



National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

Big IDEAs: Dropout Prevention Strategies Newsletter

September 2013

In This Issue:

Chronic Absence: An
Early Warning Indicator
You Need to Notice

NDPC-SD Highlights:

Increasing Attendance in
Clay County, West
Virginia

Attendance
Extravaganza in
Madison County,
Georgia

Cracking Down on
Truancy in Boone
County, West Virginia

Upcoming Events

The Big IDEA:

September is Attendance Awareness Month! Nationally, the evidence is mounting that students who are chronically absent - missing 10% or more of the school year for *any* reason - are less likely to read well by the end of third grade and are more prone to drop out of high school. Further, rates of chronic absence for students with IEPs tend to be 5% to 10% higher than for those without IEPs.

The good news is this is a problem we can solve!

**From Research to
Practice:**

**Bridging
the Gap**

Resource Center

Useful Websites

Contact NDPC-SD:

Toll Free: 866-745-5641
TDD: 866-212-2775
Fax: 864-656-0136

NDPCSD-L@clemson.edu
www.ndpc-sd.org

EDC Learn
trans
lives.



The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, funded by the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), works in collaboration with [Education Development Center, Inc. \(EDC\)](#), and the National Dropout Prevention

Chronic Absence: An Early Warning Indicator You Need to Notice

By Cecelia Leong, Associate Director,
Attendance Works



What happens when students miss too many days of school? How many days are too many? Most importantly, how can communities help by improving attendance policies and practices that provide more opportunities for students to learn and, eventually, graduate?

These are questions we think about every day at [Attendance Works](#).

As more researchers investigate these questions, the evidence is mounting that students who are chronically absent - missing 10% or more of the school year for *any* reason - are less likely to read well by the end of third grade and are more prone to drop out of high school. Nationwide, as many as 10% to 15% of students are chronically absent, meaning 7.5 million students are missing nearly a month of school every year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Certain types of students - particularly students with disabilities - record even higher rates of chronic absence. While there is no national data on chronic absence among students with disabilities, in districts where Attendance Works has worked, the rates tend to be 5% to 10% higher for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) than for those without. Absence patterns also vary by type of disability. For example, the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) found that students with intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities were absent more days per month than students with other disabilities.

When a student is chronically absent, it's a clear warning sign that something is going on that parents,

Center at [Clemson University](#).
*Under Co-operative Agreement
H326Q030003

[The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs \(OSEP\)](#) is committed to positive results for children with disabilities. The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities is an [IDEAs that Work project](#).
Project Officer: Dr. Selete Avoke



[Join Our Mailing List!](#)

teachers, and others need to address. Like the "check engine" indicator on your car's dashboard, chronic absence is a signal you shouldn't ignore. The longer you wait to respond, the greater the chance of negative impacts and the more costly the interventions.

Does your community have an early warning indicator?

Despite its importance, chronic absence from classes or school is often overlooked. Most schools track average daily attendance, or how many kids show up every day. They also track truancy or unexcused absences. But few include excused absences in the count to see how many students are missing 10% of the school year.

The first step, then, is to check and see if your school or district measures chronic absence as well as truancy. If not, Attendance Works offers a free set of tools to facilitate calculating chronic absence and determining the absenteeism patterns in your community. These tools can show you whether chronic absence is a problem, for which schools, in which grades, and for which sub-groups of students. To [obtain these free tools](#), contact [us](#) at Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org).

We are also testing a new version of the District Attendance Tracking Tool (DATT) that disaggregates attendance data for students with disabilities by the 14 disability categories defined by IDEA and are interested in beta-testing it with a small number of districts.

Take the time to understand the reasons why students are absent.

Once you have your warning light, you still need to figure out what it means. The key to creating a comprehensive and effective set of interventions is understanding why students are missing too much school.

Too often, we jump to solutions that do not address the root causes for a student's absences. For example, a school may offer prizes for students with good or improved attendance, but those incentives will have no impact on a child who has asthma or other health problems that have not been treated. Or you may put all your efforts into truancy prevention and miss the kindergarten students whose parents

allow them to stay home for minor complaints because they do not understand that missing even 2-3 days every month can keep their child from learning to read.

In general, we see three broad reasons for student absences:

- 1) Myths include many parents' beliefs that absences are only a problem if they are unexcused, consecutive, or occurring in the older grades. Educating parents allows them to make more informed choices.
- 2) Barriers such as lack of access to health care, poor transportation, or no safe path to school are often beyond a parent or a caregiver's control and require schools and agencies to support families.
- 3) Aversion occurs when the student may be struggling academically due to an undiagnosed learning disability, lack of engaging instruction, teasing and bullying, or ineffective school discipline. Addressing these concerns requires school action (see graphic below on How Schools Can Help).

What can we do to help students improve attendance?

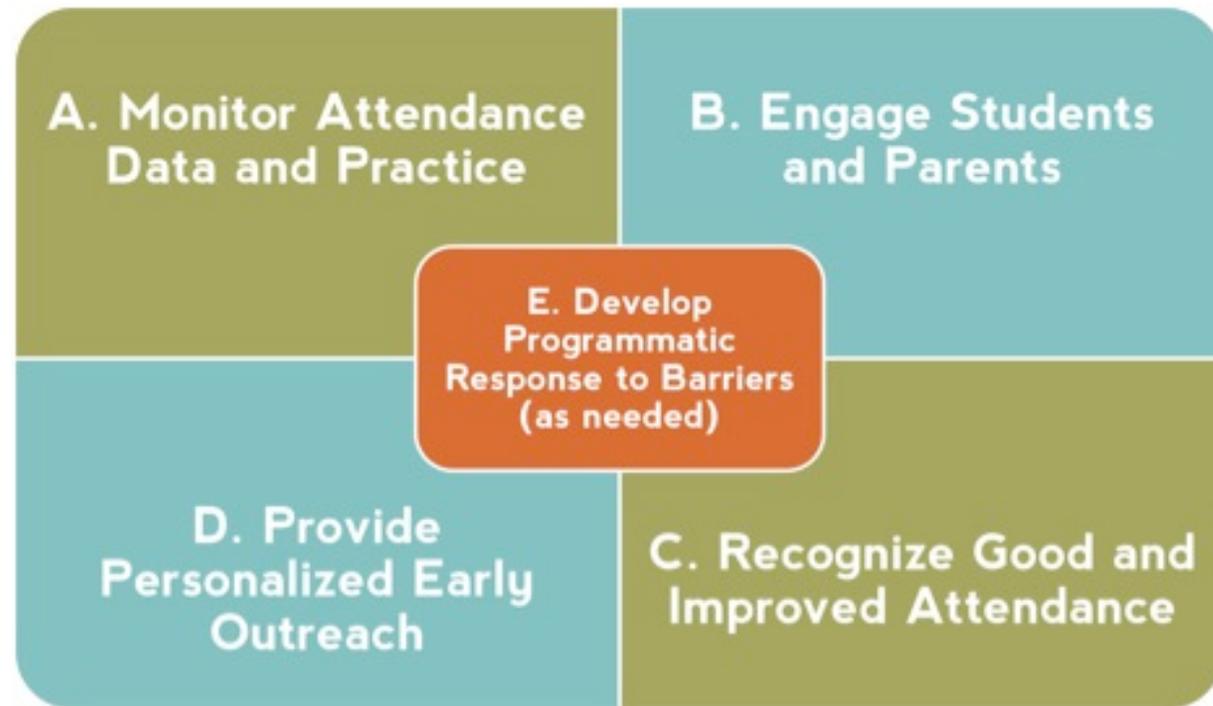
Attendance Works recommends that parents, schools, and communities work together to create a comprehensive system that addresses the many reasons students have poor attendance.

Parents can help in a variety of ways, ranging from creating routines that support their children getting to school on time every day, to asking for better attendance data from their school or district. See our [Bringing Attendance Home toolkit](#) and [handouts](#) for [parents of young children](#) and [parents of secondary school students](#).

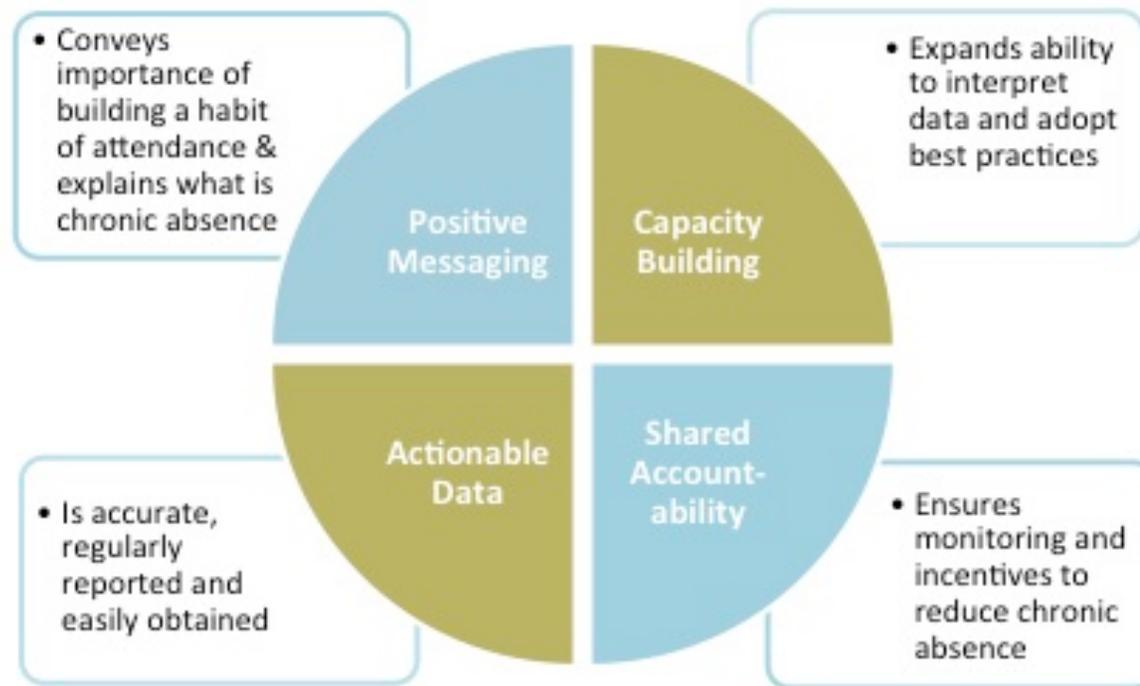
If your child has disabilities, be sure you understand what the law says about discipline, suspensions, bullying, and access to school and out-of-school programs. The Maryland Disability Law Center, for

example, publishes a helpful parent [handbook](#) which addresses such issues. Student attendance may also be discussed and goals set during the regular IEP process.

How Schools Can Help:



How School Districts Can Help:



Together, parents, schools, and communities can improve student attendance. The good news is that chronic absence, while pervasive, is a problem we can solve. Urge your school or district to get involved with [Attendance Awareness Month](#) in September or communicate [key messages](#) about the impact of school attendance throughout the year.

References:

Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *Chronic absenteeism: Summarizing what we know from nationally available data*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.



Increasing Attendance in Clay County, West Virginia

**By Kelly Duffield, School Psychologist,
Clay County Schools**

Clay County is a small district in West Virginia with one high school. Clay County is one of 13 West Virginia counties that has been receiving intensive technical assistance from the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities since 2011. In order to increase attendance at the high school in Clay County, the school's Link UP advisory program was expanded so that advisors could meet with students on a daily, rather than a monthly, basis. Advisors have caseloads of 10-15 students whom they meet with four days a week, for 20 minutes a day. Advisors for students with disabilities are special education teachers. The advisory program utilizes the West Virginia Department of Education's LINKS (Learning Individualized Needs Knowledge and Skills) curriculum, which involves lessons that enhance academic, career, and personal-social development. The name "Link UP" was adopted to signify the linking of each student with a caring adult who would remain with that student for the duration of high school.

According to the Center for Mental Health at Schools at UCLA, attendance should be addressed

through proactive interventions. This means it is important to attend to situations associated with increased absences, such as the transition between middle and high school, before they become problems for students. In order to create a smooth transition for students in Clay County, the high school holds a Freshman Orientation Day at which 8th grade students meet their future advisors and get a tour of the school while in their Link Up groups. They are also introduced to different teachers who talk to them about the various courses, and explain the various career clusters, academic clubs, sports, and additional extracurricular activities offered at the high school. In this way, familiarity with the people and culture of the high school is established before students make the transition to their freshman year.

Another change that typically accompanies students' transition to high school is a decrease in the level of parental involvement. Increasing parents' involvement in school has been associated with students' improved attendance and academic performance (Adams & Christenson, 2000). In order to increase parental involvement, Clay County High School holds informational town hall meetings at the high school on the topics of dropout prevention, drug awareness, and school safety procedures. Speakers who are experts in the field are invited to speak and participate in panel discussions. In order to encourage parent attendance, meetings are held on the same night as Parent Teacher Conferences and parents are offered incentives for attending. At the most recent meeting, a free family portrait was offered as an incentive. It is important to make sure that parents understand that their participation in school events is welcome and expected. Extending invitations and offering incentives for participating can be effective motivators for parents who rarely attend school events.

Through a partnership between the Clay County Board of Education and the Clay County Bank, free tickets for Friday night football games are donated for students with perfect attendance. Students who attend school every day for the week are given a free ticket to the Friday night game. As a result of these proactive measures to increase high school attendance, Clay County now has the second highest attendance rate in West Virginia!

References:

Adams, K. S., & Christenson, S. L. (2000). Trust and the family-school relationship examination of parent-teacher differences in elementary and secondary grades. *Journal of School Psychology, 38*(5), 477-497.

Attendance Extravaganza in Madison County, Georgia



By Jennifer Leahy, GraduateFIRST Collaboration Coach

Graduation Coach, Renee McCannon, made it her mission to improve attendance at Madison County Middle School in Northeast Georgia. With the help of her GraduateFIRST* team, she planned and

implemented an attendance incentive program that resulted in improved attendance school-wide. The most dramatic gain was evidenced for the Students with Disabilities subgroup where the percent of students absent 15 or more days decreased from 22.6% to 13.4% in one year's time.

The school took many steps to see such gains. They began an "Attendance Campaign" that included posting flyers in the community about the importance of school attendance, discussing individual student attendance patterns with parents at conferences, and ensuring there was a phone call to parents each time a child was absent.

In addition, students with the most significant attendance problems attended an assembly regarding the importance of regular school attendance. Contracts for improving attendance were developed between these students, the school, and parents. Attendance was closely monitored and bi-weekly incentives were awarded when improvements were made.

In an effort to encourage school attendance and recognize those students who regularly had good attendance, the team also planned an Attendance Extravaganza. All students who have no more than 9 absences and no more than 9 unexcused tardies/leave earlies for the year participate in this day of food and fun, including bounce houses, games and athletic competitions, dancing, and door prizes. The "Extravaganza" is staffed by parent and community volunteers and relies almost entirely on community donations. The Cattlemen's Association donates and grills hotdogs and hamburgers for the 800 to 900 students who participate in the day. Additional donations from local businesses and community groups include paper goods, cotton candy, drinks, and snacks. The Attendance Extravaganza has become an annual tradition that is enjoyed by students and community in this small, rural town.

The team at Madison County Middle School identified several key steps that contributed to their success:

- Review data and develop specific goal(s)

- Communicate message
- Solicit community support
- Identify students for intervention(s)
- Appoint leader
- Review attendance data regularly
- Celebrate success

For questions regarding the attendance program at Madison County Middle School, contact Renee McCannon: rmaccannon@madison.k12.ga.us

*For more information on Georgia's GraduateFIRST program, please visit <http://www.graduatefirst.org/>.

Cracking Down on Truancy in Boone County, West Virginia

**By Sheila Paitsel, DEC Coordinator,
Boone County Schools**

During the 2011-2012 school year, one in three students in West Virginia had five or more unexcused absences from school (Paulhus, 2012). It is known that students who miss excessive amounts of school are more likely to drop out. To slow the tide of this epidemic, several counties in West Virginia have created truancy diversion programs. Although the models are all slightly different, they typically involve school-community partnerships, particularly between the school counties and the court system. The initiatives in Boone County Schools serve as just one example of a successful model in truancy reduction in West Virginia.

Boone County Schools (BCS) is a small, mostly rural school district in southern West Virginia made

up of a preK-12 student population of approximately 4,500 students. Under West Virginia Code §18-8-3, every county is mandated to have a director of school attendance to work with teachers, families, and students to ensure that students are attending school regularly. The attendance director of Boone County Schools had discussed on many occasions the need for additional leverage in implementing the county's attendance policy. In 2011, a partnership with the Supreme Court of West Virginia enabled the hiring of a countywide truancy diversion officer. The circuit judge, who was also a parent in the school system and was knowledgeable about the social problems of the area, was a partner in addressing the truancy concerns of the district and took the initiative in pursuing the hiring of the truancy diversion officer. The role of the officer includes implementing sanctions and working proactively with students and families to address barriers to school attendance. She meets with students in danger of violating the attendance policy to educate them on the ramifications of missing more school and provides direct assistance to parents who cannot get their children to go to school. She informs parents about programs and services available to their children, such as counseling or after-school tutoring, and makes referrals when necessary.

It is often assumed that if parents let their children skip school, they do not value education. However, there are many reasons students may not attend, which, according to Paulhus (2012) include parents not being notified of their children's absences, and the school not properly addressing the needs of children with disabilities. Previously in Boone County, parents of children with truancy issues were charged and fined, but the problem continued despite court appearances and probationary periods. With the addition of the truancy diversion officer, students in grades 6-12 who cannot be forced to school by their parents can be charged as juveniles thereby alleviating their parents from bearing sole responsibility for the problem. Juvenile court was also moved to the high schools with a full staff including the circuit judge, bailiff, court reporter, prosecuting attorney, and other support staff. The presence of juvenile court in the high schools serves as a reminder for students of the importance and seriousness of attendance. These measures have resulted in a 3% increase in high school attendance since their inception, which indicates that they are a first step in the right direction.

Reference:

Paulhus, E. (2012). *Afterschool programs in West Virginia improving the lives of the state's children*. West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy and the West Virginia Statewide Afterschool Network Director. Retrieved from http://www.wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Afterschool_Report_12.12.12.pdf

Upcoming Events

Conferences

[25th Annual National Dropout Prevention Network Conference](#)
November 3-6, 2013, Atlanta, Georgia

[10th Annual International Bullying Prevention Conference](#)
November 10-12, 2013, Nashville, Tennessee

[Division on Career Development and Transition \(DCDT\)
17th DCDT International Conference](#)
November 14-16, 2013, Williamsburg, Virginia

[2014 Special & General Education Conference](#)
March 5, 6 & 7, 2014, Seattle, Washington

[CEC 2014 Convention & Expo](#)
April 9-12, 2014, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Save the Date:

[National Family Engagement Conference](#)

April 8-9, 2014, Cincinnati, Ohio
For more information, [contact Janet Brown](#).

Resource Center

Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School -
<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/188947.pdf>

Truancy: A Serious Problem for Students, Schools, and Society -
http://www.lepnet.sparcc.org/hck/cgi-bin/article_display_page.pl?id=vswartz&ar=10

School Connectedness and Meaningful Student Participation
<http://www.wingsforkids.org/files/School%20Connectedness%20and%20Meaningful%20Participation.pdf>

Youth Out of School: Linking Absence to Delinquency
<http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancyPreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/YouthOutofSchoolLinkingAbsencetoDelinquency.pdf>

Useful Websites

The Vera Institute of Justice

Enter in Search box:

- *Approaches to Truancy Prevention*

National Center for School Engagement

Enter in Search box:

- *Guidelines for a National Definition of Truancy and Calculating Rates*
- *School Policies that Engage Students and Families*

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

Enter in Search box:

- *Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research to Practice*

Spread the News

We encourage the distribution of our eNewsletter.

Big IDEAs may be distributed freely as long as it is not altered in any way, distribution is without charge, and all copies retain the NDPC-SD copyright notice.

Questions, comments, or suggestions?

Email: NDPCSD-L@clemson.edu

Visit our website at: ndpc-sd.org