

How Data Can Solve the Chronic Absenteeism Crisis

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[Chronic absenteeism](#) is one of the greatest barriers to academic success, particularly for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, undocumented students, and students with disabilities. These students are more likely to face systemic inequities, such as unaddressed mental health needs, unreliable transportation, housing insecurity, and school and community violence, that make regular school attendance more difficult. Though the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) increased awareness of chronic absenteeism nationally, it has long been an issue for schools. Research consistently shows that students who are chronically absent from school are more likely to struggle [socially and academically](#) and face greater [challenges](#) after high school than their peers who attend school regularly.

Strong, transparent attendance data systems are not just an administrative tool — they can serve as a bridge of opportunity for previously “invisible students” to experience educational justice. After COVID, many states designated chronic absenteeism and related challenges a [priority](#) to assure students, their families, and stakeholders. Yet, archaic and weak attendance data management practices, including inconsistent attendance definitions, infrequent reporting of chronic absenteeism rates, and limited data disaggregation, obscure the true scope of chronic absenteeism and mask inequities experienced by our nation’s students. Timely, accurate, and disaggregated reporting of this data would create a stronger sense of urgency and help states and districts identify trends, target interventions, and respond before attendance challenges become long-term barriers to student success.

Strong data systems can also help educators understand why students are missing school. For example, by analyzing which day(s) of the week students are most likely to miss school alongside factors such as grade level, zip code, and other identifiable student characteristics, school staff can identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism and intervene before a student’s academic performance and sense of belonging are impacted, and address underlying causes rather than symptoms.

This brief outlines five strategies state leaders and policymakers can use to strengthen attendance data systems, improve transparency, and equip schools with the information they need to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve student outcomes. It also highlights practices that are worthy of state resources, investment, and implementation to support schools in addressing barriers to regular attendance.

Strategy #1: Make Chronic Absenteeism Data Public and Actionable

Too often, attendance data is inaccessible or inadequately reported, meaning only a few school or district staff can see who's missing school and understand why. Accessible chronic absenteeism data increases public awareness of what's happening in schools and encourages shared ownership to address it. When attendance data is transparent, the burden does not fall solely on schools; it enables families, community members, and local businesses to play a role in resolving chronic absenteeism.

Without publicly accessible data, schools are left solely responsible with minimal support, families are left in the dark, and state and local community stakeholders are underutilized, even though they could help address key challenges.

Data transparency is not about embarrassing or attacking a school. Instead, it helps reveal patterns and allows diverse perspectives to identify barriers, whether for individual students or for broader challenges like transportation or violence in a community. Publicly accessible data can also expose disparities experienced by many of our students and families, creating opportunities to better understand and address root causes.

State Example: Rhode Island

Rhode Island stands out as an example of how making attendance data public can drive action. The [Student Attendance Leader Board](#) is a public, real-time dashboard designed to make chronic absenteeism visible — not just for schools, but for everyone. The tool provides daily updates on student attendance across every school and district in the state. Instead of waiting until the end of the year, the tool highlights emerging attendance issues as they develop, allowing schools, families, and communities to identify patterns and respond early.

The Student Attendance Leader Board in Rhode Island exposed [attendance gaps](#) between affluent students and students from low-income backgrounds. The chronic absenteeism rate peaked at [34.1%](#) in the 2021-22 school year, which was also the height of the pandemic. The Attendance Leader Board provided clarity empowering schools to move beyond assumptions and reactive patterns to providing targeted supports, such as transportation subsidies and connections to health services, to students most in need. The state saw its first improvement in the 2022-23 school year with a drop down to [28.9%](#). Ending the following school year 2023-24 at [24.7%](#), which was a 4.2 percentage point decline. Finally, during the 2024-25 school year, the state experienced an additional 2.6 percentage point drop down to [22.1%](#). Not far from the pre-pandemic baseline of [19%](#) chronically absent. Through family engagement, publicly accessible data, and individual students' K-12 attendance history, Rhode Island achieved significant progress in reducing chronic absenteeism.

When advocates can show that chronic absenteeism is higher in certain neighborhoods, it offers strong evidence for equity-focused policy changes and targeted interventions. Families and affected communities can advocate for themselves in partnership with influential community members.

Strategy #2: Defining a “Full Day” of Attendance

Before states can address attendance challenges, they need a clear and consistent definition of what counts as a full day of school. Without a shared definition, states cannot reliably measure or meaningfully compare data across districts, identify trends, or hold schools accountable for attendance outcomes.

Currently, states and districts have a variety of ways to define a full day of attendance. Some [count students](#) as present for the full day even if they only attend a portion of the school day, while others require a minimum number of hours or instructional minutes. Some states even have different requirements for elementary and secondary schools.

Lenient or inconsistent definitions may prevent districts from accurately counting student attendance or make chronic absenteeism seem less severe than it truly is. Without a standard definition, data reliability can be compromised, and it can become challenging to target interventions to students most in need.

When districts within a state define a school day differently, a district may appear to have a lower rate of chronic absenteeism because it is easier for students to be counted as present. If District A marks students as present for the full day after two hours, and District B requires five hours or more, the state is comparing inconsistent standards, and this practice harms students.

What would a standard definition of a “full day” do for students?

A standard attendance definition would greatly benefit the students most impacted by chronic absenteeism, ensuring that data accurately identifies school communities and individuals most in need, based on a shared definition across districts. Student needs, currently masked by inconsistent “present” designations, can be properly addressed and prioritized by school districts.

Inconsistent definitions make it difficult for teachers taking attendance and confuse parents trying to understand what “present” means for their child. A standard statewide definition of attendance eliminates confusion and increases transparency. When all districts across the state use the same criteria, the data becomes more reliable and actionable.

State Example: Connecticut

Connecticut exemplifies the progress a state can make by establishing a shared definition of a full day of attendance and setting clear expectations across all districts. Though the state previously had a clear definition of a full day, it worked to clarify attendance expectations with all stakeholders through a campaign called “[School is Better with You](#).” The campaign, which started in 2024, focused on establishing clear and consistent attendance criteria. From an attendance rate of [20%](#) at the end of the 2022-23 school year, the state experienced measurable improvements: rates fell to [17.7%](#) by the end of the next year (2023-24), and further to [17.2%](#) in the following year (2024-25).

Data accuracy improved, and the increased clarity allowed districts to [target investments](#) toward the student groups facing the greatest challenges in achieving regular attendance. Specifically, the [Learner Engagement and Attendance Program](#) (LEAP), is credited with supporting students of color and multilingual learners through home visits. In some cases, schools saw a 15-20% increase in student attendance. While no single strategy can be credited with Connecticut's progress, this is an example of how common standards and clear expectations, combined with intentional investment, can position a state for improvement.

Strategy #3: Disaggregate and Cross-Tabulate Data

The real value of attendance data emerges when it is disaggregated to reveal which students are missing school. Cross-tabulation takes analysis a step further by scanning across multiple student characteristics at once to identify students most at risk, enabling targeted school intervention. These strategies transform attendance monitoring from a routine administrative task into a powerful tool for advancing education equity, a goal that requires looking beyond overall numbers. Knowing that a certain percentage of students are missing school raises concerns, but it does not explain who is absent, why they are absent, or the overlapping factors and patterns.

[Disaggregating](#) and [cross-tabulating](#) student data uncovers equity gaps that may otherwise go unnoticed. By analyzing student data and characteristics across groups such as race, income level, disability status, English learner status, and housing status, schools can identify which student populations are most affected by chronic absenteeism.

For example, students from low-income backgrounds may struggle with unreliable transportation or caregiving responsibilities, while students with disabilities may be absent more often due to health-related needs or limited access to appropriate support. Multilingual learners may face communication barriers and homelessness and may also be considered low income. Without language-responsive practices that connect school and home, students may feel disconnected from classroom instruction. Without disaggregated data and cross-tabulation, these patterns remain hidden, making it difficult for schools to design targeted, effective interventions. When practitioners understand who is most affected and why, they are better equipped to partner with students and families, address underlying challenges, and promote consistent attendance for all.

State Example: California

California demonstrates the power of disaggregated and cross-tabulated data in driving [targeted investments](#) to improve chronic absenteeism. By analyzing attendance data across multiple student characteristics, including multilingual status, zip code, and income status, the state was able to identify multilingual learners as a student group disproportionately affected by high rates of chronic absence.

In response, California strategically invested \$4.1 billion in community schools within neighborhoods predominantly serving Black students and multilingual learners. As a result, [community schools](#) achieved a 30% reduction in chronic absenteeism by providing wraparound services such as health clinics, after-school programs, family and community engagement, and dedicated staff for program coordination. This [strategic investment](#) ensured the holistic needs of students and their families were met, leading to improved regular attendance.

Strategy #4: Establish Centralized Data Monitoring & Early Warning Indicator (EWI) Systems

Centralized data systems can support states in improving their data collection, analysis, and responsiveness. A shared system for collecting and monitoring statewide data creates an opportunity to pivot from a flawed approach to one that improves attendance outcomes for all districts. When statewide monitoring systems are designed to identify early warning signs of chronic absenteeism, schools are empowered to be proactive about addressing student attendance.

Oftentimes, students show signs of becoming chronically absent, but no one notices until they have missed numerous days of school or drop out altogether. Early warning indicators (EWI's) are signals that are tracked and measured alongside other metrics to identify students who show early signs of being disengaged or needing additional supports to fully engage in the classroom.

When a state allows school districts to use different systems, smaller or under-resourced districts may lack the real-time visibility needed to effectively support struggling schools and hold themselves accountable. A statewide attendance monitoring system offers many advantages. First, data from all districts can be found in one place, standardizing data collection. States can also build user-friendly dashboards and analytical tools that allow educators and leaders to glean clearer insights from data. Centralized systems also support state-level decision-making and accountability by monitoring attendance initiatives, tracking the effectiveness of investments, and identifying patterns for similar demographics across districts. These centralized methods allow a state to share solutions with advocates, policymakers, and district and school leaders, and replicate successful strategies.

Recovering from chronic absence requires intense intervention. And often, when students become chronically absent, schools are left wondering why they waited so long to address the issue.

With these systems in place, schools are not only made aware of concerning attendance patterns but they can also alert students and families about students' current status and collaborate to develop a support plan. The purpose of these systems is to address barriers to regular attendance, not to rely on punitive practices, such as suspensions, which do not address the underlying issues.

A good EWI system will not only alert the school before a student becomes chronically absent, but the tool should also provide suggested [interventions](#) based upon available data and a conversation with the student and their family to identify potential courses of action.

State Example: Michigan

Michigan's Early Warning Indicator System (EWI) tool monitors attendance, behavior, and academic performance from the state level down to individual students. Providing educators with a [dashboard](#) that displays the early warning signs of disengagement allows state and district staff to provide analysis and guidance to coordinate supports and resources between schools and families. Proactive responses to attendance challenges give administrators time to implement effective interventions and actions. Facing a chronic absence rate of [38.5%](#) in the 2021-22 school year, Michigan leveraged its EWI system to determine the student groups most chronically absent.

Data [analysis](#) revealed that students from low-income backgrounds, Black students, and students with disabilities had the highest rates of absenteeism. Michigan then implemented its multitiered systems of support process to ensure students received the needed wraparound supports, such as mental health services, home stability resources, and transportation. By focusing on the students most in need, the chronic absenteeism rate in Michigan improved to [27.9%](#) by the end of the 2024-25 school year.

Strategy #5: Collect Data From Districts Frequently

Frequent data collection transforms attendance monitoring from a reactive reporting exercise into a tool that can be used for continuous improvement. Traditional data collection practices, where districts submit attendance data once or twice per year, do not provide the same opportunity for real-time analysis and intervention. Typically, by the time chronic absenteeism is identified among many students, the year is over, making it more difficult to implement effective supports.

When districts submit their attendance data to the state on a monthly or quarterly basis, there is a greater opportunity for data analysis and targeted improvement, as well as opportunities to coach and train staff on how to best support and reengage students. This frequency of collection creates opportunities for true real-time intervention.

State Example: Rhode Island

Rhode Island is a strong example of frequent data collection through its requirement that districts submit attendance [data](#) monthly. While Rhode Island is known for its daily attendance dashboard, which provides real-time visibility for school and district-level responses, the monthly data submission to the state serves as a tool for continuous improvement that creates structured checkpoints for state-level analysis that can drive systemic improvement. This approach has changed how the state and districts respond to attendance challenges and patterns. Rhode Island has shared that monthly data submission and review provide an opportunity for intentional feedback and support based on [data analysis](#), leading to greater reductions in chronic absenteeism.

What Advocates and Policymakers Can Do

Adopting equitable attendance policies and data systems is not just about technical upgrades; it is about ensuring states are positioned to respond to invisible challenges and barriers to regular attendance. Advocates can push states to use chronic absenteeism as an indicator instead of a year-end report card. This looks like pushing for real-time data dashboards, increasing tools for public access to attendance, developing clear attendance definitions and tools that clarify the best intervention strategies based upon student, and family needs. State leaders and policymakers must recognize that prioritizing and investing in the internal structures governing reporting and transparency sets the stage for continuous improvement. If this happens, states will see reductions in chronic absenteeism and are likely to see lasting progress.