



# REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENCE STARTING IN THE EARLY GRADES:

AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT FOR PROMOTING SUCCESS IN SCHOOL

A Toolkit for City Leaders



“ At the core of school improvement and education reform is an assumption so widely understood that it is rarely invoked: Students have to be present and engaged in order to learn. ”

- Present, Engaged and Accounted For  
September 2008

Imagine you have a school with 100 students and 95 of them show up every day. Congratulations, you've got 95 percent average daily attendance rate. Now consider, those five absences a day add up to 900 absences over the school year. While some students are missing just three or four days, 30 kids miss 18 days or 10 percent of the year, the point at which absenteeism puts kids at risk academically. Now you've got a chronic absence rate of 30 percent. That's nothing to cheer about.

In cities across the country, civic leaders and school administrators are taking a fresh look at student absenteeism and how it affects academic performance. Research proves what we know from common sense: Showing up to class is critical to succeeding in school. What is less understood is the critical importance of looking at chronic absence data starting in elementary school.

Far too many cities and schools focus on truancy in high school or, at best, middle school, without looking at how many young children in the early grades are headed off track academically because they are

missing too much school due to *excused* or *unexcused* absences. In some places, elementary school students are missing school at alarmingly high rates. In fact, in some school districts the absentee rate in kindergarten is second only to the ninth grade rate. Research shows that early absences hamper a child's ability to read and exacerbate achievement gaps, especially for poor children and minorities who typically

have higher rates of absenteeism. By sixth grade, chronic absence becomes one of the key early warning signals that a student will eventually drop out of high school. Unfortunately many city and school district leaders are in the dark because, as illustrated by the example above, they don't look at the right numbers. They settle for average figures rather than looking more deeply into

**Chronic absence is missing 10 percent of school days for any reason—excused and unexcused—over an academic year. Keep in mind that chronic absence is not the same as truancy, which typically refers to unexcused absences and often is associated with willfully skipping class.**

attendance patterns that can explain why students are missing so much school. Elementary students, especially in the early grades, are not likely to be skipping school willfully. Instead, many of their absences are excused as they deal

with health, safety, transportation and other challenges that keep them from class.

This toolkit (available online or in a printable version) offers information and resources to help city leaders address this essential but often overlooked ingredient of school success. Reducing chronic absenteeism is a key priority for the [Campaign for Grade Level Reading](#), a collaborative effort among foundations, children's advocates,

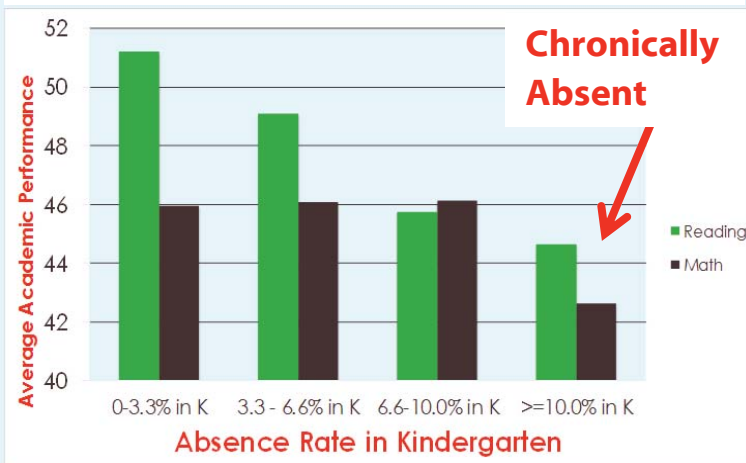
policymakers, educators and parents to close the gap in reading achievement that separates many low-income students from their more affluent peers.

### This toolkit offers:

- ✓ The imperative for city leaders to address chronic absence early in a child’s school career
- ✓ Five strategies that city leaders can use to lead the community and school systems in improving attendance
- ✓ Profiles of cities and selected local programs that illustrate how chronic absence can be reduced effectively. The brief profiles offered in this toolkit are linked to more in-depth descriptions on line.
- ✓ Templates and tools for assessing data and identifying barriers to attendance
- ✓ Resources for assisting city leaders in this important work

City leaders can make a real difference in

### Chronic absence in kindergarten translates into poor performance in fifth grade for poor children.



improving school attendance by promoting public awareness and galvanizing public and nonprofit resources to address the root causes of student absenteeism.

## The Imperative

For children to succeed in school—and learn to read well by the end of third grade—they need to be present at school. Yet nationwide, **nearly one in 10 kindergarten students misses a month of school every year**, a 2008 study shows. Chronic absence in kindergarten can translate into poor academic performance throughout elementary school, especially for children in poverty whose families lack the resources to help make up for time lost on task in the classroom.

A new study commissioned by Attendance Works suggests that promoting attendance in the early grades is critical to sustaining the school readiness skills that preschool or Head Start programs can help children to develop. This study, conducted by Applied Survey Research, examined the progress of

640 young California children in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties where research has consistently shown a strong correlation between a high score on local school readiness assessment measure and third reading proficiency. When chronic absence was taken into account, however, students who arrived at school academically ready to learn—but then missed 10 percent of their kindergarten and first grade years—scored , on average, 60 points below similar students with good attendance on third-grade reading tests. In math,

the gap was nearly 100 points.

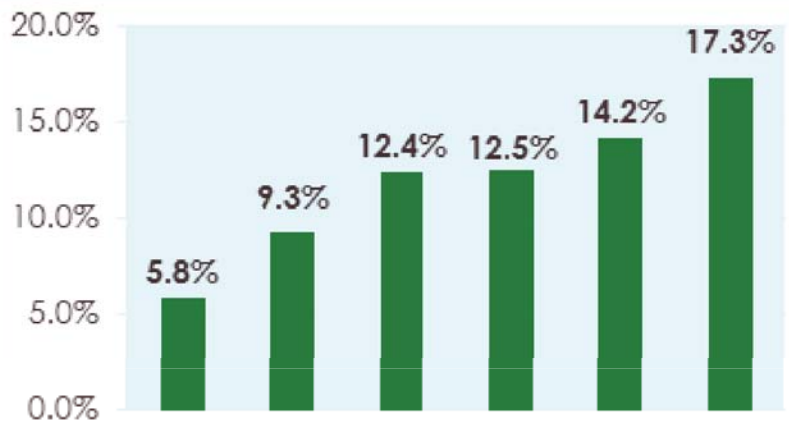
As students get older, chronic absence becomes an important early warning sign for students regardless of family economics. By ninth grade, missing excessive amounts of school can predict dropout rates with more accuracy than eighth grade test scores.

While chronic absence rates are higher and more intractable in secondary school, it is crucial to start addressing the problem among our youngest students, before they slip off track academically and poor attendance habits become entrenched. To ensure all children have a chance to learn, we must emphasize the importance of attendance early and often throughout their school careers.

Reducing chronic absence is especially important for children living in poverty, who need as much time as possible in a literacy-rich, engaging learning environment during the early years to set them on a path toward academic success and third grade reading proficiency. Unfortunately they are four times more likely to be chronically absent than their more affluent peers. After all, families struggling in poverty are more likely to face a web of problems that can stand in the way of good school attendance, such as inadequate transportation, unstable housing, lack of health care, higher incidence of chronic disease and poor nutrition and safety concerns. Also, the schools in high poverty neighborhoods are often not as educationally engaging as other campuses, another factor influencing whether a child attends regularly.

When city leaders know what barriers students are facing, they can marshal

**These six Oakland schools all have 95% average daily attendance but starkly different chronic absence rates.**



community resources to address them, whether by redirecting health care assets to asthma sufferers, creating safer walking routes to school or supporting policy change. Most schools only track truancy (which is required by No Child Left Behind) or average daily attendance. These figures can mask the often significant numbers of students who are missing 10 percent or more of the school year, the common definition of chronic absence.

Chronic absence is a problem we can fix if we start early enough. Schools and communities are seeing attendance rates improve within months when they work together to monitor to chronic absence data and reach out to children and families to encourage good attendance and help them overcome barriers to getting to school.

City leaders have an important role to play. Baltimore and New York City, for example, have developed initiatives that illustrate how local government can work with school districts, communities and philanthropic partners to bring marked improvements in the attendance rates. Both developed task



forces that found new ways to reach out to parents and students about attendance.

Baltimore used videos and posters developed by students; New York tapped celebrities for wake-up calls. Baltimore instituted systemic changes, including reducing the number of suspensions for nonviolent offenses and shutting down troubled middle schools to create K-6 campuses. New York adopted a more targeted approach, assigning mentors to chronically absent students in 25 pilot schools. See these profiles of [Baltimore](#) and [New York City](#) for more information on how local leaders can use their leverage, position and resources to make a difference.

### **City leaders can partner with school districts using these strategies:**

- I.** Get, share and monitor chronic absence data
- II.** Make student attendance a community priority
- III.** Nurture a culture of attendance
- IV.** Identify and address barriers to school attendance
- V.** Advocate for stronger policies and public investment

This toolkit offers an in-depth description of each of these key strategies.

City leaders are especially well-positioned to advance a chronic absence agenda because it leverages the mayor's ability to use the bully pulpit for rallying support around a common concern. In addition, city

governments are typically deeply involved in administering and funding an array of supports and services ranging from public safety to early childhood programs or community health clinics that can address issues that often pose significant barriers to school attendance.

### **Strategy I: Get, share and monitor chronic absence data**

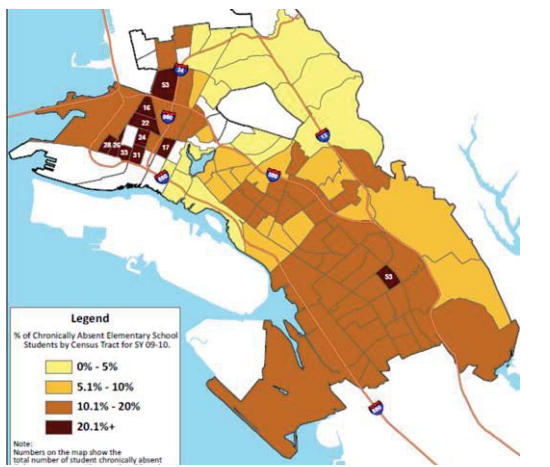
*The first step in reducing absences is to understand how the depth and scope of the problem in your community. Most school districts have the data they need to track chronic absence.*

#### **City leaders can:**

- 1. Ask your school district(s) to produce a chronic absence analysis.** As long as your district uses a computerized database to collect attendance information, this should be straightforward. The analysis can present a simple description of rates by grade level, race and ethnicity. Or it can take a deep dive into the data, as a recent analysis did in Oakland, Calif. For details about what data to ask for and how school districts should present the information, [view this work sheet](#).
- 2. If needed, conduct or broker an external analysis.** If the school district does not have time or capacity, city data shops could analyze the attendance information. Or city leaders could help broker an

## Profile: Oakland

The mayor's [Education Cabinet](#) brings together education leaders, social service agencies, higher education leaders, workforce development providers and foundations to address Oakland's critical education needs. One of the cabinet's priorities is reducing chronic absence. The cabinet recently reviewed a data analysis that showed one in seven students is missing 10 percent of the school year, with information broken down by grade, race, ethnicity and poverty level. The analysis, supported by philanthropic dollars, also mapped attendance by census tracts. This revealed that elementary school absenteeism is especially high in particular neighborhoods already challenged by environmental health hazards and poverty. The analysis also show far higher absentee rates, starting in elementary school, among African-American students, suggesting that improving school attendance at school entry could help reduce racial inequities in academic achievement.



arrangement where the district downloads data files with the names of students removed to protect confidentiality. Then, these files can be analyzed by a local university using faculty and graduate students, possibly at lower cost, or bring in a consultant. If the data analysis is conducted by an external group, take care to vet the preliminary findings by school district leadership to ensure the results appear valid before any public release.

- 3. Monitor data over time.** After the initial set of data on chronic absence is generated, track it over time. Make sure the school district produces a similar chronic absence analysis once, if not twice a year. Compare data by district and school to see whether progress is being made. Ensure that the data is available to the public and interested stakeholders in paper form or by posting it on the school district or city websites.

### Strategy II: Make student attendance a community priority

*Since many people aren't aware that chronic absence is a problem in their community, city leaders can play an important role in using the results of an attendance analysis to make this a community priority. By working together with the district to release information about scale and scope of the problem, the city can help send the message that this isn't about blaming schools or families but about galvanizing the resources of the entire community to ensure all students have the chance to learn and succeed.*

## City leaders can:

1. **Create a task force** that brings together senior leadership from across city, school and community agencies from a cross-section of disciplines (early childhood, K-12 education, family engagement, social services, public safety, afterschool, faith-based institutions, philanthropy, public housing, transportation, etc.) to consider ways to make attendance a priority.
2. **Develop a presentation** that combines local data with national research revealing the impact of chronic absence on school success and highlighting how schools and communities can work together to significantly improve student attendance. (See for example, [this PowerPoint presentation](#) developed for Oakland Unified School District in California.)
3. **Identify and highlight local success stories** that demonstrate that your city does not need to settle for high levels of chronic absence. Use your district wide analysis to find schools with good attendance even though they serve large number of low-income students. This combination is rarely achieved by chance, but reflects work by the school and often the community to motivate students to attend school regularly and overcome any barriers. If local examples aren't available, use the stories found on the What Works section of the Attendance Works website.

## Profile: Baltimore

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The data points were dire: One in six elementary students was missing at least 20 days of class. So were 34 percent of middle school students and 44 percent of high school students. The mayor's office collaborated with the Open Society Institute and Baltimore City Schools to launch a city-wide attendance workgroup that brought together city, school and community stakeholders for a public campaign making attendance everyone's responsibility. That included structural changes that have helped cut the middle school chronic absence rate in half. Absences are also dropping slowly but steadily in elementary and high schools. For more detail read this more in-depth [Baltimore](#) description.





4. **Work with school leaders to disseminate the information** whether it is through public presentations, a news conference, posting a PowerPoint or brief report on the city and district websites or convening key stakeholders to discuss the data and their implications for how they can work together to address the problem.

### Strategy III: Partner with schools and city funded agencies to nurture a culture of attendance

*Respected city leaders, along with educators, can play a critical role in helping to build a community-wide culture of regular school attendance, starting in the early grades. For instance, it's a common myth that going to kindergarten is not very important. It's considered just a nice transition to school. Many parents don't realize that what children learn in kindergarten—including social, behavioral and academic skills—provides a critical foundation for their long-term educational success. Unaware of this, families may be lax about making sure that kids get to school every day and will keep them home when they should be in school.*

#### City leaders can:

1. **Launch a public awareness campaign to convey the importance of going to school every day.** City leaders can use the bully pulpit to send a clear message about the importance of school attendance. Speeches, proclamations, billboards and special recognition events can reinforce to parents and children that showing up matters. That can range

## Profile: New York City

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's office tapped star power to spread the word on the chronic absence and truancy initiative launched in 25 pilot schools in the 2010-11 school year. WakeUp! NYC, a multimedia awareness campaign, partners with Viacom, MTV, local radio, TV and social media networks to spread the word about attendance. Chronically absent students began getting celebrity [wake-up calls](#) in February: Basketball great [Magic Johnson](#) exhorted them to "get up out of bed and into school, try hard and do well." Mets shortstop [Jose Reyes](#) conveyed the message in Spanish. Beyond the public awareness efforts, the initiative uses "success mentors" to improve attendance among at-risk students. Read more about the initiative in this [in-depth description](#).



from parent summits at the start of the school year to public service messages. In Baltimore, the high school students themselves have created [videos and posters](#) to highlight the sort of messages that appeal to teens. One poster, for instance, includes the fact that a high school graduate makes \$1 million more over a lifetime than a dropout.

- 2. Recognize and appreciate good and improved attendance.** Simple rewards—recognition from peers and the school through certificates or assemblies, stickers, extra recess time, crazy bands or parties with ice cream and pizza—go a long way toward motivating students. When widely adopted they are an excellent strategy for cultivating a culture of attendance across an entire school. They send the message that attendance matters, and they help students begin “competing” to achieve something positive. In addition, they implicitly encourage teachers to take attendance carefully and offer positive feedback to students when their attendance improves. [See these tips for creating attendance incentives.](#) Cities are in an especially good position to identify and link schools to businesses that can provide incentives (e.g. tickets to a sports event, back packs or movie tickets, stickers, treats for classes with improved attendance) to schools.
- 3. Work with early care and education and afterschool programs to help build a culture of attendance.** Fostering a culture of attendance is

## Profile: Fort Myers, Fla.

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The Head Start programs in Fort Myers and Lee County, boast attendance rates well above Head Start’s national average. The school readiness rates for children leaving the programs also surpass the district and state averages, with gains persisting through the third grade. These statistics are no accident. Program leaders make a conscious effort to stress the importance of daily attendance with parents and children. This begins with securing a commitment from parents to bring their kids every day and continues with visiting families at homes, tracking absences regularly and bringing parents in for conferences when attendance is flagging. For more information, see [this profile](#).

## Profile: Schuylkill County, Penn.

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[The SHINE After School Program](#) decided on a simple goal: improve the school-day attendance of the students who show up for the afterschool program in rural Pennsylvania. The results: a school attendance rate significantly higher than similar programs nationally, improved communications with parents and a collaboration with school teachers. When parents sign up for SHINE, they sign a contract stressing the importance of attending school and the after school program. Central to the attendance initiative is tracking—and sharing—attendance data with the school district. For more information, [read this profile](#).

not just what happens when children are in school. It is also about the habits nurtured before children enter kindergarten and messages reinforced during the afterschool hours. Often cities can influence how child care and afterschool programs operate because they fund or administer many of them, especially the programs serving low-income families.

Early childhood programs are a wonderful place to begin educating parents that regular, on-time attendance is critical to helping their children succeed in school. Often, parents are open to advice from preschool teachers, especially because this is a time of transition. See these tips for how early childhood education can promote good attendance.

Similarly, research has long shown that good afterschool programs can improve school-day attendance. The sense of belonging, the connection to caring adults and the academic enrichment that afterschool provides can make children more likely to attend school. Often, though, improved attendance is a by-product of good programs, rather than a stated goal. Imagine how much more can be accomplished when afterschool programs pay explicit attention to this problem. They can promote a culture of attendance through their own activities and partner with schools to address the needs of chronically absent students.

See these attendance tips for afterschool programs.

City leaders can:

- ✓ Prioritize funding for child care and afterschool programs at schools struggling with chronic absence.
  - ✓ Use data on poor attendance to identify where new programs are located or which students at a school should be targeted for support.
  - ✓ Ask programs applying for funding to explain what they will do programmatically to improve attendance. Baltimore, for instance, asks its afterschool providers to reach out to chronically absent student and work with them to improve their school-day attendance,
  - ✓ Use evidence of reduced chronic absence to identify which programs should continue to receive funding even in tight budget times.
  - ✓ Set accountability metrics. In Oakland, the city and school district are proposing to hold themselves jointly accountable for increasing the number of students attending school at least 95 percent of the time.
4. Enlist volunteer services to support attendance. City leaders can help schools expand their capacity to promote attendance by building partnerships with community service organizations that identify, train and

deploy volunteers. City Year core members (typically young adults) working in elementary schools often play a major role in helping set up attendance awards or organizing other school-wide events celebrating the importance of attendance. In New York, volunteers from City Year as well as other community-based organizations and local universities, serve as success mentors supporting attendance for 15 to 20 students each. New York City developed confidentiality agreements for community-based organizations and mentors to ensure information about each student is shared and used appropriately. In Baltimore, Experience Corps uses retirees for direct outreach and home visits to the families of chronically absent students, to find and help address barriers to student attendance.

#### **Strategy IV: Identify and address systemic barriers to school attendance**

*If chronic absence affects large numbers of students at particular schools, in neighborhoods or populations of students, city leaders can help find out if there are systemic barriers preventing students from getting to school. A concentration of chronic absence in a single neighborhood may reflect safety or transportation barriers. A spate of asthma suggests health concerns. A surplus of absent children in a single classroom can signal instructional issues that need addressing.*

## **Profile: Boston**

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The mayor's office, school district and public health commission rolled out a new slogan this year: "Every Day Matters." In a dozen struggling elementary schools that mantra is reinforced with City Year mentors helping chronically absent students. City Year workers greet the students when they arrive in the morning, help them with school and call the kids up if they don't come to school. Each mentor works with 15 to 20 students. They also participate in the schools' efforts to track data and look for patterns in absences by classroom, grade and neighborhoods. To learn more about Boston's efforts, read this [article](#).







## Profile: Providence

At a Providence elementary school where nearly one in five students was chronically absent, a team of community providers began using the data to identify children and families in need of help. Some students received rides to school; other families received health services and counseling with support from foundations and a federal Full Services Community Schools. Some parents reported they worked overnight shifts and fell asleep before bringing their children to school. The school responded by opening up a 6:30 a.m. day care, allowing parents to drop off their kids before heading off to sleep. For more information, [read this detailed description](#).

### City Leaders Can:

**1. Bring together the right players** to identify the right solutions to chronic absence in your community. The causes dictate the response.

Here's a guide for examining what might be contributing factors at a school. Consider examining what is happening at the schools with the worst attendance and then look to see whether issues cut across schools. As you'll see, the district has some of this information, but other data are more likely to be available from city or county agencies. In Oakland, the school district and public housing agency are working together to examine attendance as well as academic performance of students living in public housing units.

**2. Brainstorm with various agencies** about the most efficient and cost-effective ways to gather data and insight, whether through a parent survey, a task force or leveraging the skills of local university students and professors.

**3. Engage school district and city agency leaders** in discussing what resources can be put in place to address the identified barriers.



# Breaking Barriers to Attendance

Barrier to Attendance	Potential Actions
<p><b>Parents do not understand that attendance in the early years matters for academic success.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Promote a culture of attendance that educates parents about the value of the learning/skill development that begins with school entry.</li> <li>✓ Work with child care and pre-K providers to emphasize the importance of attendance.</li> <li>✓ Offer orientation/education for parents new to the school that emphasizes regular attendance.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Students are not encouraged to attend school.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Provide incentives/rewards/recognition for good attendance.</li> <li>✓ Remind students through personal calls.</li> <li>✓ Train trusted adult mentors and afterschool leaders to reinforce the importance of attendance.</li> <li>✓ Ensure that the curriculum includes engaging, team-based activities that students do not want to miss.</li> <li>✓ Provide academic support to students who are struggling so school becomes a place of success rather than a negative experience.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Students have chronic health or mental health issues that keep them out of school regularly.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Promote access to free and low-cost health insurance.</li> <li>✓ Create school-based health clinics.</li> <li>✓ Address environmental issues within the community (e.g., air quality, lead exposure).</li> <li>✓ Establish wellness policies that encourage healthy eating and more physical activity to reduce the negative health effects of obesity.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Students do not feel safe traveling to school.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Add sidewalks or initiate walking school buses to help children reach school safely.</li> <li>✓ Establish community watch programs and ask community police officers to increase their presence during the hour before and after school.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Parents do not trust or feel comfortable with schools.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Conduct home visits to meet parents.</li> <li>✓ Provide a school liaison to support parents and address their concerns.</li> <li>✓ Personally invite parents to engage in the school as volunteers and offer a range of options.</li> <li>✓ Offer family services or activities in the school.</li> </ul>

## Strategy V. Advocate for stronger policies and public investments

*Smart policy and strategic public investments can ensure attendance data are collected, monitored and shared on a regular basis. They also can motivate key stakeholders to work together to promote a culture of regular school attendance and intervene when chronic absence is a problem. While all levels of policy matter, what happens locally is particularly essential for ensuring steps are taken to address chronic absence. Cities can also advocate for policies and public investments that support what they know works.*

### City leaders can advocate for policies to:

1. Adopt a standard definition of chronic absence: missing 10 percent or more of school days.
2. Calculate and report on chronic absence by district, school, grade and sub-group.
3. Establish school and district attendance teams to review chronic absence and other key attendance data, including average daily attendance, truancy and satisfactory attendance (missing 5 percent or less of school).
4. Address improved attendance in school improvement plans.
5. Use the prevalence of chronic absence to identify schools in need of relevant community resources such as pre-K education, afterschool programs, health care and insurance, food and nutrition, affordable housing, free tax preparation and Earned Income Tax Credit outreach.

In addition, cities can work with schools to ensure that federal grant applications include investments in programs and practices that help remove barriers to attendance and use reductions in chronic absence as an indicator of need and a measure of success.

## Conclusion

When cities reduce chronic absence, they can improve student achievement. But the benefits of good attendance extend far beyond academic gains. It means students are engaged in school and developing a sense of persistence that will serve them well past their school years. It means teachers can teach to full classrooms without slowing down for students who miss too much school. It means lower crime rates and higher graduation rates, which in turn means fuller employment and better local economies. Improved attendance is a simple concept that everyone in the community can grasp and muster behind. City officials can and should lead the charge.





## Resources

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### Organizations

- ✓ Campaign for Grade Level Reading - This collaborative effort among foundations, children's advocates, policymakers, educators and parents aims to close ensure that every child reads proficiently by the end of third grade. The Campaign has developed a toolkit for city leaders launching their own campaigns. Four national organizations are partnering with the Campaign to help city leaders create locally owned solutions:
  - National Civic League
  - National League of Cities
  - United Way Worldwide
  - U.S. Conference of Mayors

### Key Readings

- ✓ *Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, the seminal research on early absenteeism, includes templates for examining data, assessing contributing factors and taking action in schools. [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_837.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_837.html)



Advancing Student Success By Reducing Chronic Absence

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## Authors

*Written by Hedy N. Chang and Phyllis W. Jordan. Design by Lauren Gentile.*

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## Attendance Works can:

- ✓ Provide technical assistance on developing data analyses and supporting work at the state and local levels
- ✓ Point you to experts or potential partners in your state or community
- ✓ Point you to contractors who can assist with data analyses  
Share best practices from other cities
- ✓ Provide online tools for analyzing policy, practice and opportunities
- ✓ Support coalition building and communications

If you have read this toolkit and would like additional information or help advance work on chronic absence in your own community, please complete and submit this form (need to link) so we can determine the best way to help you.

If are interested in more information about **Attendance Works**, please email [info@attendanceworks.org](mailto:info@attendanceworks.org) or visit [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org).