendance by rewarding students who have excellent attendance records (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 34),
- providing school-based dental and health services for students who may not have access to these services outside of school (Chang & Jordan, 2015, p 2), and
- revising policies that may inadvertently decrease student attendance by establishing severe penalties for tardiness (Utah, 2012, p 14) and/or suspending students from school as a result of excessive absences (Chang & Jordan, 2015, p 1).

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Districts also can leverage community support through partnership with local agencies, including

- **Homeless shelters:** Shelters can partner with schools in support of homeless students by providing a space for students to do homework and encouraging families to send their children to school every day (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 35; ICPH, 2015, p 7).
- **Social services:** Local social service agencies can support school attendance by encouraging families who receive public benefits to send their children to school every day, such as one Colorado community that incorporated regular school attendance into its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) personal responsibility contracts (NFES, 2009, p 21).
- **Local public transit and media:** Communities such as New York City have partnered with the local public transit authority and media through public relations campaigns, including automated phone calls to student homes from celebrities encouraging regular school attendance, and signs on subways and busses reminding parents about the importance of their children being in school every day (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p 35).

FEDERAL SUPPORTS

The U.S. Department of Education has encouraged schools to focus attention on the issue of chronic absenteeism among homeless students in a variety of ways, including

- implementing *Every Student, Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism*, which included the development of print resources and the hosting of a national conference in support of State and local efforts to address and eliminate chronic absenteeism among our nation's most vulnerable students,
- instituting a requirement for schools to report on chronic absenteeism among homeless students beginning with the 2016-2017 school year (ED, 2017a, pp 7-8), and
- requiring States and school districts to remove barriers to school attendance and promote school stability for students experiencing homelessness under the education subtitle of the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act*, as reauthorized by the ESSA (42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq).

Districts that implement a multi-layered approach to addressing the issue of student absenteeism are likely to see the most success in improving student attendance. Through targeted and committed efforts to engage directly with students, parents, and community partners, and implement district-level policies and practices that encourage regular attendance, schools can help reduce levels of chronic absenteeism and improve outcomes for students in school and over the course of their lifetimes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on understanding and addressing chronic absenteeism, visit

- Attendance Works:
<http://www.attendanceworks.org/>
- *Every Student, Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism*:
<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/index.html>
- Everyone Graduates Center:

<http://every1graduates.org/>

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals oversee the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at http://nche.ed.gov/states/state_resources.php.

For more information on issues related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, contact the NCHE helpline at 800-308-2145 (toll-free) or homeless@serve.org.

Local Contact Information:

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