

Understanding the Factors Contributing to Chronic Absence in Your School

(Revised – December 2010)

Once you have been able to collect data on the prevalence of chronic absence for your school (and ideally district-wide), it is important to unpack—and understand—the factors that lead children to miss school for extended periods of time. These factors can vary across schools, communities and groups of families. Developing a more informed picture of the story behind the statistics on prevalence is a critical step in developing effective interventions.

The strategies described below will help you to identify what is occurring in your school and community. The attached matrix also offers a framework for using these activities to answer key questions about factors that contribute to chronic absence, as well as what assets might be engaged to improve school attendance.

1. Examine data on chronic absence.

Review and reflect upon your school and district data on chronic absence. Some issues to discuss include:

a. Does the level of chronic absence affect a significant proportion of the student population (10% or more)? Is it higher or lower than the rest of the school district? *(High levels throughout a district suggest the existence of systemic challenges related to school policy, practice or environmental conditions and/or relevant community-wide social, health or economic issues.)*

b. Does the level of chronic absence differ among specific students and their families? By grade level? Ethnicity? Language background? Special education status? English Language Learner status? Neighborhood of residence?

2. Obtain background information on basic school and community conditions.

Key sources of information include an interview with the principal, a review of any school or district or state attendance policies, school data (available on the Internet through the school district, state department of education, or other Web sites such as GreatSchools.Net), and community data (e.g. census data on family economics, structure, educational levels, language and ethnic background, data on child care supply and demand, police statistics on crime, child welfare data, public and school health data).

3. Contact families when students are absent.

When children and youth are absent, especially for an extended period of time, contact their families to show concern about their child's well-being. Begin to learn about the challenges families face in terms of having their child attend school regularly. Track information and analyze it for common patterns. If possible, consider conducting a confidential data match with public agency records to find out how many families are also involved in services such as child welfare, public assistance, food stamps and the criminal justice system.

4. Conduct school success focus/discussion groups.

Focus or discussion groups with a variety of stakeholders, including parents, students, school staff (teachers, support personnel, school nurses and social workers) and staff of community agencies including health practitioners will help you learn more about school experiences. Find staff or consultants with skills and experience in holding focus groups to help design and facilitate the process.

Pay special attention to respectfully seeking insights into the challenges parents face in promoting their children's educational success and avoid creating feelings of stigma or blame. Take care to reach out to parents of different backgrounds including ethnicity, language, type of educational programs (for example, special education and bilingual

education, as well as general education). Existing parent advisory committees may be helpful resources for parent outreach. Rather than limiting the discussions to barriers to attendance, it may be more helpful to frame the issues around academic success in order to look at the overall situation.

Through careful facilitation, a focus group of older youth may also provide invaluable insight into the underlying causes of attendance and truancy patterns. Again to be successful, it is critical that the staff or consultants designing and facilitating the process are experienced and can create a trusting environment so that youth feel comfortable and can be candid.

Focus groups can be used to identify strengths, as well as barriers, to promoting regular school attendance and school success.

5. Develop parent and student surveys.

Consider developing a survey to solicit input from an even broader array of parents and students about their experiences with the school, including the issue of regular school attendance. Find skilled professionals familiar with survey design who can work with teams of parents from different backgrounds to help develop, disseminate and collect surveys and to interpret the results. If your school serves sizable numbers of families who speak languages other than English, find resources to help translate the questions culturally as well as linguistically. Student surveys should also be carefully designed and procedures should be put into place to safeguard confidentiality in order to elicit candid responses.

*For more information about
improving attendance and
reducing chronic absence go to
[www. AttendanceWorks.org](http://www.AttendanceWorks.org).*

*Reprinting of this document is
permitted.*

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHRONIC ABSENCE: QUESTIONS FOR YOUR SCHOOL OR COMMUNITY

(Information in **blue** indicates potential sources of data to assess the relevance of possible contributing factors)

A. Is chronic absence a sign that more attention should be paid to promoting regular school attendance?

Family	School	Community
1. Do parents indicate that they (and other families they know) think school attendance is important for academic achievement, including attendance in kindergarten? (Parent focus groups or survey) 2. Do students think it is important for them to attend school every day? (Student focus groups or survey) 3. Is missing school a social norm? Does chronic absence affect a significant portion of the student population at a school? From a particular neighborhood? For the district as a whole? (Attendance data)	1. Does the school conduct transition activities to orient parents and students to the school and the importance regular attendance? (Review of school practice; parent focus groups) 2. Does the school communicate the importance of school attendance to parents through eg. materials sent home, school events, and interactions with staff? If so, does this include guidance about when to keep a sick child at home and how to avoid unnecessary absence by keeping children healthy and avoiding scheduling vacations and appointments during school time? (Review of school practice) 3. Do teachers take roll daily? (Review of school practice and district policy) 4. Is the principal knowledgeable about students or families with chronic attendance problems? (Principal interview) 5. Do school staff contact families and speak with them personally if a student is absent especially, for extended periods of time? (Review of school practice, teacher and parent focus groups) 6. Do schools recognize and honor students with excellent attendance records? With improved attendance records? (Review of school practice) 7. Does the school inform parents when a student has a contagious health issue (e.g. strep or lice) and educate them about how to identify and respond to the situation so it will not be spread further? When students are ill, is there support to help them make up for missed instruction? (Review of school practice)	1. Are staff of family-serving community agencies aware of the importance of regular attendance? (Focus groups with agency staff) 2. Do family- and youth-serving community agencies help to communicate the importance of school attendance through printed materials, parenting classes and/or other supports to students and families? (Review of on-site community resources, focus groups with agency staff) 3. Do preschools and other child care providers help families develop a regular routine of school attendance prior to kindergarten? (Focus groups or surveys of parents of preschooler and preschool teachers; Data on child care supply and percentage of kindergartners who attended preschool) 4. Do health providers (i.e. community clinics and pediatricians) help to promote school attendance by educating families taking steps to prevent and address chronic illness to it does not affect school attendance and if children are younger, procuring timely immunizations? (Telephone survey of health providers, interview with administrator) 5. Do schools and community agencies, including health providers, work together to identify and support families with school attendance problems? (Focus group with agency staff and principal interview) 6. Do community agencies help parents to adopt strategies they can use at home to promote regular routines, especially consistent school attendance? (Focus group with agency staff and parents) 7. Do community members and neighbors express concern if they notice students at home during a school day? (Parent and student focus groups)

B. Is chronic absence a sign of low levels of school outreach to and engagement of parents?

Family	School	Community
1. Do parents and students feel a sense of connection to the school community? Or do parents or students feel intimidated? Do students miss school because of issues related to economics: e.g. lack of transportation, inadequate clothing, especially in bad weather, parents working long hours, insufficient nutrition, etc.? (Parent and youth focus groups or surveys; contacts with chronically absent families) 2. Do parents participate in school activities (e.g. attending parent/teacher conferences, volunteering in the classroom, attending school-wide events)? Is this true for different groups of families at the school? (Parent survey, observations of school events, focus groups with teachers) 3. Do parents feel comfortable talking with the teachers or other school staff (administrator, social worker or school nurse) about problems that are affecting their child's attendance? Do parents feel that staff notice when an effort has been made to improve attendance? (Parent focus groups or survey) 4. Do parents and older students feel hopeful that school will have a positive affect on their children's well-being? (Parent or student focus groups or surveys) 5. What is the educational experience of parents? Do some parents feel alienated because they experienced educational failure? Does the school serve any communities who have a prior history of negative experience with formal education? (Parent focus groups and/or survey)	1. Does the school actively help parents of all backgrounds understand their approach to teaching and learning? (Parent focus groups) 2. Does the school staff regularly communicate with parents about their child's academic progress and how they can assist in their education during times and at locations that allow parents, especially who work, to participate? (Teacher and parent focus groups) 3. Does the school offer a range of opportunities for parents to get involved? Are at least some of these opportunities appropriate and inviting, especially for working parents with limited economic resources and job flexibility and/or who are cultural and linguistic minorities? (Teacher and parents focus groups and/or surveys) 4. Does the school staff have the capacity to communicate with and engage parents who speak languages other than English? (Review of staff background) 5. Are district policies and practices for addressing truancy (e.g. the student attendance review board process in California) operational and effectively working to address truancy? Has this policy been effectively implemented at the school site? (Review of district policies and school practice)	1. Do community agencies use the school facility as a venue for offering needed supports to families and youth (e.g. parenting classes, education and training opportunities, access to social services, health services such as well-child checks, immunizations, health education programs, etc.)? (Review of school practice) 2. Do community agencies help parents to understand how they can get involved in children's schools? (Focus groups with agency staff and parents) 3. Are high quality early care and education programs and experiences available to families? (Data on child care supply and quality ratings –if available, % of kindergartners who attended preschool, focus groups with parents) 4. Is parent engagement supported and nurtured prior to kindergarten thru early childhood and education programs? (Focus groups with parents and preschool teachers) 5. What is the overall educational level of adults in the community where children live? Are there adults who can serve as mentors and guides to educational success to friends and neighbors? (Census data on education levels of adults in the community, focus groups with parents) 6. Do community and business leaders actively encourage parents to send their children to school regularly and get involved in their schools? (Focus groups with parents and teachers)

C. Is chronic absence a sign of a poor quality educational program?

Family	School	Community
1. Are students anxious about attending school because they are struggling to keep up academically? (Focus groups with students and parents) 2. Do students indicate that they dislike or feel bored by school? (Student focus groups and/or surveys) 3. Do students report feeling a sense of trust and connection to their teachers? To other adults at the school? (Student focus groups) 4. Do students report feeling fearful because of bullying and threats from other children? (Student focus groups) 5. Are parents pleased or concerned about the quality of the education that their child is receiving? (Parent focus groups and/or surveys) 6. Are parents pleased or concerned about the effectiveness of their children's teachers and the principal? (Parent focus groups with and/or surveys, ideally with families of diverse backgrounds) 7. Do parents feel that the needs of children with learning disabilities are being adequately diagnosed and addressed? (Parent focus groups and/or surveys)	1. Does the school have an experienced and skilled site administrator? (Teacher and parent focus groups) 2. Are teachers experienced and trained? (School district teacher data) 3. Does the school suffer from high levels of teacher turnover or absenteeism? (School district teacher data, principal interview) 4. Is the school able to maintain reasonable class sizes? (Review of school data, principal interview) 5. Does the school have a thoughtful curriculum and learning philosophy in place? (Teacher focus group) 6. Are school staff skilled in identifying and addressing the needs of children with special needs? (Teacher focus group, principal interview) 7. Are school staff trained and skilled in promoting a positive school climate and helping children resolve conflicts peacefully? Has the school made parents aware of these practices and how they can support them? (Teacher and student focus groups) 8. Does school discipline policy and practice ensure students do not miss instruction due to unnecessary suspensions. (Suspension data, student focus groups, teacher interviews, review of district & school policy) 9. Do test scores indicate that school performance is improving or declining? (Test score data) 10. Does the school have well-maintained and safe facilities? (Direct observation; Focus groups with teachers, students and parents, consider using the environmental assessment developed for schools by the EPA (http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/))	1. Do community agencies or community volunteers provide extra tutoring and academic resources to help students struggling academically? (Review of on-site community resources; teacher focus group, principal interview) 2. Is mental health consultation available to teachers, students and families through partnerships with community agencies? (Review of community resources, principal interview) 3. Do community agencies provide students with high quality afterschool programming? (Review of on-site community resources; parent focus groups)

D. Is chronic absence a sign of challenging social, health and economic conditions in the community?

Family	School	Community
1. Do students miss school because of economic challenges e.g. lack transportation, inadequate clothing , parents working long hours etc? (Parent and student focus groups or surveys; contacts with chronically absent families) 2. Do parents feel they can easily turn to friends or relatives for help in caring for their children, including getting them to school as the need arises? (Parent interviews and surveys) 3. Are students absent from school because they are sick and cannot obtain needed medical treatment? (Contacts with chronically absent families) 4. Are chronically absent students from households with multiple risks (e.g. low-income, single parent, teen parenthood, multiple siblings, a parent in poor health)? (Contacts with chronically absent families) 5. Are chronically absent students from families in crisis, e.g. involved in the child welfare system, homeless, dealing with domestic abuse or parental incarceration? (Contacts with chronically absent families; public agency data match) 6. Have chronically absent children moved multiple times in the past year or two? (School district data) What appear to be the reasons for these moves? Lack of affordable housing? Seeking better jobs? Immigration status related challenges? (Contacts with chronically absent families) 7. Do students or parent express concerns about traveling safely to and from school? (Parent and student focus groups) 8. Have chronically absent students or their families witnessed or fallen victim to violent crime? (Contacts with chronically absent families)	1. Does the school work with parents and other community partners to create opportunities for families to build relationships so that they can offer mutual support in times of need? (Review of school practice, teacher and parent focus groups) 2. Does the school work with other social service agencies to ensure families, especially those with students showing patterns of chronic absence, receive ongoing case management along with needed social, health and economic supports? (Focus groups with teacher, community agency staff and parents of chronically absent students) 3. Does the school have access to a school nurse who can help to ensure sick children are treated and to connected, as needed, to subsidized health insurance and medical, mental health or dental care? (Principal interview, review of school staffing patterns.health screening data)) 4. Does the partner with public agencies ensure attention to school issues if families are in crisis e.g. child or domestic abuse or incarceration of a parent? (Principal interview; teacher focus groups) 5. Is there a wait time for children to transfer to another school that causes a child to miss days of school? (Review district policy and practice) 6. When community violence erupts, is the school considered a safe haven? (Focus groups with parents, teachers, students)	1. Are community agencies available to partner with the school to meet the economic, child care and housing needs of families at the school? (Principal interview, focus groups with agency staff and parents) 2. Do family and youth serving agencies create opportunities for families to build relationships so that they can offer each mutual support in times of need?(Focus groups with agency staff and parents) 3. Is health care accessible and affordable for families in the community? Does this include culturally and linguistically appropriate forms of mental health care as well as substance abuse treatment?(data on health care facilities, staffing and cost; parent focus groups) 4. Are public and non-profit agencies involved in the child welfare, juvenile and criminal justice systems working closely with the school to ensure that children's school placement is as stable as possible? (Principal interview; agency staff focus group) 5. Has the neighborhood undergone any major redevelopment projects causing the displacement of families? (Parent and agency staff focus groups) 6. Does the neighborhood suffer from high rates of community violence? (Police department data) 7. Does the neighborhood suffer from environmental conditions (e.g. air pollution, lead poisoning, mold) that could cause chronic disease or disabilities among children as well as other family members? (public health department data).