Incorporating Equity Measures in New State Accountability and Improvement Systems

Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism

Abstract

This policy brief is part of a larger research report, *Advancing Educational Equity for Underserved Youth: How New State Accountability Systems Can Support School Inclusion and Student Success*, that describes how ESSA provides an opportunity for states to better support historically underserved students through the thoughtful selection of specific equity measures in their accountability and improvement systems. These five measures are:

1. Reducing student suspensions and expulsions.
2. Building a positive school climate and promoting social-emotional learning.
3. Eliminating chronic absenteeism.
4. Implementing extended-year graduation rates.
5. Expanding access to a college- and career-ready curriculum.

This brief treats the research, rationale, and evidence-based interventions associated with **eliminating chronic absenteeism**.

For the full report, go to https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/advancing-educational-equity.

Introduction

New accountability policies under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) can be used to create systems that help schools develop stronger supports for historically underserved children and youth. As states work to implement ESSA and redesign accountability and improvement systems, they have an opportunity to incorporate indicators of student and school performance that can provide educators, parents, and the community with the information and incentives needed to create conditions that support greater school inclusion, and target resources to keep students in school and enable their success. ESSA requires that state accountability systems incorporate at least one indicator of school quality or student success that are annually measured and reported for all students and, separately, for each identified group of students, and used to help identify schools for intervention and support. There are many possibilities for leveraging the indicator(s) of school quality or student success to help students reach their full potential. By including rates of chronic absenteeism as an indicator, states can provide incentives for schools to engender a sense of purpose, engagement, and belonging for all children and youth that keeps them engaged in their learning, and prepares them to thrive in school and beyond.

Why This Measure Matters

Chronic absenteeism has a significant impact on student achievement and graduation rates, setting students up for failure. Ensuring that all students receive the support they need to remain present and engaged in learning throughout their k-12 experience begins with obtaining an accurate picture of how much instructional time students are losing and why.

All states collect and report data on "average daily attendance," which is based on the percentage of students in attendance out of the total enrollment on an individual school day. These data are distinct in both calculation and utility compared to "chronic absenteeism" data that are most often based on the percentage of students missing 10% or more of school days. Because different students can be absent on different days, average daily attendance data do not provide information regarding whether and which students are chronically absent. For example, a school could have an average daily attendance of 90%, yet 20% of the students at the school could be chronically absent. Because the chronically absent students are out of school on different days and data are not reported by student, this set of chronic absences would be masked by the average daily attendance data.

According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, during the 2013–14 school year:

- more than 6.8 million students—or 14% of all students—were chronically absent;
- more than 3 million high school students—or 19% of all high school students—were chronically absent; and
- rates of chronic absenteeism were higher for students of color. Compared to their White peers, American Indian and Pacific Islander students were over 50% more likely to lose three weeks of school or more, Black students were 30% more likely, and Hispanic students were 9% more likely.[1]

Chronic absenteeism negatively impacts student performance. Students who are chronically absent, on average, score lower on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) than students with better attendance, regardless of race or socioeconomic status.[2] Students who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and 1st grade are much less likely to read at grade level by the 3rd grade.[3] Students who cannot read at grade level by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school.[4] Additional studies demonstrate the connection of chronic absenteeism to low academic achievement and high dropout rates and suggest that attendance may predict a student's academic progress as effectively as test scores.[5] Students who are chronically absent are 68% less likely than other students to graduate.[6]

A study in Utah examining the impact of chronic absenteeism on graduation rates found that starting in 8th grade, a student who is chronically absent in any year is 7.4 times more likely to drop out of school than a student who was not chronically absent during any of those years.[7] Therefore, reducing the rate of chronic absenteeism is an effective early intervention strategy for improving student achievement and graduation rates. By including chronic absenteeism rates in

a state's accountability and improvement system, schools will be provided with this critical data so that they can be recognized for developing strategies to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism, thus increasing the amount of time students are engaged in learning. State accountability and improvement systems can include this indicator in evaluating school success and identifying whether schools need additional support.

Evidence-Based Strategies and Resources for Reducing Rates of Chronic Absenteeism

Research has found that school, family, and community partnership practices can significantly decrease chronic absenteeism.[8] In particular, communicating with families about attendance, celebrating good attendance with students and families, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors can measurably reduce students' chronic absenteeism from one year to the next. Also, schools that conduct a greater total number of attendance-focused activities have been found to be more likely to decrease the percentage of students who miss 20 or more days of school each year.[9] School reorganization to strengthen student-staff personal relationships can also be a productive strategy for reducing chronic absenteeism. It is also beneficial for schools and districts to constantly recognize, model, and promote good attendance, and promptly respond to initial absences; schools can do this through teachers or advisors who serve as student advocates and the first point of contact with the family, or through attendance teams composed of teachers, administrators, counselors, and sometimes parents who meet continually to analyze the data and devise solutions.[10]

Schools can also mount individually targeted efforts to understand why certain students continue to be absent, despite positive incentives and recognition. This may include attending to the factors contributing to a student's emotional and cognitive engagement, as well as health and housing issues, or other home or community factors, to gain a more complete understanding of the student. One such strategy uses student outreach efforts that include communicating to the parent and the student that the student was missed, asking the reason for nonattendance, and considering, where appropriate, intensive, individualized, and clinical interventions that may involve one-on-one services from helping professionals.[11]

A key part of the solution is also likely to be implementing data collection and analysis tools that allow educators to track and identify attendance issues in an ongoing and timely manner.

Along with reporting rates of chronic absenteeism in annual data collected by the state, districts and schools should consider data systems that allow them to access such data more frequently so that they can respond in real time.

Finally, in defining and tracking "chronic absenteeism," it would be more effective for the state to establish a consistent statewide calculation that is based on the percentage of days a student is absent while enrolled at a particular school, such as 10%, rather than a minimum number of days, such as 15 days, to allow for early intervention. This would allow districts and schools, who have access to the data more frequently than the state, to track and identify for

early intervention highly mobile students who may not have been considered chronically absent based on the total number of school days in a new school but would be considered chronically absent based on the percentage of days they have missed.

Additional evidence-based strategies to address chronic absenteeism are included in a toolkit jointly released by the U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and U.S. Department of Education, *Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism*.[12]

Endnotes

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