For the first time in California, data is available that can help districts and schools better understand the academic impact for students of missing too much school. As a school board member, awareness of the scale and concentration of chronic absences in your district and schools is essential to implementing effective strategies to improve overall achievement and close opportunity gaps. Chronic absence data available through Dataquest on the California Department of Education (CDE) website and through the chronic absence story map from the University of California, Davis, can help trustees determine to what extent students might be struggling simply because they are not in class.

Chronic absence, defined in California as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason,\(^1\) is an early warning sign of academic risk for students from pre-school through high school. Chronic absence is different from truancy (unexcused absences) in that it includes both excused and unexcused absences.\(^2\) Chronic absence has an especially adverse impact on students living in poverty. They are more likely to face attendance barriers at an earlier age and lack access to resources to make up for lost instructional time.

High levels of chronic absence in a school are a red flag signaling that barriers to daily attendance may exist at home, in the community, within the school, or a combination of these factors. Such absenteeism is an indicator that additional support is needed from the district, other public agencies, and nonprofits to address these barriers. Even moderate levels of chronic absence can signal that schools should look into what supports are necessary to prevent escalating absence issues. When many students in a school have poor attendance rates, this can serve as an early warning sign that efforts to engage and meet the needs of students and families are not succeeding.
The good news is that chronic absence can be turned around, especially when schools, students, families, caregivers, public agencies, and other community partners take a data-driven approach to comprehensive support, starting with prevention and early intervention.

**How can chronic absence data help?**

Chronic absence data is an essential tool for boosting student success. Such data bolsters existing efforts by providing insights on student achievement and what might be needed to achieve more equitable student outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable students. Chronic absence data sheds light on which schools need support for increasing attendance. It also informs school districts’ Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) goals to improve attendance and allocate resources to meet those goals. Further, districts, schools, and communities are now held accountable for chronic absence through the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) legislation and are required to make this information transparent.

**When did chronic absence data become easily available?**

When the Every Student Succeeds Act became law in December 2015, chronic absence data became a required reporting element. The CDE began including chronic absence statistics in the data publicly available through DataQuest in December 2017 after collecting it for the first time in Spring 2017. Previously, California only collected data on truancy (unexcused absences). Relying on truancy data, however, only offers a partial picture and can overlook a large number of students, especially those in the early grades, who are academically at-risk because they have missed instruction due to an accumulation of excused absences.

**Analyzing school level chronic absence**

Chronic absence data offers invaluable insights into what is needed improve poor attendance and boost achievement. Attendance Works identifies four major causes of chronic absence: barriers to attendance, negative school experiences, lack of engagement, and misconceptions (see table 1).
Questions for boards to consider

1. Have you seen chronic absence data for your district and schools?

2. Is chronic absence a moderate or severe problem in particular schools in your district?

3. What strategies and resources are included in your Local Control and Accountability Plan to either prevent future or address current chronic absences?

4. What strategies does the district and the board use to communicate the importance of school attendance to students and their families?

For more information, please see the full report:

Seize the Data Opportunity in California: Using Chronic Absence to Improve Educational Outcomes

Attendance Works is a national initiative dedicated to improving the policy, practice, and research around attendance. Find research, policy analysis and resources at www.attendanceworks.org.