

# Attendance in the Early Grades: Why it Matters for Reading

*A Research Brief*

February 2014



Our nation is facing a crisis in early literacy: fully two-thirds of U.S. fourth graders are not reading proficiently, national assessments show. The numbers are even more dire for students from low-income families: 80 percent of them haven't reached proficiency.<sup>1</sup> Amid the search for solutions — whether through better instruction, improved curriculum or third-grade retention policies — educators and families often overlook the potential to raise achievement by improving student attendance. Most recognize that students don't learn as much when they miss too much school, but few realize how many students are at risk academically in the early grades due to absenteeism or how quickly absences can add up to too much lost instructional time. A growing body of research documents how many youngsters are chronically absent, meaning they miss 10 percent or more of the school year due to excused or unexcused absences. The research also shows how these missed days as early as preschool translate into weaker reading skills.

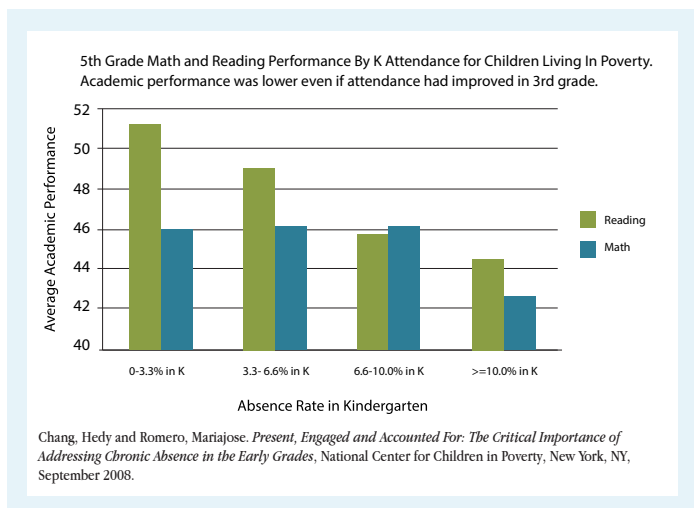
The research findings make a clear case for engaging families to reduce chronic absenteeism. Good attendance habits begin at home with the right messages from parents and caregivers. Even those parents who can't read or speak English fluently can help their children learn to read simply by getting them to school everyday. Schools and organizations that work with families can encourage better attendance by getting to know students and families, ensuring parents know the importance of attendance, offering a rich and engaging school experience and helping families overcome barriers to getting children to class. Schools can also review their data and evaluate their culture to ensure they are engaging both students and families.

Among the findings are:

- One in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students nationally are chronically absent, missing nearly a month of school. Emerging research shows even higher rates among preschoolers.
- These early absences correlate with reading difficulties and poor attendance patterns in later years. One California study found that only 17 percent of students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade were reading proficiently in third grade, compared to 64 percent of those with good attendance.
- The effects of poor attendance are particularly pronounced among low-income children, who need more time in the classroom to master reading and are less likely to have access to resources outside of school to help them catch up. Unfortunately, low-income children are four times more likely to be chronically absent.
- Students can begin to reverse their academic difficulties if they improve their attendance.
- Parents are often unaware of the corrosive effects of absenteeism and how quickly absences add up to academic trouble in the early grades. Some face challenges with health, transportation or housing that contribute to absences.
- Attendance rates are better in schools where parents feel welcomed and engaged and where they trust their children are safe.

## I. Literacy and Attendance: The Research Case

For many years, educators, researchers and policymakers focused on attendance chiefly in secondary school, viewing truancy or unexcused absence as an indicator of student disengagement and eventual dropout. This changed in 2008 when the National Center for Children in Poverty published a report detailing the extent of absenteeism — for excused and unexcused reasons — in the elementary grades. In the report, *Present, Engaged and Accounted For*, Hedy Chang and Mariajose Romero used data from a nationally representative data set to document that **one in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students misses at least 10 percent of the school year**. All of the students who were chronically absent in kindergarten demonstrated weaker reading skills in first grade, with Latino children suffering the worst effects. Further analysis of test scores through fifth grade showed that the ill effects lingered for low-income children even if their attendance had improved in third grade.<sup>ii</sup>



A 2011 California study connected early attendance with third-grade reading proficiency, which is considered a key indicator of future academic success. Applied Survey Research found that 64 percent of the students with good attendance in kindergarten and first grade scored proficient on the state's third-grade English language arts test. That compares to 41 percent of students who were chronically absent one of those years. For students chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade, only 17 percent scored proficient.<sup>iii</sup> These trends reflect the increased emphasis on literacy skills in the early grades. From 1998 to 2006, kindergarten teachers reported devoting 25 percent more

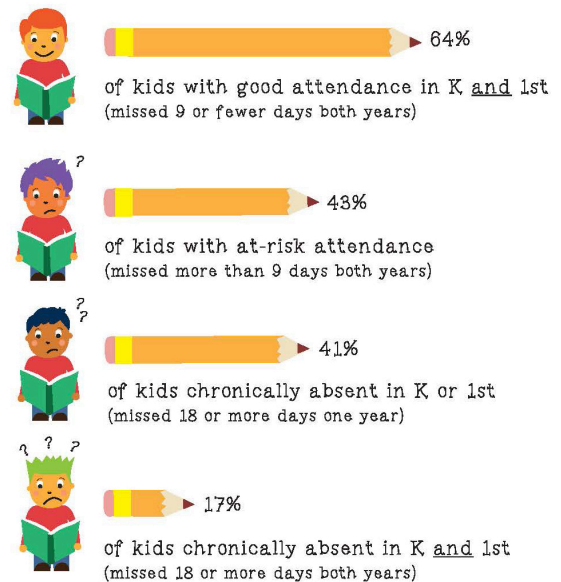
time to teaching early literacy, up from 5.5 hours to seven hours per week, according to the working paper recently released by the University of Virginia.<sup>iv</sup>

### Why It Matters

If children don't show up for school regularly, they miss out on fundamental reading and math skills and the chance to build a habit of good attendance that will carry them into college and careers.

Preliminary data from a California study found that children who were chronically absent in kindergarten and 1st grade were far less likely to read proficiently at the end of 3rd grade.

#### Who Can Read on Grade Level After 3rd Grade?<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> *Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes*, Applied Survey Research, May 2011.

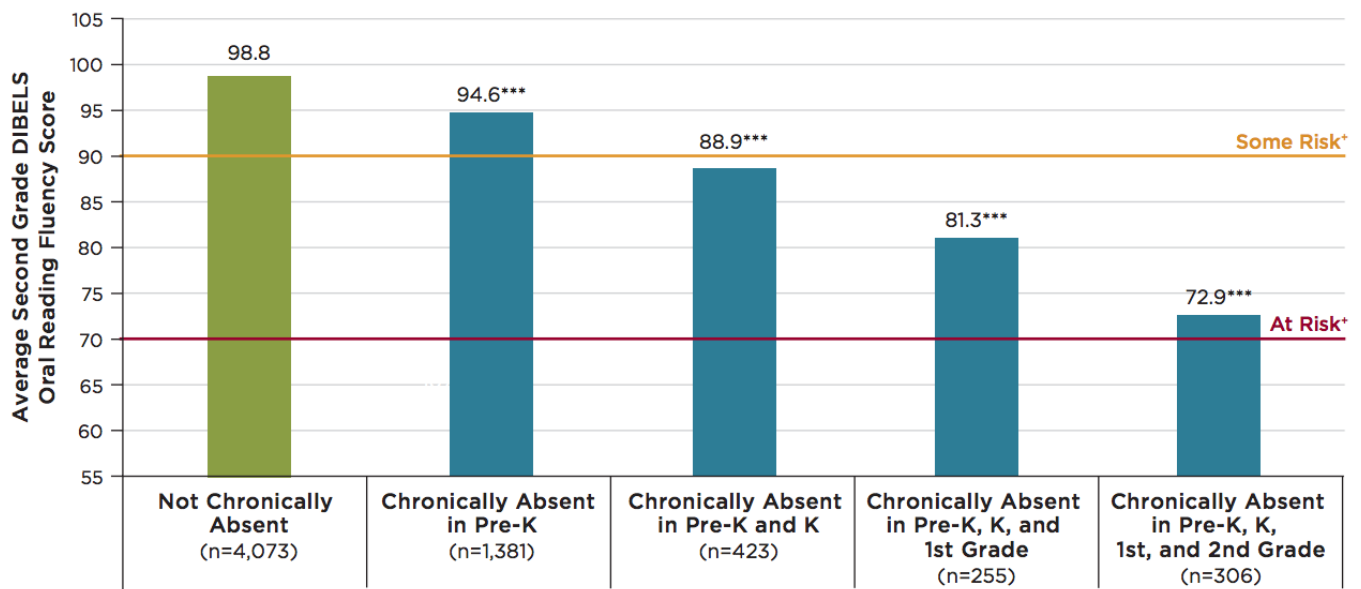
Missing this critical literacy instruction in kindergarten and first grade has more dire consequences for children from low-income families than their more affluent peers, according to a 2010 study by Douglas P. Ready. Tapping a national data base, Ready found that chronically absent children gained 14 percent fewer literacy skills in kindergarten than those who attended more regularly. The negative impact, though, is 75 percent greater for a low-income student in kindergarten than for more affluent peers and 40 percent greater in first grade.<sup>v</sup> Ready's study, as well as the Chang & Romero analysis, showed that poor children are far more likely to be chronically absent.

**The effects of absenteeism on literacy skills start before kindergarten, two recent studies show.** The University of Chicago Consortium of Chicago School Research followed 25,000 3- and 4-year-olds served by Chicago Public Schools' school-based preschool programs and found that nearly half of 3-year-olds and more than one-third of 4-year-olds missed at least 10 percent of the school year. Chronic absence for 4-year-old students correlated with weaker kindergarten readiness scores, including letter recognition and pre-literacy scores. The effects were particularly pronounced for the children who arrived at preschool with the weakest skills. Once again, these are the students who were more likely to be chronically absent, the 2013 study found. And for every year a student is chronically absent, his or her chance for reading success diminished.<sup>vi</sup> The Baltimore Education Research Consortium also focused on prekindergarten and kindergarten attendance and followed these young students over time. The 2012 study found that students with low

attendance in both pre-K and kindergarten often continue to have low attendance, are more likely to be retained by third grade and on average have lower academic outcomes than peers with better attendance.<sup>vii</sup>

**The good news is that when students attend school regularly, they can see outsized literacy gains.** Ready's study showed that low-income kids who attended regularly appeared to benefit from the instruction more than the higher income peers. They gained 8 percent more literacy skills in kindergarten and nearly 7 percent more in first grade. This narrows the reading gap between rich and poor by nearly a third.<sup>viii</sup> Likewise the Chicago research showed that students who arrived at pre-K with the weakest reading skills and attended regularly saw the biggest gains.<sup>ix</sup> And when chronically absent students improve their attendance, they can get back on track academically, the Baltimore research found.<sup>x</sup>

**The more years students are chronically absent in the early years, the more at-risk they are for needing reading interventions by the end of second grade.**



Ehrlich, Stacy B. et al. *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences: Research Summary*. September 2013.

## II. Family Attitudes on Attendance

Parents and family caregivers are critical partners in ensuring that children get to school on time and every day. But sometimes even well-intentioned parents don't fully understand the negative consequences of absences, particularly in the early grades when many assume not much "learning" is taking place. Other times they face real barriers to getting their children to class. While illness is a big factor in the early grades, the research shows that parental attitudes toward attendance and the comfort level with the local school can affect absenteeism rates.

**Parents who believe attendance is very important tend to have children with better attendance rates,** the Chicago study found. Interviews with families showed those who recognized the importance had children with absenteeism rates averaging 7.5 percent. Those who didn't think attendance mattered saw an average 13.2 percent absenteeism rate for their children. A series of Ad Council focus groups with parents of middle-school students revealed some surprising attitudes. While parents were concerned about their children skipping school without permission,

they were not as worried about excused absences. In fact some saw giving their child a day off from school as a show of affection.

**Attendance improves when parents believe schools are safe, trust the teachers and feel connected to the elementary school,** studies show. In addition to the Chicago research, an analysis of the Los Angeles Unified School District's Attendance Improvement Program for kindergartners identified these common characteristics among the most successful programs:

- greater levels of parent engagement;
- a strength-based approach with more positive perceptions of parents and higher expectations of their students and parents;
- a shared belief that everyone had a role in improving attendance and should work together;
- and deeper levels of commitment to program implementation and delving into the causes of absence.

## III. Helping Families Improve Attendance

Schools and community organizations working with parents can take several approaches to help families improve attendance and, with it, reading skills.

### 1. Inform parents early and often about the value of good attendance

Connect with parents during the summer and throughout the school year about the value of good attendance and let them know that you are there to partner with them every day. We know from experience that attendance improves when a school community offers a warm and welcoming environment that engages students and families and offers enriching learning opportunities.

A key component of the engagement is helping families learn about the positive effects of good attendance and

learn about the positive effects of good attendance and the consequences of chronic absenteeism on realizing their hopes and dreams for their children. Parents may not know that even excused absences, if allowed to accumulate, can cause their children to fall behind. Nor do they realize that building the habit of attendance in the early grades can influence their children's chances of graduating from high school. Send home information highlighting both the value of attendance and the consequences of poor attendance.

Talk to parents about when absences become a problem. Starting in early education programs along with kindergarten, too many absences can cause children to fall behind in school. Missing 10 percent of school days (or about 18 days) can make it harder for children to learn to read. Emphasize that students can fall behind if they

miss just a day or two every few weeks, and that being late to school can also cause a child to miss out on critical learning opportunities and may lead to poor attendance.

Additionally, absences can affect the whole classroom if the teacher has to slow down learning to help children catch up on missed material. So that even children who attend regularly can be adversely affected by other children's chronic absence.

Encourage parents to work with the teacher when their child is absent to ensure he or she has an opportunity to make up missed class assignments.

## 2. Offer incentives to recognize parents' efforts to build a culture of attendance

One strategy for improving attendance is engaging students, parents, educators and community members in a campaign that offers positive rewards for getting to school on-time.

Incentives should be part of creating a school-wide culture of attendance accompanied by a deep commitment to ensuring students are engaged in the classroom once they show up. Attendance incentives are most effective when they are part of a comprehensive approach that includes outreach to families with more significant challenges to attendance.

Incentives don't need to be costly. Simple rewards — recognition from peers and the school through certificates or assemblies, extra recess time, homework passes or even dancing in the hallways — go a long way toward motivating students. Teachers can solicit ideas from students about what they consider a meaningful incentive.

Key considerations for an incentive program include:

- Let children know they were missed. A powerful strategy for encouraging better attendance is letting children know that their absence was noticed and their classmates and teachers hope they will be back in class soon.
- Interclass competition can be a strong motivator. The sense of competition between classes (with rewards like a party for the class with the best monthly attendance) can encourage students to feel accountable to each other for attending class.
- Avoid recognizing only perfect attendance. Perfect attendance is not always the goal because it is not wise to encourage children to come to school when they're sick. Students should be rewarded for improved and good attendance, not just perfect records. Offering weekly perfect attendance awards can allow students to still have a chance to succeed the next week if they are absent. Remember incentives can be as simple and inexpensive as the opportunity to sit with a friend of your choice at lunchtime or to have your picture posted on a wall of fame.
- Reward timeliness, not just showing up to school. Since tardiness also has an adverse impact on learning, many schools count only on-time attendance toward rewards.
- Ensure families know about the incentive program and the importance of attendance for academic success, as well as the school policies and consequences for poor attendance. Sanctions should never be used without incentives.
- Offer incentives for families, not just students. Often, families appreciate access to resources such as food baskets and transportation passes.
- Implement incentives school-wide. To foster a culture of attendance, every classroom needs to participate.

## 3. Identify barriers to attendance and partner with parents to alleviate them

Schools, after-school programs and community organizations should establish and maintain ongoing two-way communication with parents to help identify barriers — such as transportation issues, job loss, unstable housing arrangements or health concerns.

Staying plugged in with parents and the barriers they and their children may be facing requires consistent tracking in school so that we know which students are missing and why. Schools should:

- Invest in accurate collection and entry of attendance data into student data systems.
- Calculate and analyze chronic absence and good attendance to discern patterns for students and classrooms.
- Invest in professional development to help teachers and administrators understand chronic absence.
- Reach out to frequently absent students to find out in a supportive manner why they are missing school and what would help them attend more regularly.

These efforts give school administrators and teachers the data they need to identify which students and families might benefit from deeper engagement and support to help alleviate barriers to attendance. To the extent possible, they should share this data with other agencies and community organizations.

They can also encourage parents to help each other. Parents need to know they can reach out for help when they are experiencing tough times that may make it difficult to get their children to school. They may not realize that other parents, teachers, principals, social workers, school nurses, after-school providers, faith-based organizations or community agencies may be able to help with problem-solving or connecting them to needed resources. For example, parents can be encouraged to coordinate carpools, walking school buses and child care arrangements to help ensure more children are getting to school.

#### **4. Help parents recognize what they can do to foster good school attendance for their children**

Emphasize to parents that establishing consistent good habits at home can put children on the right track to good school attendance. Parents can:

- Set a regular bed time and morning routine.
- Lay out clothes and pack backpacks the night before.
- Know the first day of school and make sure their child has the required immunizations and materials
- Introduce their child to his or her teachers and classmates before school starts to help with the transition.
- Avoid letting their child stay home unless he or she is truly sick. Advise parents that sometimes complaints of a stomachache or headache can be a sign of anxiety and not a reason to stay home.
- Talk to teachers, school counselors or other parents for advice on how to alleviate a child's anxiety about going to school or other issues.
- Develop back-up plans for getting to school if something comes up. Call on a family member, a neighbor or another parent.
- Avoid scheduling medical appointments and extended trips when school is in session.

By establishing clear channels of communication with parents, engaging families and communities in problem-solving and rewarding steps to improve attendance, schools and early education programs can be instrumental in creating and maintaining learning environments that reduce absenteeism and promote school success.

Attendance Works is a national organization dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, research and success stories about reducing chronic absence. Attendance Works also offers technical assistance to school districts and communities. For more information and resources, go to [www.attendanceworks.org/tools/for-parents/](http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/for-parents/)

Launched in May 2010, the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#) is a collaborative effort of funders, nonprofit partners, states and communities across the nation to ensure that many more children from low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career and active citizenship. It focuses on reading proficiency by the end of third grade, a key predictor of high school graduation and a milestone missed by fully 80 percent of low-income children.

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- <sup>i.</sup> *Early Reading Proficiency in the United States*, KIDS COUNT, Annie E. Casey Foundation, January 2014
  - <sup>ii.</sup> Chang, Hedy and Romero, Mariajose. *Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty, New York, NY, September 2008.
  - <sup>iii.</sup> *Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes*, Applied Survey Research, May 2011.
  - <sup>iv.</sup> Bassok, Daphna, and Rorem, Anna. *Working Paper: Is Kindergarten the New First Grade? The Changing Nature of Kindergarten in the Age of Accountability*, EdPolicyWorks, University of Virginia, January 2014.
  - <sup>v.</sup> Ready, Douglas D. *Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development, The Differential Effects of School Exposure*, Sociology of Education, October 2010.
  - <sup>vi.</sup> Ehrlich, Stacy B. et al. *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences: Research Summary*. September 2013.
  - <sup>vii.</sup> Connolly, Faith and Olson, Linda S. *Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten*, Baltimore Education Research Consortium, Baltimore, Md., March 2012.
  - <sup>viii.</sup> Ready
  - <sup>ix.</sup> Ehrlich
  - <sup>x.</sup> Connolly & Olson
  - <sup>xi.</sup> Ehrlich
  - <sup>xii.</sup> *High School Dropout Prevention Exploratory Research*, Report for the Advertising Council, C&C Hispanic Research Solutions, March 2012
  - <sup>xiii.</sup> Duardo, Debra L., *Solutions to Chronic Absenteeism: An Evaluation of a Kindergarten Attendance Improvement Program in LAUSD*, Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

