



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK / ALBANY, NY 12234

**TO:** P-12 Education Committee

**FROM:** Cosimo Tangorra, Jr.

**SUBJECT:** Chronic Absenteeism

**DATE:** December 8, 2014

**AUTHORIZATION(S):**

#### SUMMARY

#### Issue for Discussion

Should the Board of Regents direct Department staff to develop and implement policies and procedures that capture and report chronic absenteeism in an effort to ensure that low-performing schools and districts with chronic absenteeism issues address them in their improvement plans?

#### Proposed Handling

This item will come before the P-12 Education Committee for discussion at the December 2014 meeting.

#### Background Information

There has been a growing national movement to recognize that absenteeism, and especially chronic absenteeism, is a risk factor that diminishes student learning and undermines educational efforts to support student learning. Research by nationally recognized organizations assert that there is a high correlation between kindergarten and first grade students who are absent for 10-20% of their instructional time and those who are likely to read below third grade proficiency standards.<sup>1</sup> Students who continue to exhibit this level of absenteeism are more likely to be identified as students with disabilities, repeat grades, or leave school before high school completion.

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<sup>1</sup> Showing Up Matters: Working Together to Improve Attendance to Prevent Dropouts, Attendance Works, February 2013.

In a recent nationwide study, it was estimated that between five and seven million students miss 21 or more days of school in a given school year.<sup>2</sup> The study also reported that when chronic absence was examined by grade level, the students at both ends of the educational continuum—the youngest and the oldest—had the highest rates of chronic absence. Students attended school most regularly in third through fifth grades. If youth in the middle grades do not have the important basic skills, they are less likely to be successful and more likely to disengage from school.

Chronic absence is defined as absence from school for ten percent or more days while school is in session in a given school year. The measure of attendance does not distinguish the reason for the absence; it includes both excused and unexcused absences. It differs from truancy, which typically refers to only unexcused absences. Students who miss school because of excused absence nevertheless lose valuable learning time, which can lead to these students falling behind academically.

Chronic absence warrants our attention as it is one of the earliest indications that students are not on track. Moreover, the earlier the data is available, the sooner interventions may be provided at a point when they may produce success, rather than during the later years when it becomes more difficult for a student to catch up.

Research demonstrates that chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among low-income students.<sup>3</sup> Chronic absenteeism generally begins in kindergarten and absenteeism is highest among the youngest and oldest students, with students attending most regularly in third through fifth grades. Chronic absenteeism begins to rise in middle school and continues climbing through 12th grade, with seniors having the highest rate of all. The data also suggests that chronic absenteeism can be concentrated in relatively few schools: for example, 15 percent of the schools in Florida account for at least half of all chronically absent students.

National experts<sup>4</sup> recommend the following:

- Use the research-based standard of ten percent or more days while school is in session in a given school year to define chronic absenteeism;
- Focus on the percentage of days absent, not the reason for the absence (excused vs. unexcused);<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Balfanz & Vaughan Byrnes, *Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism*, John Hopkins School of Education. 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Mariajose Romero & Young-Sun Lee, *A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> National Experts include: Attendance Works, National Center for Children in Poverty, John Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, and Baltimore Education Research Consortium.

<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Department of Education has proposed to revise the final requirements for the School Improvement Grant program, under a proposal released in the Federal Register. As part of its response, Attendance Works is recommending the use of a percentage of days absent from school, rather than an absolute number of days absent. Providing for a percent measure rather than total number of days encourages early detection of when students are at-risk for chronic absence.

- Make available to stakeholders consistent with privacy protections data on chronic absence disaggregated at the district, school, subgroup and individual student level; and
- Incorporate into attendance policies measures of chronic absence and the use of prevention and positive supports strategies.

A national initiative headed by Hedy Chang from Attendance Works, promotes awareness of the role that school attendance plays in achieving academic success, addresses the importance of research-based chronic absence data, and identifies practices that reduce chronic absence.<sup>6</sup> Attendance Works also leads the New York based public awareness campaign, led by the New York State Council on Children and Families,<sup>7</sup> which is designed to help parents, school leaders and communities understand the impact of chronic absence and engage in activities that help reduce it.

### ***Current Regulations and Absenteeism Data Collection in New York State***

The Department does not currently report on chronic absenteeism at the state, district, or school level, but does collect attendance rates via the BEDS systems, that are certified by school districts. The statewide annual attendance rate for the 2012-13 school year was 94%.

In October 2001, the Board of Regents amended Section 104.1 of the Regulations of the Commissioner. The amended regulations affect the following:

1. The content and responsibility for the record of pupil attendance to include:
  - a. Taking and recording for daily and period by period attendance,
  - b. Determining excused and unexcused absences,
  - c. Developing relationships between attendance and course credit, and
  - d. Development of comprehensive attendance practices.
2. A review of attendance data by school building administrators for the purpose of identifying pupil attendance problems and initiate actions to improve pupil attendance.
3. The development of a comprehensive attendance policy in each school district.

In 2005, an Attendance Workgroup was formed by the Department to make recommendations to school districts and nonpublic schools regarding compliance with the requirements of the new regulations. The Workgroup developed a national questionnaire to determine what states require the collection and reporting of building level attendance.

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<sup>6</sup> Ms. Chang is a partner of Every Student Present, the New York based public awareness campaign.

<sup>7</sup> Other partners include the Children's Aid Society, Erie 1 BOCES, New York State After School Network, State University of New York, New York State Education Department and United Way of New York City.

When New York State submitted to the United States Department of Education its initial accountability workbook to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Department indicated that it planned to use elementary and middle level science as the required third academic indicator at the elementary/middle level until such time as the Department could begin to collect individual student level attendance data. However, the Department subsequently concluded that because 8 NYCRR 104.1 requires each school district to propose, adopt, and amend its own excused and unexcused absences and codes differences in local policy made it impossible to establish attendance as a uniform accountability measure for schools and districts. Consequently, the Board of Regents accepted the Department's recommendation that science, rather than attendance, continue to be used as the third academic indicator at the elementary/middle school level for NCLB accountability purposes. Attendance records are required for all students attending school in New York State, and since Commissioner's Regulation (NYCRR 104.1) requires that pupil attendance records be reviewed by the principal and a designated school official, these records are among the first indicators that educators can use to identify students in need of support and to provide interventions.

Should the Board of Regents choose to define chronic absenteeism according to the research articulated in this item, the Department would bring to the Regents for consideration amendments to Commissioner's Regulations sections 104.1(b)(iii) that would define chronic absence to be missing ten percent or more enrolled school days in a school year for any reason, including excused or unexcused absence as well as suspensions.

To reduce chronic absence and help every student be present in school, the Department recommends the following steps be taken:

- Amend attendance regulations to incorporate chronic absence;
- Adopt the research-based definition of ten percent absence to track chronic absenteeism through school-district submitted reports to the Department;
- Provide school administrators with guidance regarding effective strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism, including promoting cross-system collaborations among professionals within and outside of schools to address the underlying reasons for chronic absences;
- The Department should begin to report the performance of schools and districts in terms of chronic absenteeism statewide; and
- Require that Priority and Focus Schools, Local Assistance Plan Schools, and Focus Districts with high rates of chronic absenteeism set targets to reduce chronic absenteeism and explicitly address this issue in their improvement plans.

## **Next Steps**

It is recommended that the Board of Regents direct Department staff to:

1. Prepare for Board of Regents consideration amendments to Commissioner's regulations to clearly define chronic absenteeism;
2. Draft and develop statewide guidance on chronic absenteeism as it relates to data collection and reporting at the school district, school building, and individual student levels; and
3. Ensure that identified schools and districts with chronic absentee issues establish targets for addressing this issue and incorporate strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism in their improvement plans.

Proposed amendments will be presented to the Board of Regents for discussion in March of 2015 and for action in April of 2015.

## **Appendix: Other States' Policies and Relevant Research**

Several states around the country have implemented laws and regulations to more efficiently reduce chronic absenteeism. For example:

- California enacted a new state funding formula that will require every school district to monitor its chronic absence rate;
- Hawaii requires that each school set targets for reducing chronic absenteeism as part of its annual academic plans;
- Maryland has created a database, which is publicly accessible, to view rates of public absence at every school and also recently enacted a law requiring school districts to intervene when a student misses ten percent or more of school days for unexcused reasons;
- Massachusetts and Virginia monitor chronic absences as part of their early warning systems, which track a variety of metrics and alert officials when a student might be at risk of not graduating; and
- Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, New Jersey, Oregon, and Rhode Island are actively taking steps to better address chronic absenteeism, which may lead to statutory and regulatory changes in these respective states.

In 2010, New York City established the Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and School Engagement in an acknowledgement of chronic absenteeism as a complex, under-recognized problem that affects academic achievement, dropout rates, and juvenile crime. The interagency task force developed a comprehensive set of strategies to combat this problem, which were piloted in 25 schools the first year, 50 the second, and 100 schools in the third year, ultimately affecting over 60,000 students. A report compiled to examine the task force's efforts found that:

1. Task Force schools significantly and consistently outperformed comparison schools in reducing chronic absenteeism.
2. In statistically significant ways, students in the Task Force schools were less likely to be chronically absent and more likely to be solid attenders than students in comparison schools.
3. Students in poverty at Task Force schools were 15% less likely to be chronically absent than similar students at comparison schools.
4. Students in temporary housing in shelters who were in Task Force schools—a major focus of the Task Force efforts—were 31% less likely to be chronically absent from similar students at comparison schools.
5. Success Mentors,<sup>8</sup> and their supporting infrastructure, were the most effective components of the task force's efforts across all school types. Previously

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<sup>8</sup> The NYC Success Mentor Corps is a research-based, data-driven mentoring model that seeks to improve attendance, behavior, and educational outcomes for at-risk students in low-income communities citywide. Success Mentors are trained to serve as advisors, motivators, connectors, confidence-builders, and early warning systems for chronically absent students at risk of getting off track – both in school and in life.

- chronically absent students who had mentors gained almost two additional weeks (nine days) of school per student, per year.
6. In the 25% of schools in which the strategies had the greatest impact, chronically absent students supported by Success Mentors gained, on average, more than a month of school.
  7. Previously chronically absent students in the 2012-13 school year with Success Mentors gained 51,562 additional days of school.

New York City is also leveraging the growth of community schools to decrease chronic absenteeism in some of its lowest-income neighborhoods. Because community schools are comprised of a network of stakeholders (e.g., mental health service and healthcare providers), these schools can provide a more robust parent outreach program and an array of on-site social services programs to address students' physical needs and socio-emotional developmental health, thus allowing these schools to intervene effectively to prevent chronic absenteeism.

Similar to New York City, Baltimore conducted an analysis of district-wide attendance and found that financial, health, and mental health issues that affect individuals, families, schools and communities all greatly impact students' attendance.

The Baltimore study found that environmental factors were also a substantial factor influencing school attendance. The study reported that 1,071 children were hospitalized in 2009 in Baltimore City for asthma, which is generally associated with poor air quality, either indoor or outdoor.

The Maryland Asthma Control Program implemented the Asthma-Friendly School Initiative to maximize asthma management and reduce environmental asthma triggers in schools. Many elements of the program were supported by state regulations and school health service standards. As of 2011, 32 Baltimore City Schools were designated asthma free. Six components of an asthma-friendly school are:

- Identifying and tracking students with asthma,
- Maximizing asthma management through action planning with parents, case management and health care providers,
- Supporting policies regarding access to asthma medication,
- Maintenance of the building facilities to reduce asthma triggers and improve indoor and outdoor air quality, and
- Providing asthma education for students and staff.