

Illinois K-2 Workgroup Indicator Discussion Guide Chronic Absenteeism

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Indicator Summary

Students will not learn if they are not present in school. A consistent and growing body of research indicates that absenteeism can be an early warning for later academic problems and a contributing factor in achievement gaps.¹ Absenteeism causes achievement gaps because students who are economically disadvantaged and students of color are more likely to miss school than their peers, and pay a greater academic penalty for those missed learning opportunities.²

There are several potential reasons to focus on chronic absenteeism in the early grades. Outside of high school, absenteeism tends to be highest in Pre-K and Kindergarten.³ For example, in Chicago Public Schools one in five kindergarten students were chronically absent in 2011-12, higher than rates of absenteeism for first through eighth grades.⁴ Reasons for absenteeism in the early years tend to be different than in middle school or high school because students are more likely to be absent due to illness, family circumstances, or transportation challenges.⁵ Early absenteeism also tends to be persistent unless schools intervene, so students who are chronically absent in pre-K are significantly more likely to be chronically absent in second grade.⁶ Children who were chronically absent in kindergarten tend to perform worse in first grade, third grade, and beyond.

Focusing on the root causes of absenteeism can point to other productive areas for school improvement, such as family and student engagement, wraparound health services, transportation, and exclusionary discipline policies. There is evidence that by focusing on these root causes, schools can effectively improve their absenteeism rates in a relatively short amount of time.

While states have tracked attendance for a long time, chronic absenteeism is different from average daily attendance (ADA) and truancy rates. Average daily attendance usually does not include students who are absent for excused reasons like illness; and most schools' ADA rates are over 90 percent, which can mask individual students with very high absenteeism.⁷ Truancy rates are usually framed more punitively, for older children, and do not include excused absences. In contrast, chronic absenteeism rates include any days spent out of school, including excused absences and suspensions.

A majority of states plan to use chronic absenteeism as a measure of school quality and student success under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). 10 approved state plans, including Illinois', use chronic absenteeism, and 25 more draft state plans include it. Most states define chronic absenteeism as missing ten percent or more school days in K-12 grades. In many of those states, like Illinois, kindergarten is not compulsory, but is still part of the accountability indicator.⁸

In Illinois' current ESSA plan, chronic absenteeism will make up twenty percent of elementary schools' ratings in 2017-18, and five to ten percent going forward. The proposed definition of chronic absenteeism is missing ten percent or more of a prior school year. Given the strong evidence for the importance of attendance in early grades, and the unique causes and solutions to early absenteeism, the K-2 workgroup may want to recommend extra weight on absenteeism in the early grades, which was the recommendation of Illinois' Early Learning Council.⁹

Measurement Options and ESSA Alignment

For consistency with Illinois' overall rating system, using the same definition of chronic absenteeism in early grades would likely be the best option. The way in which absenteeism rates translate into school scores may change based on the recommendation of Illinois' technical advisory committee (TAC), but the K-2 absenteeism indicator could focus on improvement rather than pure absenteeism.

Valid and Reliable: Yes

- Many states, including Illinois, have proposed chronic absenteeism as an ESSA indicator. It is widely considered a valid and reliable measure, as long as appropriate data rules and weighting are in place (see below).
- **Meaningfully Differentiated: Yes**
 - Illinois has already indicated that it plans to have its TAC analyze chronic absenteeism for meaningful differentiation, but data from other states indicate a high level of differentiation among schools.
- **Comparable: Likely Yes**
 - This indicator would be comparable if the state has a clear and consistent definition of absenteeism, including a definition of partial-day attendance, and reliable data collection mechanisms with periodic monitoring for accuracy.
- **Reportable Annually and By Subgroup: Yes**
 - This is a student-level measure that is easily disaggregated by subgroup.
- **Additional Considerations: ISBE reported strong stakeholder support for chronic absenteeism in the state accountability system, but there are some potential drawbacks. Placing too much weight on chronic absenteeism could encourage schools or districts to manipulate data, for example, by counting students as present if they are on the verge of missing too many school days.¹⁰ This was already an issue in four Chicago high schools, according to a recent investigation.¹¹ This could be addressed by ISBE monitoring and clear policies on attendance. A heavy weight on absenteeism could disadvantage schools enrolling high numbers of economically disadvantaged students, who are most likely to be chronically absent and tend to face the biggest barriers to attendance. Lastly, because chronic absenteeism will be a significant factor in school ratings, schools should receive support and technical assistance to help them address the root causes of absenteeism in productive, effective, and equitable ways.**

Examples from Other States

As mentioned above, the majority of states plan to use chronic absenteeism in their accountability ratings.¹² Most of those start measuring absenteeism at kindergarten, but some plans are unclear. One state, Rhode Island, plans to include pre-K absenteeism. States vary as

to how much weight they give this indicator in elementary school ratings. Most fall between five and ten percent, in line with what Illinois is currently planning for 2018-19 and beyond. No state thus far has proposed extra weight on K-2 grades in chronic absenteeism, but many mentioned the importance of early attendance in their plans, and it is possible that states could add that weight in the future.

Pros/Cons of Using This Indicator in K-2 Accountability Ratings

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizes the importance of K-2 attendance, where absenteeism is high, but often overlooked. • Strong evidence of impact on student achievement. • Can encourage schools to look to other important improvement areas – such as family engagement and student health. • Consistent with other state measures, and already approved by the Department of Education. • Straightforward to measure, data are already collected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already significantly weighted/included in school quality measures – could be a missed opportunity to diversify measures • Over emphasis without monitoring and safeguards could encourage data manipulation. • Could penalize districts with many economically disadvantaged students and/or rural districts with transportation challenges. • Attendance is not compulsory for individual students in Kindergarten and pre-K.

¹Robert Balfanz and Vaughn Byrnes., "The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools," Johns Hopkins University Center for the Social Organization of Schools, 2012; Hedy Chang and Mariajose Romero, "Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades," National Center for Children in Poverty, 2008; Hedy Chang and Robert Balfanz, "Portraits of Change: Aligning School and Community Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence," attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center, 2017.

² U.S. Department of Education, "Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools," 2016, <https://ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#one>; Balfanz 2012.

³ Melissa Dahlin and Jim Squires, "Pre-K Attendance – Why It's Important and How to Support It," Center for Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO), 2016, http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ceelo_fastfact_state_ece_attendance_2016_02_01_final_for_web.pdf.

⁴ Stacy Erlich et. al., "Research Summary: Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools," University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2013, <http://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Pre-K%20Attendance%20Research%20Summary.pdf>.

⁵ Erlich, 2013; Chang, 2008.

⁶ Erlich, 2013.

⁷ Charles Bruner, Anne Discher, and Hedy Chang, "Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Site," Attendance Works and the Child and Family Policy Center, 2011, <https://www.edweek.org/media/chronicabsence-15chang.pdf>.

⁸ For example: AL, AK, CA, CO, GA, IN, ME, MA, MN, MO, NE, NJ, NY, OR, PA, WA, WI

⁹ Illinois Early Learning Council, "Illinois ESSA Recommendations," Letter to the Illinois P-20 Council, <http://files.constantcontact.com/10769473401/6b4ac107-b08f-4555-83a5-fefcc2e6ff54.pdf>.

¹⁰ Matt Barnum, “Student absences are about to have higher stakes in most states. Will cheating follow?” Chalkbeat, October 3, 2017, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2017/10/03/student-absences-are-about-to-have-higher-stakes-in-most-states-will-cheating-follow/>.

¹¹ Patrick Smith, “Staff At Four Chicago High Schools Falsified Student Attendance Records,” WBEZ, October 6, 2016, <https://www.wbez.org/shows/wbez-news/staff-at-four-chicago-high-schools-falsified-student-attendance-records/328da520-a0d6-46c4-91b1-c9ac1bc92186>.

¹² Review of draft state plans as of October 1, 2017.