January 2016:
Addressing Chronic Absence in Head Start

Background

Chronic absenteeism: the term sounds as though it belongs in the depths of a medical dictionary. Much like a disease, it’s a condition that spreads rapidly, appears in clusters, runs in families, and has serious, detrimental effects. Unfortunately, it’s infecting our schools. What are the risk factors? Is it preventable?

Chronic absenteeism means missing 10% of a school year for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences. Hedy Chang, director of Attendance Works, paints a picture of what this means in one example: “If you’re chronically absent in kindergarten or first grade because of an asthma issue, then by third grade you’re not reading at grade level and by sixth grade you don’t like school because it was never a positive experience. Now maybe you’re truant and you’re skipping school. But you’re losing sight of the fact that we never created an equal opportunity for this child to be successful in school.” Chang highlights the value at the core of this growing problem: because chronic absenteeism is disproportionately affecting minorities, students with disabilities, and students from low income families, it’s a matter of equity. A missed day of school is a missed opportunity for learning, and the implications are massive.

The premise is simple: students who regularly attend school are likely to do better and stay in school longer. The opposite reigns true, as well. Much like the cognitive and noncognitive skills that students begin to develop at an early age, foundations for good attendance are formed at an early age. To treat the disease, chronic absenteeism, we must first identify the source. The key is tracking absences and causes and identifying the effects, both short term and long term. By identifying students who are in need of intervention and partnering with their families to take proper preventative measures, we can help all children be successful.

Thinking about chronic absenteeism is especially important right now because the proposed Head Start standards (NPRM) will require Head Start programs to focus not only on overall program attendance but also on identifying and intervening with individual children who have low attendance. As you navigate the resources and research below, which would help your program better target those children? Are there steps you can take now? This is one more way Head Start can put children on a long-term trajectory to success.
Resources

Every Student, Every Day
This past October, in reaction to the growing wealth of research on attendance and with support from the White House and the Department of Education, among others, the Every Student, Every Day national initiative was launched to raise awareness. Check out the toolkit for communities and other resources!

Accounted For
In this radio series from 2014, St. Louis Public Radio (part of the NPR digital network) identifies and discusses the impacts of chronic absenteeism. It begins with a three minute whiteboard-style video summarizing the attendance research, then presents a series of seven articles which you can listen to or read.

"Stopping Absenteeism at the Age of Five" by Rikha Sharma Rani
This past October, the Opinionator blog of the New York Times published this article detailing the personal story of a woman named Lillian and her daughter, Annabelle, who is in kindergarten and missing so much class that it threatens her future. Annabelle, though, is lucky; she goes to school in New Britain, Connecticut where the district has made staunch efforts to inform parents and affect change.

Chronic Student Absenteeism in Connecticut's Districts and Schools
The Connecticut state Department of Education published this powerpoint in October of 2014. The powerpoint illustrates what chronic absenteeism is and why it’s important in a digestible format, using graphs and research to draw thought-provoking comparisons and underline the importance of attendance.

Getting Preschoolers Off to a Good Start by Janice Haker
Georgia’s Head Start and Early Head Start have put increased attendance at the top of their priority list. This blog from the director of Georgia's Head Start State Collaboration Office explains how they are seeking the answers to why their children are absent so often through a two-year data collection effort. At the same time, they are tracking different initiatives and efforts to increase attendance.

Research

National Center for Children in Poverty
Present, Engaged, and Accounted for: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades
By Hedy N. Chang and MariaJosé Romero

Written by the director of Attendance Works and a National Center for Children in Poverty research associate, this report works to identify and define the particulars of chronic absenteeism.
It explores early school attendance as an indicator for later education experiences and finds a number of revealing correlations; most notably, children who are absent in kindergarten do worse in first grade and, for those who are poor, chronic absence in kindergarten often means they are at the lowest educational achievement levels by the end of fifth grade. The authors highlight three factors that have the power to heighten school attendance: engaging learning experiences; stable, skilled teachers; and parent engagement. They also identify some of the factors that contribute to absences, such as transportation, inflexible jobs, housing or health care problems, and community violence.

After describing the causes and solutions, Chang and Romero move to answer the next logical question: if it’s this simple to break down the data, then why is chronic absenteeism so prevalent across the nation? The answer, they claim, is hidden in the No Child Left Behind Act which requires unexcused absences (truancies) to be tracked while excused absences go unnoticed. Chronic absence is caused by missing as few as two days a month, excused or unexcused. In other words, an excused absence is still a missed learning opportunity and, if meaningful intervention is to occur, all absences must be treated with equal seriousness. As a result, the authors call for more advanced data systems and more careful thinking about the use of attendance data.

Upstream Public Health
The Connection Between Missing School and Health
By Tia Henderson, Caitlin Hill and Kerry Norton

By examining K-12 students in Oregon, this study seeks to highlight the link between health and chronic absenteeism. Oregon, which has one of the nation’s worst chronic absenteeism rates, passed a bill in 2011 setting high goals for the state’s education system. These goals, scheduled to be reached by 2025, require education reform and motivate research, such as this, into solutions to the issues at the heart of the state’s problems.

This particular research unwinds the interconnected factors related to attendance (“physical, social, and environmental...at the community, home, school district, school, and individual level”) and the three categories of causes of absences. The first category is “barrier,” or "cannot go" reasons, like transportation problems or sickness. The second category is “aversion,” or "will not go" reasons, like disinterest or fear. The third and last category is “myth,” or "do not go" reasons, such as thinking a child is too young for attendance to matter. This paper explores the relationship between health and education, drawing important connections such as the prominent link between respiratory health issues and attendance. For more, here is a news article on these findings.

Attendance Works
Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting a Course for School Success
Attendance Works and Healthy Schools Campaign

This report asks why the attendance gap gets so much less attention than the achievement gap. Attendance gaps, it argues, are the root cause of achievement gaps which then ultimately go on
to become graduation gaps. Within states, it’s the responsibility of state leaders to focus attention on not just truancies but chronic absenteeism in order to address the leading causes of excused absences, namely medical issues.

The power for action, then, is at the state level where systems can be established that collect and analyze data; this data can go on to inform methods of prevention and intervention. At the local level, more specialized action can take place; the authors advocate for preventative measures taken through innovation. Through identifying causes of chronic absenteeism, schools are better able to meet the needs of their students. In Baltimore, for example, school-based clinics made it possible for students with asthma to have better attendance.

Urban Institute
Absenteeism in DC Public Schools Early Education Program
by Lisa Dubay and Nikhil Holla

This report by the Urban Institute examines absenteeism in DC Public Schools’ (DCPS) early education program during the 2013-2014 school year. DCPS blends local preschool funding with Head Start (HS) dollars. On average, DCPS early childhood students were absent for 8% of school days. At the same time, 20% of students were chronically absent (missing 10-20% of school days) and another 7% were severely chronically absent (missing 20% or more). These numbers alone capture the significance of examining data on an individual level, not just at the school, district, or state level; while the schoolwide average attendance rate is acceptable, a huge percentage of students are missing a shocking amount of school.

This report highlights the underlying patterns in the causes and effects of absenteeism. Which groups had the worst attendance rates? Three particular demographic trends were outlined: children who speak English at home had worse attendance rates than those who didn’t speak English at home, black students missed more school than white students, and students with special needs missed more school than those without special needs. Program eligibility also affected attendance: homeless children missed the most school. Attendance varied based on season of the year and location of the school (by ward). After taking a moment to reflect on the data presented in this report, one is left wondering: with the collection of so much data and the subsequent discovery of distinct patterns, how can programs use their own data to design interventions for the groups of families that the data predicts most need support to improve attendance?

Baltimore Education Research Consortium
Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten
by Faith Connolly and Linda Olson

This study focuses on the effects of chronic absenteeism in prekindergarten and kindergarten on later attendance and academic achievement. Students with poor attendance in these earliest years tend to continue to have poor attendance and lower academic outcomes in later grades. The most important finding of this study is that the negative impacts of early absenteeism can be
minimized by later improved attendance. In other words, poor absence in early grades is important and impactful, but its effects are reversible.

The study looks specifically at Head Start students in Baltimore and finds that Head Start students began kindergarten with higher attendance rates than similar students and this gap continued through the early elementary years. Head Start students performed lower than their peers in reading and math in first and second grade, but by third grade they caught up and scored as well as their peers on their state assessments. In third grade Head Start students were also significantly less likely than other children to be chronically absent!

_Looking for more research on chronic absenteeism? This summary of key research from Attendance Works is a great place to start._

**Discussion**

1. How does your program analyze the attendance data it collects? What kinds of continuous improvement questions do you ask about that data? How often do you revisit the data - weekly? monthly?

2. What is your program’s set procedure for addressing chronic or consecutive absences? Which families does it seem to help the most?

3. Does your program offer health, transportation, or other services specifically targeted to reduce chronic absenteeism?

4. How many of the parents and families in your program understand the importance of good attendance? What can be done to raise awareness?

We’re still collecting PhD research from the Head Start community! Please let us know if you or someone you know has work to share. We’ll feature your research in an upcoming Blast! Contact Emmalie (edropkin@nhsa.org) or Cody (ckornack@nhsa.org) to let us know what you've accomplished.

Do you have other questions, comments, or concerns? E-mail Emmalie Dropkin (edropkin@nhsa.org).