

# Curbing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades

Hedy N. Chang

Schools must work with families and communities to ensure every child is present and accounted for throughout their school careers.

**M**ost educators, especially elementary principals, know from experience and common sense that attending school regularly during the early elementary years is essential. Young children need enough time in the classroom to gain the basic social and academic skills that will equip them to succeed long term in school. This understanding is confirmed by the report *Present, Engaged and Accounted For*, which documents that missing nearly a month or more of school during kindergarten is associated with lower academic achievement in first grade. The impact was most profound for children in poverty, for whom poor kindergarten attendance predicted low fifth-grade performance.



What many educators might not realize, however, is that thousands of our youngest students are at risk because they are chronically absent, missing 10 percent or more of school over the course of an academic year. Nationwide, nearly one out of 10 kindergartners and first graders is chronically absent. While chronic absence is not a problem everywhere, in some communities, it affects as much as a quarter of all the children in kindergarten through third grade across an entire district, or as many as half the students in a single elementary school. If large numbers of students miss school, then academic performance for all students can suffer, as teachers divert their attention from the rest of the class to meet the needs of children who are frequently absent.



Yet even in schools or districts heavily affected by chronic early absence, this nascent academic crisis can persist largely unnoticed and unaddressed. While elementary schools often track how many children attend school each day or track unexcused absences (i.e., truancy), few monitor whether individual students are missing extended periods of school, regardless of whether the absence is excused or unexcused. The presence of large numbers of chronically absent students can easily be hidden by high schoolwide attendance rates. (See “Daily Attendance Rates

Might Mask Significant Levels of Chronic Absence” on page 48.)

### Using Data to Inform Action

The first step to addressing chronic absence can be as simple as counting. Consider, for example, what occurred last fall when the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School conducted an analysis of individual student attendance in New York City public schools. The startling results are captured in the report *Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families: Community Strategies to Reverse Chronic*

*Absenteeism in the Early Grades and Improve Supports for Children and Families*. It revealed that one of every five students in kindergarten through fifth grade was chronically absent. In the poorest neighborhoods, this number was as high as one in every three students. The analysis uncovered a problem that had remained invisible even though the New York City Department of Education had been monitoring schoolwide attendance and had policies in place to follow up on student absences, including conducting in-depth investigations when students

were absent for 10 consecutive days or for 20 days over a 40-day period. These policies did not generally pick up on the attendance patterns of students who missed school sporadically—for instance, once every two weeks rather than several days in a row.

Informed by this research, the New York City Department of Education began working with 75 elementary schools experiencing high levels of chronic absence (affecting at least 30 percent of their students). District attendance staff contacted principals at each of the 75 schools to examine their attendance data and develop strategies for improving attendance. Schools began actively reaching out to parents of chronically absent students through letters and meetings aimed at informing them about the adverse impact of poor attendance and connecting them to community resources. The New York City Department of Education also created a new report that regularly monitors levels of chronic absence. By the end of the year, chronic absenteeism had decreased in most of the 75 schools, even though they did not take action until January, at the earliest, and the timing for this initiative coincided with the first outbreak of swine flu.

### The Crucial Role of Principals

The good news is that chronic early absence is not inevitable. Rather, it can be reduced substantially when elementary schools partner with communities and families to monitor and promote attendance, as well as to identify and eliminate barriers that inhibit young students from coming to school every day. Principals are essential to any school-based effort to address chronic early absence. The principal can set the stage by regularly examining data and making sure all members of the school community treat attendance as a priority, starting with school entry. Below are a few examples of what principals can do.

*Ensure that roll is taken every day in every class and that chronic absence is monitored over time.* If children are missing extended periods of school for

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any reason, make sure that a school official makes contact with the family to express concern, find out what is happening, and if needed, connect the family to community resources. Sometimes, it can make a difference to simply reach out to a family to explain that the child is missing so much school that he or she is academically at risk. That’s especially the case if problematic attendance is not caused by a deeper challenge related to family functioning, but simply reflects a lack of awareness of the adverse impact of missing class, even when absences are counted as “excused” because a parent called the school.

### Daily Attendance Rates Might Mask Significant Levels of Chronic Absence

Chronic absence can be masked by high rates of average daily attendance. Suppose, for example, a school has 100 students, and, on average, 95 percent show up every day. In other words, on any given day, five students are absent while 95 are in class. The same five students, however, are not absent for all 180 days.

Rather, it is quite possible that the school is serving 30 students who take turns being absent. But added up for each student, those absences could equal each one missing a month or more of school over the course of the school year. If this is the case, then 30 percent of the students are chronically absent, even though the average daily attendance rate is relatively high.

*If chronic absence is a major problem, collect quantitative and qualitative data to identify which students are most affected and what might be the major factors contributing to their poor school attendance.*

A key place to start is by analyzing school data on chronic absence—if possible, in comparison to district data. If those numbers are not easily available, use your leverage as a principal to call for such information to be made accessible, through either regular reports or data dashboards (a visual display of key performance indicators for a school), if they are being developed in your district. If needed, enlist other principals in helping to advocate for access to this information.

Once you have data, consider the following questions: Does the level of chronic absence affect a significant proportion (10 percent or more) of the student population? Is it higher or lower than the rates at other schools in the district? Does the level of chronic absence differ among specific groups of students and their families? By grade level? By classroom? Ethnicity? Language background? Neighborhood of residence?

Examining chronic absence level by grade and classroom can be especially helpful because that information can be used to target interventions as well to identify promising or problematic situations. National as well as local data indicate, for example, that chronic absence in elementary school tends to be highest among kindergartners. When this is the case, schools might find it particularly pays off to target incoming kindergartners and help them to develop regular attendance habits from the beginning of their school careers. If a significant proportion of absences are concentrated among the children taught by one or two teachers rather than spread out across all classrooms, a more in-depth exploration of classroom dynamics is in order. Perhaps, for example, the teacher is new and needs support to develop a more engaging curriculum, or the classroom itself is problematic due to poor ventilation or mold. At the same time, a comparatively

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low level of chronic absence in a particular classroom or grade is often a sign that a teacher or teachers are engaged in some form of exemplary practice—perhaps related to student incentives or parent communication—that could serve as a model for others.

High levels of chronic absence typically suggest the presence of systemic challenges affecting large numbers of students. For example, if chronic absence is high among students from a particular neighborhood, the problem might be related to poor transportation or perhaps high levels of community violence. Attendance might be improved through an additional bus route or working with parents to establish “safe walks” to school in the morning and afternoon. Or chronic absence could be related to health issues such as a high prevalence of asthma, lack of dental care, persistent problems with lice, or the lack of health insurance. If this might be the case, then partner with public or

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school health departments to find solutions. Consulting with parents—one on one or through focus groups in a nonjudgmental manner—can be very helpful in identifying systemic barriers to school attendance and ways to help parents carry out their responsibility for getting their children to school every day.

*Work with school staff to reward children who attend school consistently.* Rewards can be as simple as monthly certificates, extra recess time, or charts with gold stars. Incentives are most

effective when they help to create a schoolwide culture of regular attendance. The types of awards also matter. Attendance incentives that emphasize psychological rewards in the form of recognition from peers and the school (certificates, recognition at assemblies, popcorn parties for classes with the highest attendance levels, etc.) are typically considered more appropriate than a focus on monetary or material incentives (cash rewards, toys, etc.) Some schools also offer incentives for families, especially when children are young. Parents appreciate gifts such as food baskets or transportation passes, as well as recognition for the hard work of being responsible parents who send their children to school. However, you should avoid providing rewards only for perfect attendance throughout the year, since such an emphasis can encourage children to come to school when they should stay home because of illness.

*Help parents understand that attendance, starting in kindergarten, matters for their child’s long-term academic success.* Many parents do not realize that regular attendance in kindergarten, although it might not be mandated by state law, is vital to their child’s educational success, especially since this might not have been their own experience. Educators can change this perception by helping parents understand the adverse and immediate impact of prolonged absence on a child’s learning. Schools can also provide tips about how parents can support attendance by establishing regular bedtime and morning routines, avoiding prolonged family trips while school is in session, and coming up with backup plans with other parents to get children to school in times of need. Often fellow parents, especially those who have succeeded in helping their children do well despite significant challenges, are among the best equipped to deliver such advice.

*Use data on chronic absence to target the allocation and use of community resources that can help improve attendance.* Preschool programming is an

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excellent example of such a community resource. National research indicates that children who attend formal childcare programs during the year preceding kindergarten are less likely to be chronically absent. Yet high levels of chronic absence are rarely used to determine where to locate new preschool programs. Principals could play a central role in advocating for using attendance data to target such valuable and often limited resources.

Whether or not children have the opportunity to reach their potential depends, in part, on whether they are present at school, starting in kindergarten, so they can learn. As the leaders of a school community, the principal plays a key role in bringing the members of that community together to make certain that children attend school regularly so they have a chance to achieve and succeed. 

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### WEB RESOURCES

*Present, Engaged, and Accounted For* is a groundbreaking report that examines the consequences, prevalence, likely causes, and potential solutions to chronic absence during the first years of elementary school.

[www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_837.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_837.html)

This report documents the extent of chronic absence in New York City public schools, including how this problem could be addressed, especially by targeting schools with the greatest need.

[www.newschool.edu/milano/nyc affairs/documents/StrengtheningSchoolsReport.pdf](http://www.newschool.edu/milano/nyc affairs/documents/StrengtheningSchoolsReport.pdf)



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