Community Schools and Chronic Absenteeism: Using the Community School Model to Improve Attendance

When students are chronically absent, they miss out on essential opportunities for academic, social, and emotional development. Because of its impacts on students and schools, the challenge of chronic absenteeism—as well as how to solve it—has become a nationwide issue. This report compiles the information and strategies shared at the Federation for Community Schools’ quarterly symposium on chronic absenteeism, including current research on chronic absenteeism, its effects on students’ academic outcomes, and promising strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism using the community school model.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
A community school is one which actively works to improve student learning, to strengthen families, and to develop effective communities in support of children and families. Community schools foster shared leadership and responsibility for student achievement and healthy communities. They coordinate access to existing resources and identify new resources necessary for supporting students and strengthening families, using the school as a hub of community learning and activity.

An essential element of the community school model is the Resource Coordinator, or the professional dedicated to establishing and facilitating community partnerships and managing the resources and services within a school. Community schools connect students and families to resources, support, and expertise and, as such, provide an infrastructure through which schools and communities can efficiently and effectively address barriers to learning and positive development.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM
Chronic absenteeism occurs when a student misses 10% of school for any reason, whether excused or unexcused. Both consecutive and sporadic absences contribute to a student’s chronic absence.

Nationwide, chronic absenteeism has become a growing concern for schools and communities. 7.5 million students—or 10-15% of the country’s student population—miss nearly a month of school each year. This statistic is even more alarming when considering what it means for individual students: for a student who misses this much school beginning in preschool, these absences will add up to missing the equivalent of an entire school year before he or she enters the 5th grade.

The impacts on students and schools
When students are absent from school, they miss out on classroom learning and opportunities for social engagement; when these absences become chronic, the effects are compounded. The data is clear: multiple studies have shown chronic absense to be a predictor of students’ future academic challenges. According to Attendance Works’ 2006-2012 analysis of attendance data for the Oakland Unified School District, students’ chronic absences in 1st grade were associated with lower test scores in 6th grade.

The impact of chronic absence on school success carries over into high school, as well. A 2007 study conducted by the Chicago Consortium on School Research found that students’ 9th grade absence data was a stronger predictor of their high school graduation than their 8th grade test scores.

UNPACKING ATTENDANCE TERMS

Chronic absenteeism
A student who misses 10% or more of school for any reason, whether excused or unexcused, is considered chronically absent.

Average daily attendance
Based on school-wide data, average daily attendance refers to the percentage of enrolled students in attendance each day.

Truancy
In Illinois, truancy refers to any unexcused absence. Individual states have discretion over how they define truancy, as well as the legal interventions used to address it.

While a number of measurements can be used to describe schools’ attendance, it is important to consider what each measurement means and how it can be used to support improvement. Focusing only on a school’s average daily attendance masks those students who miss school on a consistent basis. While a school may boast a high average daily attendance rate, it may also be the case that a small yet significant percentage of its students are chronically absent. Considering only truancy data can have a similar effect.
Chronic absence does not just affect the absent student—it also affects the entire classroom by creating an inconsistent learning environment for teachers and other students.

According to Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Works, reducing chronic absenteeism is fundamental to reducing the achievement gap because chronic absenteeism is especially prevalent amongst low-income students. Students living in low-income communities face a higher number of environmental barriers that challenge their regular attendance early on. Compared to their highest-income peers, low-income students are four times more likely to be chronically absent in Kindergarten. Once they are chronically absent, these students are also less likely to have the resources to make up instruction time lost in the early grades.

**Why it happens:**
**barriers to regular attendance**
Consistent attendance is the result of a supportive environment and positive habits. Too often, a student’s absences are attributed to his or her family’s failure to prioritize education. These misconceptions hinder the ability of schools to work collaboratively with families to develop strategies that address the actual roots of students’ attendance challenges.

A number of environmental factors can serve as barriers to a student’s ability to get to school every day, all day. These barriers include unstable housing or homelessness, lack of access to quality healthcare and reliable transportation, dangerous commutes to and from school, and a strained family environment.

School climate can impact students’ level of comfort and motivation to regularly attend school. The school environment—including the way in which students are welcomed into the school, the quality of students’ relationships with adults and peers, the rigor of classroom instruction, and the support students receive when they are facing academic, social, or emotional challenges—can have a significant impact on attendance.

When students overcome barriers in order to get to school, the response they receive from the adults charged with carrying out school policies can encourage or hinder consistent attendance. School policies meant to provide structure and order can have detrimental effects on attendance when implemented without consideration of students’ challenges. For instance, school uniform policies that prohibit students from starting their school day until their uniforms are in full compliance may alienate students who face difficulties in affording the cost of maintaining and laundering their uniforms. Harsh discipline policies, including those regarding suspensions, remove students from their classrooms and, ultimately, contribute to their absences.

**POSSIBLE STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOL PRACTITIONERS**
Addressing the multiple causes of chronic absenteeism requires both prevention and intervention strategies. As with any complex school or community issue, relationship-building is fundamental to supporting consistent attendance. Community schools can leverage the relationships established between students, families, and school staff, as well as the resources provided through partnerships with community agencies, to cultivate a school environment that encourages and supports students’ attendance.

**Create an environmental context that emphasizes the importance of attendance beginning in early childhood**
It is crucial that students develop school-going habits early in their educational careers. School and partner agency staff can play a role in this by emphasizing the importance of attendance and school involvement as early as possible. If your community school includes a preschool class or early learning program, develop ways for these teachers, families, and students to be incorporated into the rest of the school environment so that they feel connected to the school and have ample opportunities to develop relationships that can serve as supports should future challenges to attendance arise.

**Support students in establishing good attendance habits**
Helping students to establish routines of regular attendance can sometimes require implementing small but impactful practices:
POWER-PAC, formed by Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), is an active group of parent leaders who have been trained to raise awareness and advocate for important educational issues. In 2013, POWER-PAC developed the Early Learning Pilot in order to address a common barrier to attendance — a lack of access to information on school enrollment processes, particularly for families with young children. In collaboration with Chicago Public Schools, POWER-PAC implemented the Pilot at Peabody Elementary School and Reavis Math and Science Special School. As part of the program, 59 parents participated in COFI’s Parent Leadership Training. Over the course of one month, 22 of these parents performed community outreach with 475 families in the Chicago neighborhoods of West Town and Kenwood. Through their outreach, the parent leaders identified 67 preschool-aged children not yet enrolled in an early learning program. The children’s families were provided information on how to enroll their children in an early learning program, as well as books they can read with their children.

Engage parents as leaders in raising awareness and creating solutions
Because of their strong connections to their children and parent peers, parents can serve as instrumental leaders in raising awareness about the importance of getting students to school every day. Parents can also improve efforts to support families by informing their school’s understanding of the challenges families face in getting their children to school and identifying the resources from which other families may benefit.

Use data to structure prevention and intervention efforts
Multiple sources of data can inform community schools’ prevention and intervention practices. In order to create a school-wide context that encourages attendance, community school practitioners must evaluate their collective understanding of attendance issues and their schools’ efforts to prevent absenteeism. Attendance Works offers useful self-assessment tools for schools and early education programs to evaluate their current efforts and plan for next steps.

According to Attendance Works, the strongest predictor of which students are at highest risk of being chronically absent one year is to examine their attendance data from the year before. Community school staff can use attendance data to identify students who are at risk of becoming or are already chronically absent and to examine patterns of absence amongst individual students, families, and classrooms. For Resource Coordinators who may not have access to classroom attendance data, attendance in out-of-school time activities can also be a useful data source.

From the Field: COFI’s Early Learning Pilot
Because school-going habits are established early on, it is essential that parents are adequately informed of the importance of prioritizing early learning and school attendance when children are young.

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Connect students and families to necessary supports

After your school develops an understanding of the students who are chronically absent, this knowledge can then be used to structure more targeted interventions. It is important to examine what factors are contributing to absenteeism through direct outreach. **Conversations with students, families, and relevant school staff can inform school practitioners’ understanding of significant barriers to students’ attendance, what resources students and families need to overcome these barriers, and what staff or community partners can provide these resources.**

Recognize and celebrate good attendance

For some students, getting to school consistently involves overcoming a number of challenges. Celebrating students’ and families’ efforts to improve attendance can help encourage their future efforts, as well as motivate other students to do the same. **Community schools can emphasize the importance of consistent attendance by implementing recognition strategies throughout the year,** such as displaying the names of students with good and improved attendance in a visible place in the school building or hosting frequent attendance assemblies and celebrations.

Now more than ever, it is essential that community school professionals share efforts around addressing chronic absenteeism. As the hub of school and community resources, community schools are in a unique position to inform people’s understanding of the challenges that lead to absenteeism and provide resources that address these challenges. By putting their partnerships to work, community schools can cultivate a network of supports around students and families in order to improve attendance and, ultimately, the well-being of students, schools, and communities.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

**Attendance Works | attendanceworks.org**

Attendance Works is a national initiative committed to improving school attendance through policy and practice. Their website includes further research on chronic absenteeism and attendance issues, reports on best practices throughout the country, archived webinars and workshops, and useful tools for implementing attendance-improvement strategies in your community school.

**Attendance Awareness Month | attendanceworks.org/attendancemonth**

September 2013 will mark the first-ever Attendance Awareness Month, led by the Attendance Awareness Campaign. The Campaign's **Count Us In! Toolkit** includes strategies for utilizing community partnerships to encourage attendance, guidance on data-driven decisionmaking, and media tools to spread the word in your community.

**Purple Binder | purplebinder.com**

When students and families need resources that are not yet provided through community school partnerships, community school staff can help make connections to local agencies that provide these services. Purple Binder is a database of Chicago’s social service agencies that school staff can use to search for and refer relevant services.

**Research Summary | Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning and Reasons for Absences**

Compiled by the The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, this report illustrates the prevalence of and reasons behind chronic absenteeism amongst young students and outlines the connection between absenteeism and important learning outcomes. While the report’s focus is on Chicago preschoolers, its findings are highly applicable in multiple settings as it highlights the importance of an early emphasis on attendance and how data can be used to better understand the impacts of chronic absenteeism.

*For more information and resources, please contact:*