



ATTENDANCE COUNTS

HOW SCHOOLS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES ARE REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENCE IN NORTH CAROLINA

Regular school attendance, starting in preschool, helps puts children on track for reading at grade-level in third grade, a critical benchmark and predictor of future academic and life success. The good news is there are actionable strategies to support regular attendance at the state, district, and school and community levels.

This report outlines results from a survey of 1,500 NC parents, preschool staff and elementary school staff who shared their impressions of current school-level attendance policies and practices. In addition to analyzing the survey data, the report considers what can be done by schools and in communities to reduce chronic absence in preschool and the early grades and shares bright spots of schools in NC that are already acting to reduce chronic absence.

Chronic absence is defined in North Carolina as missing 10 percent of school days within one academic year for any reason (excused or unexcused). And it impacts student success. Consistent school attendance in the early grades boosts children’s academic learning, achievement, and motivation,¹ while early chronic absence is associated with lower academic achievement, truancy in middle school, school dropout, delinquency, and substance abuse.² A study of Chicago students found that multiple years of chronic absence in the early grades results in lower reading proficiency by third grade (see graph on next page).

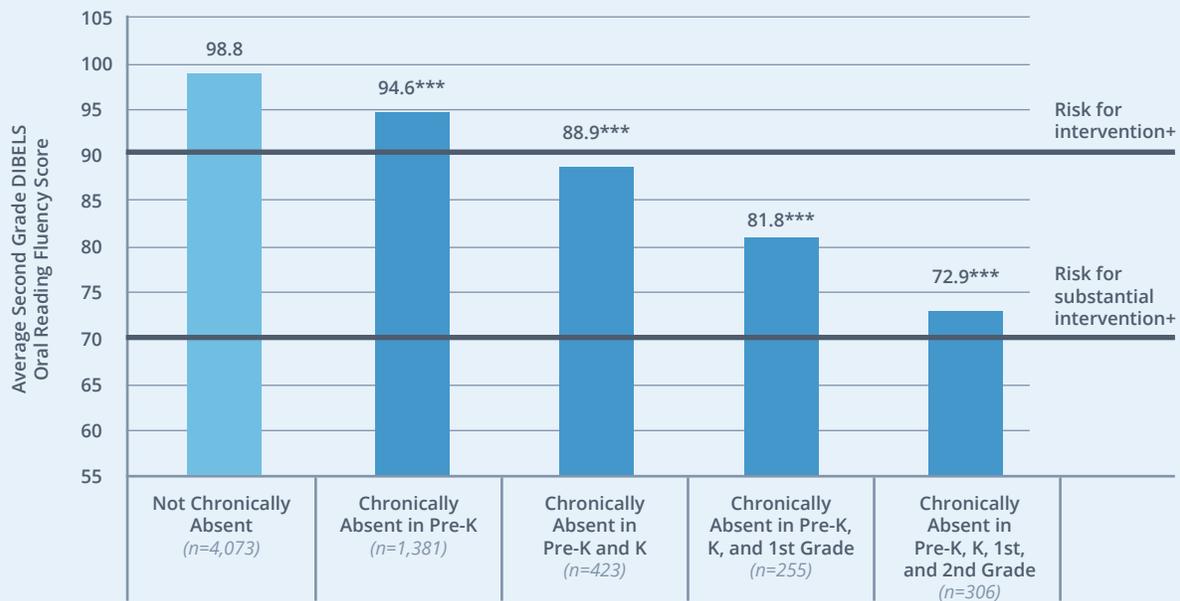
Chronic absence is a complex issue, since the causes can vary from poverty to health issues to parent understanding of the importance of being in school every day (see box). Regular attendance is also an equity issue. Children who are living with economic disadvantage are both more likely to be chronically absent in the early grades and less likely to have access to the needed resources to make up for missed time in school.³

Chronic Absence in North Carolina

In North Carolina in 2015-16 (the most recent year of data), 11 percent of elementary school students were chronically absent, which is consistent with the national rate. Chronic absence happens in every district and in every type of school—nearly three out of every four Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in North Carolina had from five to 15 percent of their elementary-school students chronically absent. There are disparities by race and ethnicity. American Indian students have the highest rates of chronic absence in North Carolina at 21 percent, followed by multiracial students (15 percent), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students (13 percent). Eleven percent of both Black and white students were chronically absent. The lowest rates were among Hispanic (9 percent) and Asian (7 percent) students.

Data collection should become more regular now that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to report on chronic absence rates.

Multiple Years of Chronic Absenteeism Impacts Reading Proficiency by Third Grade



Source: Attendance Works Note: ***Indicates that scores are significantly different from scores of students who are never chronically absent, at $p < .001$ level. + In the DIBELS 6th Edition Assessment and Scoring Guide (Good & Kaminski, 2002), these are labeled as "Some Risk," indicating the need for additional intervention and "At Risk," indicating the need for substantial interventions.

The good news is that there are actionable strategies at the state, school district, and local school and community levels. North Carolina does not have a comprehensive state plan to address chronic absenteeism in the early grades. To begin filling that gap, in 2017 and 2018, the NC Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) used self-assessments created by national attendance advocacy organization Attendance Works to learn about North Carolina's state policies and local school district policies and practices around chronic absence.

STATE-LEVEL POLICY AND PRACTICE

National best practice recommends a series of steps states can take to adjust policy and practice in order to better address chronic absence in preschool and the early grades:

- Capture attendance data in the state longitudinal student database
- Create a standard definition of chronic absence for the state

- Promote public awareness about chronic absence and why it matters
- Make chronic absence rates at the district, school, grade and student sub-population levels publicly available
- Provide families with real-time data on their children's attendance
- Provide professional development for educators about early warning signs of academic risk, like chronic absence
- Require under-performing districts to address chronic absence in school improvement plans
- Use chronic absence data to target and allocate resources
- Make reducing chronic absence a priority in state budgets and policy

NCECF's 2017 issue brief [AttendaNCe Counts: Chronic Absence in North Carolina](#), updated in 2018, examines how NC is doing on these policy and practice recommendations.⁴

Regular School Attendance in Federal Early Learning Legislation

- All states are required to report chronic absence rates in the K-12 education system for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for the first time.
- 36 states and DC have also chosen to use chronic absence as an accountability metric in their ESSA plans, generally starting in kindergarten or first grade. North Carolina has not included chronic absence as an accountability metric yet.
- Head Start Performance Standards now ask programs to track individual student attendance, take action for students missing more than 10 percent of school days, and implement strategies to encourage regular attendance, including engaging families in understanding the benefits of regular school attendance.

DISTRICT-LEVEL POLICY AND PRACTICE

The school district-level self-assessment asked school districts to share which of their attendance policies and practices are strong, and where there are opportunities for improvement. The survey quizzed school district superintendent office staff about their districts’:

- Chronic absence data collection, analysis and use
- Engagement with families and other stakeholders around chronic absence
- Regular attendance strategic planning and accountability
- Collaboration with community partners to address chronic absence.

Fifty-five out of 115 school districts (48 percent) responded.

NCECF’s 2018 issue brief [AttendaNCe Counts: What North Carolina School Districts are Doing to Reduce Chronic Absence](#) summarizes the results of the survey to analyze where NC school districts feel they are doing well and where they could use more support.⁵

SCHOOL- AND COMMUNITY-LEVEL POLICY AND PRACTICE

After considering state-level and district-level policy and practice in 2017 and 2018, this report focuses on North Carolina school- and community-level policy and practice around chronic absence. In 2019, NCECF adapted Attendance Works’ school- and community-level self-assessment into an online survey that went out to NC preschool, Head Start and elementary school teachers, staff, parents and volunteers. More than 1,500 people responded over a four month period, and their input is summarized and analyzed below. About 40 percent of respondents are elementary school teachers or administrators, 20 percent are preschool teachers or administrators, 16 percent are parents, 10 percent work in another role in an elementary school (attendance staff, for example), four percent work in a community organization that is involved in an elementary school, and one percent are volunteers.

Respondents came from across the state and from rural, suburban and urban schools. Respondents were fairly representative of North Carolinians by race; however, North Carolinians identifying as Hispanic were under-represented in the survey respondents. The survey was offered in English and Spanish. *For more about the demographics of the respondents, please see the Appendix.*

OVERALL SURVEY FINDINGS

- Respondents feel that their schools are highly welcoming and engaging and that they collect accurate attendance data.
- They are slightly less confident in their schools’ abilities to encourage attendance, engage families, communicate about attendance policies, and ensure staff capacity around chronic absence.
- Respondents feel there is the most room for improvement in partnering with community agencies to improve attendance, using a school-based attendance team to track and respond to chronic absence, and ensuring that attendance strategies are reflected in school improvement plans.
- Head Start, NC Pre-K and other preschool teachers and administrators tend to be more confident about their programs’ policies and practices than other respondents, including parents and elementary school staff. This may reflect that attendance policies are more successful in preschool settings, or it may reflect less of a concern with chronic absence among preschool staff than among elementary school staff. Research shows that chronic absence can impact students’ outcomes starting in preschool.
- Parent responses are fairly well aligned with those of elementary school-based staff (principals, teachers, attendance staff and “other” school-based staff) on what they consider strengths or weaknesses of their schools, but parents are more likely than school staff to report that schools need to do a better job of engaging with families.
- Staff that work directly on attendance are less confident in their schools’ approaches to chronic absence than other elementary school staff such as teachers and principals. *Note: Attendance staff represented only three percent of the respondents.*

- Staff from community-based agencies who work on attendance in schools have the least confidence of any of the respondents in schools' attendance policies and practices. *Note: community-based agency staff represented only four percent of the respondents.*
- A higher percentage of respondents from rural school districts report confidence in their schools' policies and practices than from urban and suburban school districts. This may reflect more successful attendance policies and practices in rural districts, or it may reflect less of a concern with chronic absence in these districts. Research shows that chronic absence happens in every district—nearly three out of every four NC school districts had from five to 15 percent of their elementary-school students chronically absent during the last data collection.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey included ten statements, and respondents were invited to respond on a four-point scale that included “This is a strength,” “This is ok for now,” “This could be better” and “This is an urgent gap for our school.” Some of the questions were asked of all respondents—teachers, administrators, staff, parents and volunteers—while those questions that focus on internal school policies and protocols were asked only of school-based staff. The questions, whom they were asked of, and number of respondents for each question are listed below. As expected with online surveys, the number of respondents drops off over the course of the ten questions.

QUESTION	ASKED OF ALL RESPONDENTS	ASKED ONLY OF SCHOOL-BASED STAFF	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: Our school is welcoming and engaging. It promotes safety, great teaching and learning, and good relationships among students, families, and staff.	X		1330
ENCOURAGING ATTENDANCE: Our school encourages all students to attend school every day, using year-round communication to families and students (back to school events, letters, flyers, personal phone calls, etc.) and regularly recognizes good and improved attendance.	X		1240
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: Our school staff reaches out to families and engages them as partners in problem-solving.	X		1211
COMMUNICATION ABOUT ATTENDANCE POLICIES: Our school ensures the school district attendance policy is communicated to families through materials sent home, posted on our website, and shared at school events.	X		1187
COMMUNITY PARTNERS: Our school partners with community agencies that offer resources (afterschool, health services, mentors) that help engage students and remove attendance barriers.	X		1170
STAFF CAPACITY: Our school ensures that staff knows what chronic absence is, why it matters, and best practices for reducing it.		X	1015
ATTENDANCE TEAM: Our attendance team, led by an administrator, meets at least every two weeks to: (a) monitor attendance data and trends; (b) coordinate the school's attendance strategy; (c) examine the reasons for absences using quantitative and qualitative data; and (d) ensure chronically absent students receive needed supports.		X	999

QUESTION	ASKED OF ALL RESPONDENTS	ASKED ONLY OF SCHOOL-BASED STAFF	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
ACCURATE DATA: The principal ensures that teachers and school staff take attendance accurately and that it is entered daily into the district data system.		X	1003
IMPROVEMENT PLAN: Our school's strategies for supporting student attendance are reflected in our school improvement plan.		X	987
SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICY: Our school district attendance policies promote taking a problem-solving approach that includes all staff, students, families and partners at our school.		X	985

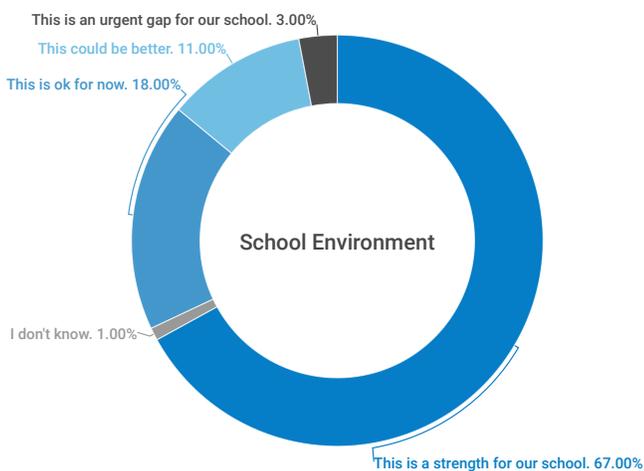
The [survey](#) ran as part of [EdNC's Reach NC Voices](#) project and was distributed by NCECF and widely across the state by our partners. We are grateful to EdNC for providing the survey platform as well as quantitative and qualitative data analysis support. Below are detailed survey findings for each question, including

overall quantitative responses, responses by "role" (i.e., principal, teacher, parent, etc.) and, where relevant, responses disaggregated by type of district (i.e., urban, rural, suburban) or by race or ethnicity. There are also "NC Voices"—representative verbatim quotes from survey respondents.

DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS • EVERYONE

The first five questions below were asked of all respondents—teachers, principals and administrators, school attendance staff, other school-based staff, staff of community-based organizations that are involved in the schools, parents and volunteers.

1 School Environment: Our school is welcoming and engaging. It promotes safety, great teaching and learning, and good relationships among students, families, and staff.



A **welcoming school environment** is one of the areas that respondents agree on the most, and they report that their schools are largely doing well in this area. Eighty-five percent of respondents indicate that this is either a strength for their school (67 percent) or is ok for now (18 percent). Very few respondents (three percent) feel that this is an urgent gap.

Looking at the results by role, elementary school principals and Head Start, NC Pre-K and preschool teachers and administrators are slightly more likely to feel that their schools offer a welcoming environment than are parents, elementary school teachers, and other school-based staff. Seventy-six percent of principals and 71 percent of preschool staff consider their school's environment to be a strength, while about two-thirds of parents, elementary school teachers and staff who work on attendance feel the same. Staff of community organizations that are involved in the schools are less confident—only about one-third of these respondents feel that a welcoming environment is a strength for the schools they work in, and 10 percent of them report that it is an urgent gap.

Respondents from urban school districts are less positive about how welcoming they view their schools' environments (55 percent consider it a strength) than are respondents from suburban and rural districts,

where 69 percent and 72 percent, respectively, consider it a strength. Respondents from urban districts are also slightly more likely to feel that having a welcoming environment is an urgent gap for their school (five percent reported this) than are their suburban and rural colleagues (two percent each).

Black respondents are more likely to report that schools need more work in this area than are white respondents. Sixty-three percent of Black respondents feel this is a strength, while 71 percent of white respondents feel the same. Only 12 percent of white respondents feel that this is an urgent gap or could be better, while 21 percent of Black respondents feel the same. *There were not sufficient sample sizes for respondents of other races to make any further analyses by race.*



NC VOICES ON SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

“The school has been through several principals but the staff, students and parents have remained the same supportive school. The students and parents love their school, regardless. The community has much pride in the school.”

“Our school is both welcoming and engaging to parents, students and community members. Our school is also a ‘low performing’ school where teaching and learning needs to be improved. We are working hard on improving this area.”

“We are really working on building this culture up, as it was something missing under previous leadership. It has grown tremendously and kids and parents feel more welcomed than ever.”

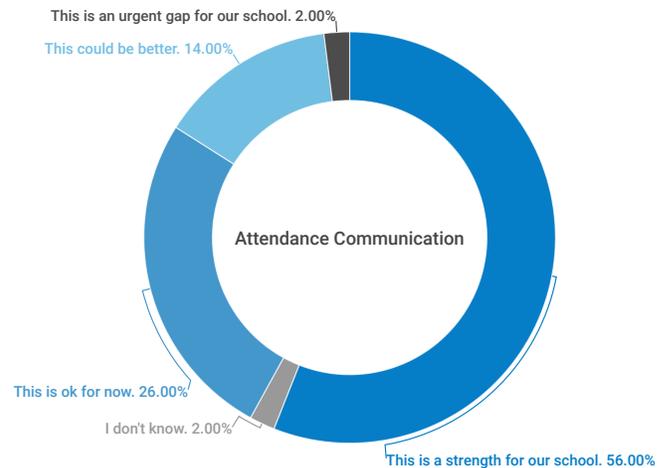
“I find the school staff and leadership to be more focused on rules and order rather than creating a positive learning environment, promoting self-esteem, and allowing for children to learn through play, exercise, social interaction, experiences, and/or exploration.”

“Parents and visitors tell us we are welcoming. Parents feel they can approach the staff.”

“Our climate committee and family engagement team organizes multiple surveys that collect these data throughout the school year.”

“We know by the way our students and parents greet us each day and how some of our students are not ready to leave in the afternoon when their parents come to pick them up.”

2 Communication about Attendance Policies: Our school ensures the school district attendance policy is communicated to families through materials sent home, posted on our website, and shared at school events.



More than half of respondents feel that **communication about attendance policies with families** is a strength for their schools and another 26 percent report it is ok for now. Overall, only a few (two percent) feel it is an urgent gap.

Sixty-six percent of preschool teachers and administrators and 70 percent of “other” elementary school-based staff report that communication of attendance policies is a strength for their schools. They have more confidence on this item than do elementary school principals (57 percent of whom consider this a strength), elementary-school teachers (51 percent), and staff who work directly on attendance (44 percent). Community-based organization staff who work in schools are the least confident—only one-third of them report that this is a strength, and 12 percent report that it is an urgent gap.

Parents fall in the middle of the pack—56 percent of them report that this is a strength for their schools, and another 31 percent report that it is ok for now. One percent of parents consider this an urgent gap.



NC VOICES ON COMMUNICATION

"Information regarding attendance is sent home monthly and reminders are available daily on the school website."

"I am not certain of where the attendance policy is located or where parents can easily find it. The school does send home a notice once students have missed more than 10 days, unexcused."

"Would love to see monthly attendance reports that show parents exactly how much school their child is missing. More incentives for good attendance would be great, too."

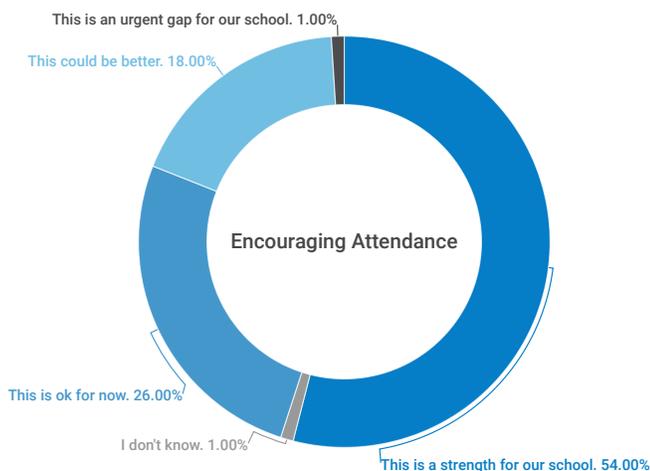
"Our school and our county do not have a strong attendance policy and each school is different. Many schools report they are 'not allowed' to try and make a difference in chronic absences of students."

"Our district's attendance policy is written like prison guidelines and is more threatening than inviting. The school does send messages and reminders about how important being there is."

"We do what is required but do not go above and beyond. However, we have discussed the need to go above and beyond."

"I haven't seen anything about an attendance policy anywhere."

3 Encouraging Attendance: Our school encourages all students to attend school every day, using year-round communication to families and students (back to school events, letters, flyers, personal phone calls, etc.) and regularly recognizes good and improved attendance.



A little more than half of the respondents feel that **encouraging attendance** is a strength for their schools, and another 26 percent report that it is ok for now. Only a handful (one percent) report that it is an urgent gap.

Preschool staff (including Head Start, NC Pre-K and other preschool teachers and administrators) are the most confident in their schools' approach to encouraging attendance, with 65 percent of these respondents reporting that this is a strength and another 27 percent responding that this is ok for now, for a total of 92 percent who are fairly pleased with their schools' approaches. Parents also feel their schools are doing a good job encouraging attendance—85 percent report that this is a strength or ok for now. Parents score their schools higher on this item than do elementary school-based staff. Respondents least likely to feel that their schools are doing a great job of encouraging attendance are staff from community-based organizations that work in schools (40 percent report this is a strength) and staff who work directly on attendance in elementary schools (32 percent report this is a strength).

Respondents from urban and suburban districts are more concerned about their schools' practices around encouraging attendance than are their rural counterparts. While 76 percent of urban and 75 percent of suburban district respondents consider encouraging attendance a strength for their schools or ok for now, 84 percent of rural respondents feel the same.

Hispanic respondents score their schools higher on this item than do non-Hispanic respondents—89 percent of Hispanic and 79 percent of non-Hispanic respondents consider encouraging attendance a strength of their schools or ok for now. *Note: this analysis is drawn from a sample size of 37 Hispanic respondents.*



NC VOICES ON ENCOURAGEMENT

"We normally call each child within the first hour to see if they are attending or not. Our family social workers also meet with parents after an excessive amount of unexcused absences to see what is going on and to see if there is anything we could do to help with getting them to school."

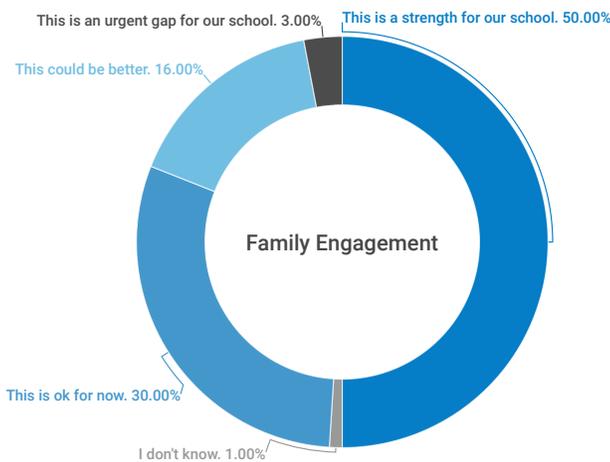
"I'm not sure how they take attendance. The count we get for our kids sometimes seems off. The rules around tardies are inconsistent and they don't follow up about excused/unexcused absences."

"We have recently started addressing attendance issues on a more routine basis. This is improving. We should do more to recognize perfect attendance and improved attendance."

“We address attendance issues through verbal and written communication. We hold monthly attendance meetings with families of students who have attendance concerns. Teachers make phone calls home when a student has been out of school for two or more consecutive days.”

“We have strong Family Advocates, and they encourage parents bring their children to school. We have open communication, plus they receive phone calls, etc.”

4 Family Engagement: Our school staff reaches out to families and engages them as partners in problem-solving.



Half of respondents feel that **engaging families** is a strength for their schools, and another 30 percent feel it does not need immediate action (ok for now). Three percent report it is an urgent gap.

Preschool teachers and administrators are the most confident about their schools' ability to engage families—65 percent of them report this is a strength. Parents and staff from community-based organizations working in the schools are more likely to report that family engagement is an urgent gap for their schools—at four and six percent, respectively—than are elementary school-based staff. However, a higher portion of parents also see family engagement as a strength than do school-based staff—while 51 percent of parents report it is a strength for their schools, fewer than half of attendance staff, elementary school teachers and principals feel the same. This suggests that parents have a wide range of experiences when it comes to family engagement. Community-based organization staff report that the schools they work in have room for improvement on family engagement—only one-third report that it is a strength.

A higher percentage of Black respondents report family engagement as a strength than white respondents—56 and 48 percent, respectively. *Note: There were not sufficient sample sizes for respondents of other races to make any further analyses by race.*



NC VOICES ON ENGAGEMENT

“We have a parent facilitator that helps organize volunteers to help out in the building and work on committees, but we need to reach out to more families on a more regular basis.”

“We offer monthly parent meetings so that parents can have input on what is going on in the classroom and stay up to date on different activities that are happening in the classroom. Parents are encouraged to plan classroom celebrations. We also offer parent workshops throughout the year and parents are also encouraged to volunteer in the classrooms.”

“We make many efforts to encourage family involvement and communication but many parents with very young children are under a lot of responsibilities and demands and their time is limited. There are also financial stressors that prevent parents from taking time off from work to participate in things like home visits, open houses, volunteering and parent/teacher conferences.”

“We could do a better job of providing interpreters for school events, so everyone can fully participate.”

“We have amazing support from our parents!”

“Our program teaches parents how to advocate for their children, participate in daily learning as the child's first teacher and provided additional information to encourage additional learning. We have parent conferences and assist in problem-solving. We also offer Triple P for our families.”

“Need more focus on parent-teacher communication.”

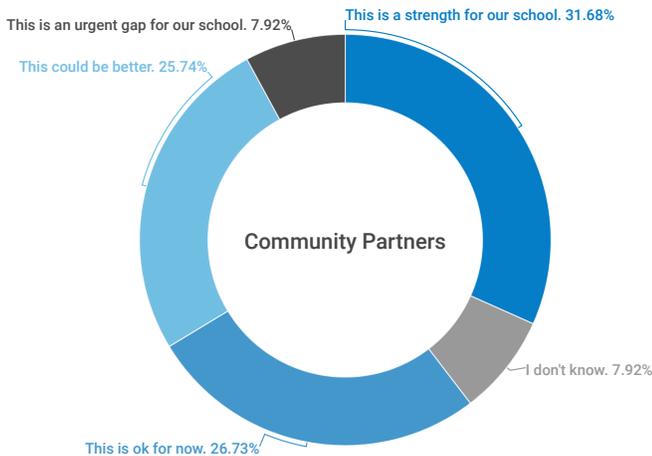
“We have a large English Language Learner population and we work to keep them included in all of our interactions.”

“When there are concerns about any issue, including absenteeism, staff reach out to families and look for solutions together. Sometimes that involves the Preschool Office or it could include the Child-Family Support Team at the school. There are times when it could mean sharing the community list of food banks or other outside resources.”

“Having worked with the county level parent advisory council for exceptional students and Council of PTAs it is clear administrators do not want to engage in areas parents are struggling with in their daily lives. There is a profound disconnect.”

“Some parents are strongly engaged, but those who are difficult to engage are not encouraged.”

5 Community Partners: Our school partners with community agencies that offer resources (afterschool, health services, mentors) that help engage students and remove attendance barriers.



Partnering with community agencies is an area that respondents overall report has room for improvement—only one-third feel it is a strength, with another third saying it is ok for now. Eight percent report that it is an urgent gap.

A higher percentage of preschool teachers and administrators (39 percent) and community-based organization staff (also 39 percent) feel that this is a strength for their schools than do their elementary school-based colleagues, including staff who work directly on attendance (33 percent), principals (30

percent) and teachers (26 percent). Though community-based staff are more likely to feel that partnering with agencies like theirs is a strength for their schools, they are also more likely than any other respondent to feel that it is an urgent gap (12 percent report this). This suggests that community-based staff have a wide variety of experiences in how successful they feel at engaging their local schools. Elementary school teachers are also more likely than others to see this as an area for improvement—10 percent feel it is an urgent gap. One-third of parents consider this a strength, but 15 percent of parents report that they don't have enough knowledge to answer this question—more than any other respondent group.



NC VOICES ON PARTNERS

"Although the school has some community partners, more are always needed."

"We have numerous school partners that are community agencies, however we need to tap into these organizations as to how they can help with attendance."

"We have community partners provide services for children while at school (i.e., Mental Health, Speech, OT). They assist in notifying parents about importance of consistent routines."

"We don't have a lot of outside resources due to being in a rural poor community."

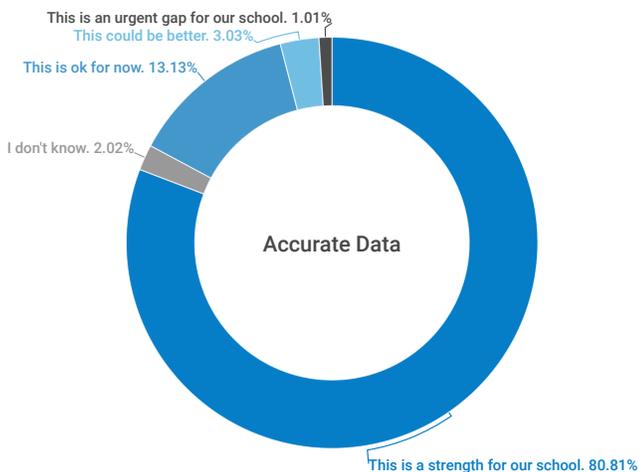
"We have some resources in our county that offer programs but would benefit with some new and innovative ones that address more clinical issues dealing with mental health and behavioral issues."

"Community resources have decreased in the last ten years as families' needs have risen."

DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS • SCHOOL-BASED STAFF

The following five questions were asked of only a subset of respondents—teachers, principals and administrators, school attendance staff, other school-based staff, and staff of community-based organizations that are involved in the schools. Because these questions deal with internal school policies and protocols, parents and volunteers were not asked these questions.

1 Accurate Data: The principal ensures that teachers and school staff take attendance accurately and that it is entered daily into the district data system.



This item received the highest rating from respondents overall—80 percent report that collecting and entering accurate attendance data is a strength of their schools, and only a handful (four percent) report that it is an urgent gap or could be better.

Staff working directly on attendance in the schools, however, are the most likely to say this is an urgent gap (six percent of them report that), and the least likely to say it is a strength—while more than 90 percent of teachers, principals, preschool, and other school-based staff report that accurate data is a strength or ok for now, fewer than 80 percent of staff directly engaged in attendance at the school feel the same. Staff of community-based organizations working in the schools do not feel they have the knowledge to answer this question—one-third of them report that they do not know.

Respondents from rural districts are slightly more likely to say accurate data collection is a strength or ok for now (97 percent) than are their colleagues from suburban (92 percent) and urban (90 percent) districts.



NC VOICES ON ACCURATE DATA

“Each homeroom teacher is required to take attendance by 8:30 in the morning. A drop-down box by each child's name allows the teacher to put in the correct reason for the absence. A 20-day report is provided each teacher by the data manger in order to make sure that everything has been entered correctly.”

“No time to correct late comers in the computer system and currently have no data manager to assist with the task.”

“We have to take attendance in several different areas and all of our paperwork has to be accurate. Our family social workers also have to check our attendance each day.”

“Our data manager communicates with staff to ensure attendance is taken accurately. Teachers remind parents to bring notes for doctor's appointments, etc.”

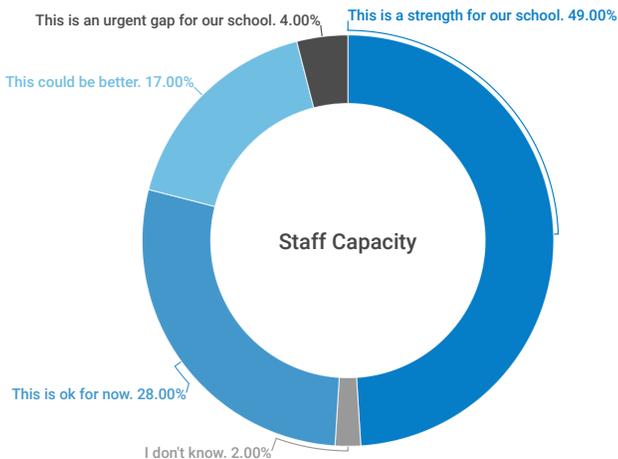
“We could do better. Our open campus lends itself to parents trying to circumvent reporting to the office.”

“Our teachers are required to take attendance by 8:15 every day. They understand that they are held accountable for doing attendance and doing it accurately. This is also a part of our staff handbook.”

“We receive emails from our secretary to remind us to take attendance if we haven't already done so.”

“The administrator checks each classroom attendance daily.”

2 Staff Capacity: Our school ensures that staff knows what chronic absence is, why it matters, and best practices for reducing it.



About half of respondents report that **staff capacity on chronic absence** is a strength for their school, with another 28 percent feeling like it is ok for now. Four percent consider it an urgent gap.

Nearly 60 percent of preschool staff feels this is a strength for their schools, while just under half of elementary school teachers and principals feel the same. Only 29 percent of staff who work on attendance and 25 percent of community-based agency staff feel that staff capacity on chronic absence is a strength. Elementary school teachers and staff who work on attendance are most likely to report that this is an urgent gap (six percent of each), followed closely by five percent of "other" elementary-school staff.

Just over half of rural school district respondents consider this a strength (52 percent), compared to 45 percent of both urban and suburban respondents. Suburban respondents are most likely to report it is an urgent gap (six percent).



NC VOICES ON STAFF CAPACITY

"Just recently 'chronic' absence was explained to the Director and is now being incorporated in staff trainings."

"District reports are sent home, but there is no formal training given to staff about what constitutes chronic absences. It is most likely just posted on the county's website and also our school website."

"Our school goes over this policy every year."

"Our staff know to contact admin/social worker when they notice attendance concerns. I'm not sure if they know the best practices for reducing chronic absence."

"Would be great if there was a follow through and support. Shrugged shoulders and there really isn't anything more we can do is the usual response to our chronic absences."

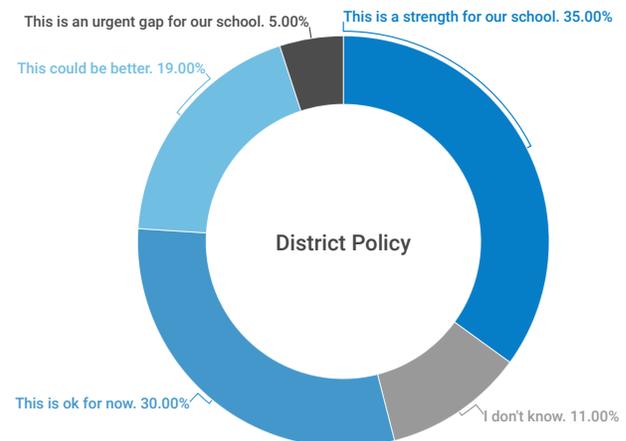
"We are only told that if the kids don't come, the school doesn't get paid. And if we don't get paid, the school will close."

"Our Multi-Tier support team reviews this information and shares it with their grade level."

"Staff is well informed and we have in house support to work with us weekly on attendance."

"We have training at the beginning of each year during our in-service training to promote awareness of these issues."

3 School District Policy: Our school district attendance policies promote taking a problem-solving approach that includes all staff, students, families and partners at our school.



Just over a third of respondents overall consider their **school district-level attendance policies** a strength, with another third reporting they are ok for now. Five percent report that this is an urgent gap, while 11 percent report that they don't know enough to answer the question.

Preschool staff, elementary school principals and attendance staff are comfortable answering this question—only six, three and three percent of them, respectively, report that they don't know—while between 10 and 32 percent of other school-based staff and community-based staff report not knowing. Preschool staff are most optimistic, with 49 percent reporting that their school district policies are a strength. One-third of principals feel the same, along with one-quarter of attendance staff. Seven percent of principals and six percent of attendance staff feel this is an urgent gap.



NC VOICES ON DISTRICT POLICY

"We have a step-by-step procedure for addressing absenteeism that helps our staff implement support."

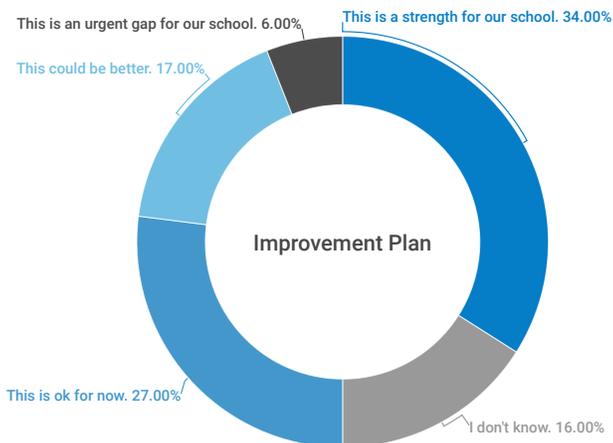
"Decentralized approach in our county seems to yield a free-wheeling approach."

"I don't think that all stakeholders are part of the problem-solving approach."

"Students hear about good attendance not just from the social worker but school nurse and teachers combined."

"Not sure our county even has a policy."

4 Improvement Plan: Our school's strategies for supporting student attendance are reflected in our school improvement plan.



Only about a third of respondents feel that attendance strategies are well reflected in their schools' improvement plans. A fairly large percentage of respondents overall—16 percent—report not knowing enough to answer this question.

Only principals seem comfortable answering this question—while only three percent of them report that they "don't know," between 16 and 20 percent of all other preschool- and school-based respondents report not knowing enough to answer the question, and more than half of community-based staff report that they don't know. Principals' responses are evenly divided among strength (31 percent), ok for now (31 percent) and could be better (30 percent), with another six percent reporting that this is an urgent gap.

Rural school district respondents are much more likely to report this as a strength (40 percent) than their urban and suburban counterparts (27 percent each), and urban and suburban district respondents are more likely to report that this is an urgent gap (9 percent each) than are their rural counterparts (three percent). Between 13 and 21 percent of respondents across types of districts report that they don't know enough to answer the question.



NC VOICES ON IMPROVEMENT PLANS

"This is addressed in small ways to raise test scores and reduce instructional time lost due to suspensions, etc. but it really needs to be addressed as a separate issue for students with chronic attendance problems."

"Attendance is not discussed at our school, except by the teachers who deal with the chronic absences of students. We have very little administrative or county-level support."

"We are well above the district average on attendance but still factor it into our school improvement plan with parallels to behavior and academics."

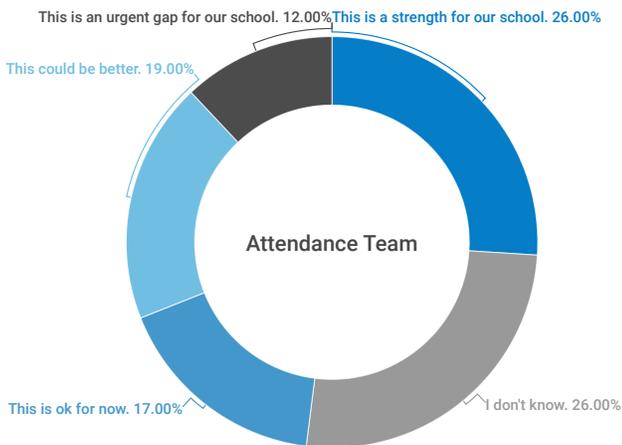
"We do not address attendance in our plan, but that is because it is not a glaring issue and we address it consistently throughout the year."

"Our school's strategies for supporting student attendance are reflected in our school improvement plan."

"Currently, it is not addressed in our School Improvement plan, however as we reviewed our processes for this year that is one area we want to incorporate."

"This isn't something we thought to include in the plan—now we will!"

5 Attendance Team: Our attendance team, led by an administrator, meets at least every two weeks to: (a) monitor attendance data and trends; (b) coordinate the school's attendance strategy; (c) examine the reasons for absences using quantitative and qualitative data; and (d) ensure chronically absent students receive needed supports.



Having an **attendance team** that meets regularly and follows up to reduce chronic absence is the item scored lowest by respondents overall. Only one-fourth feel that this is a strength for their schools, and 12 percent feel it is an urgent gap. Another one-fourth of respondents report that they do not know enough about it to answer the question.

This seems to be the item that elementary-school principals and staff who work directly with attendance are the most concerned about—16 percent of principals and 26 percent of attendance staff feel it is an urgent gap. Principals and attendance staff also seem to be much more comfortable answering this question than other categories of respondents. While only two and nine percent of principals and attendance staff, respectively, report that they don't know enough to answer the question, between 24 and 58 percent of each of the other groups of respondents report not knowing enough.

At 17 percent, urban school district respondents were more likely than their rural and suburban counterparts (11 percent each) to consider this an urgent gap.



NC VOICES ON ATTENDANCE TEAMS

"Attendance is not discussed at our school. We do not have an attendance team."

"We meet weekly with the attendance team which includes the social worker, school counselor and school psychologist."

"We have developed a goal team to support this effort but expectations and who needs to be 'in charge' of this is still an issue."

"We do not have an attendance team, though our social worker addresses attendance concerns and brings administration into it as warranted."

"We meet once per month. Every 2 weeks is not realistic because we have several Attendance Committee members who only work part-time at our school and on different days from each other."

"We hold attendance meetings every month. This team consists of our school social worker, school nurse, school counselor, principal, and teachers as appropriate. We hold monthly MTSS [Multi-Tiered System of Supports] meetings and discuss attendance as it is appropriate for each student. Teachers communicate attendance issues when they meet with families."

"Our Student Support group (data manager, school social worker, school psychologist and counselors) meets monthly. Absences are discussed but not always followed through with urgency."

Reasons for Chronic Absence in NC

We asked all respondents to share their impressions of the causes of chronic absence in North Carolina. When invited to check all that apply, they responded:

- Illness or health issues: 83%
- Lack of transportation/Missing the bus: 49%
- Family stress or emergencies: 44%
- Travel: 22%
- Difficulties with housing or food: 18%
- Bullying or feeling like they don't belong: 8%
- Spending time with a parent who is often absent (for example, on deployment): 8%
- Bad grades: 2%
- Other: 14% (some examples below)

These are the same categories of chronic absence factors that are highlighted in national research. However, the specific causes of chronic absence can vary significantly from region to region, from school to school, and from family to family. In the survey, for example, respondents from rural school districts were the most likely to report that illness or health factors keep children out of school, though that was the top response for rural, urban and suburban districts.

Urban respondents were slightly more likely than suburban and rural respondents to report that transportation, family stress/emergencies, bullying, spending time with an absent parent and bad grades were critical factors. Urban respondents were much more likely than their rural and suburban counterparts to list difficulties with housing or food as a cause. Suburban respondents were more likely to report travel as a key factor than were urban and rural respondents.

Preparing for attendance campaigns with a needs assessment to understand exactly why children are missing school can ensure that efforts are targeted to the right causes.



NC VOICES ON REASONS FOR CHRONIC ABSENCE

"We've had 40-50 students absent on some recent dates due to illness. We also seem to have a regular number of well-to-do parents that will take their children on extended trips and vacations of various kinds."

"Students tell me that they stayed home for many reasons. I have heard that they have no car and got up late or missed the bus, went for a haircut, had to babysit siblings, etc."

"Families in crisis and parent in addiction."

"Transportation is a problem for many of our parents. We have limited bus routes for Head Start and none for Early Head Start programs."

"I work from home and find it difficult to pick up my younger son from Pre-K when my husband is working out of town. Does not apply to our 1st grader who rides the bus."

"Children with hidden disabilities that the school will not acknowledge and accommodate."

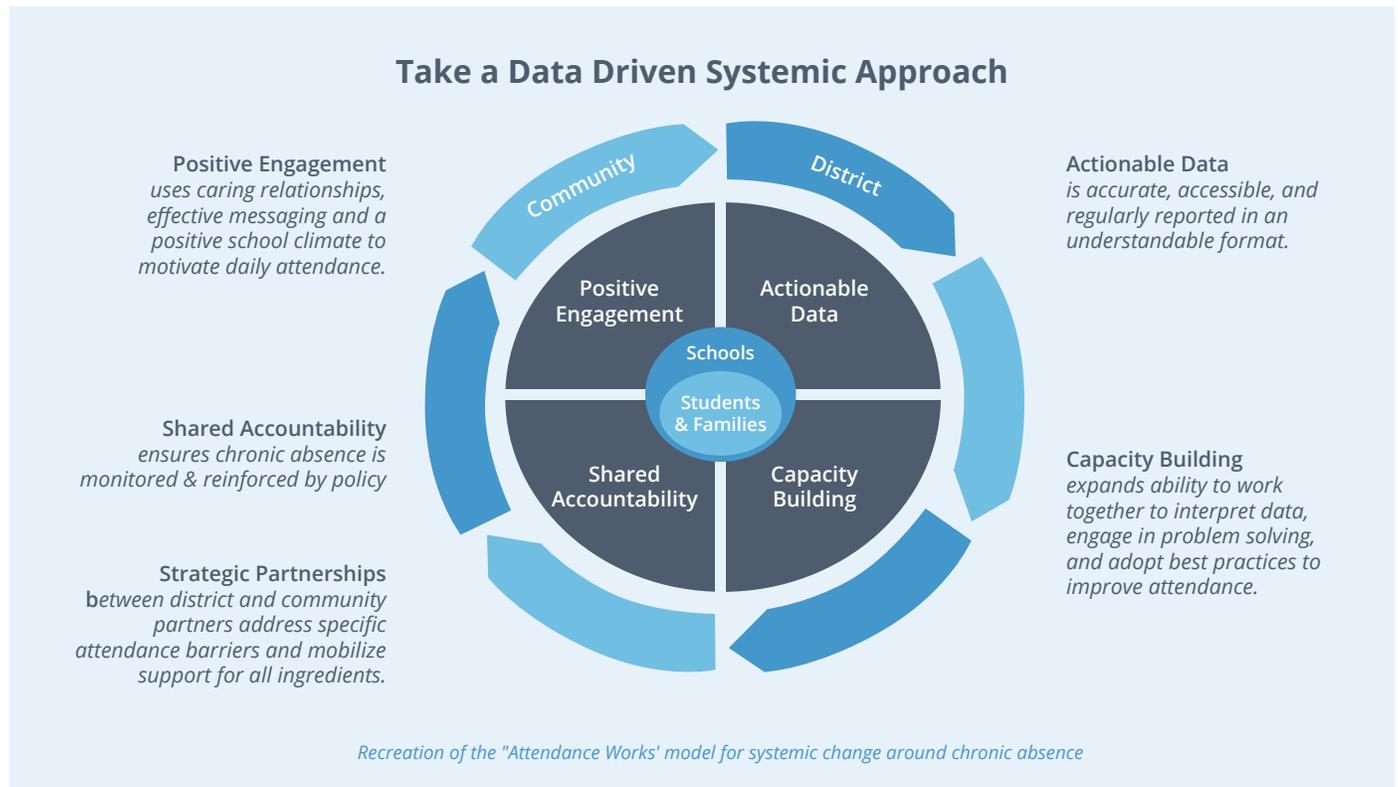
"[My] grandson [was] suspended in kindergarten and first grade for behavior issues when I felt in-school-suspension would have been a better choice to keep him in school."

"Because I have children that have a chronic illness (...) and anxieties."

TAKING ACTION: WHAT CAN SCHOOLS AND THEIR COMMUNITY PARTNERS DO?

Attendance Works' model for systemic change around chronic absence includes five action areas for schools:

1. Positive engagement with families
2. Actionable data collection and use
3. Capacity building to engage in effective problem solving
4. Shared accountability to ensure that chronic absence is addressed community-wide
5. Strategic partnerships among school and community partners



The data collected through this survey suggest several approaches that NC elementary schools can take to reduce chronic absence that align with Attendance Works' model for systemic change:

POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT

BUILD ON SUCCESS TO ENCOURAGE ATTENDANCE.

Parent and school staff respondents agree that their schools are doing a great job of being warm and welcoming but could improve their efforts to encourage attendance and communicate about attendance policies. Schools can build off their success in welcoming students and families and making them feel they belong by including supportive, proactive attendance messaging as part of their positive school climates.

ENGAGE FAMILIES. Survey data suggest that school staff feels they are engaging parents more than parents do. One way to learn from families is to do a needs assessment to better understand from them the barriers they face in getting children to school every day and what would support them to do that.

ACTIONABLE DATA

USE THE DATA TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE. Staff reports that schools are doing a good job accurately collecting attendance data, but not such a good job using it to reduce chronic absence. School leaders can build on their data-collection success by having a school-based attendance team analyze the data regularly and respond to cases of chronic absence.

CAPACITY BUILDING

LISTEN TO ATTENDANCE STAFF. The survey data suggest that staff who work directly with attendance in elementary schools are less confident about their schools' attendance policies and practices than are their school leaders. Principals can talk with their attendance staff to better understand their concerns and support them in implementing new approaches.

BUILD STAFF CAPACITY TO ADDRESS ATTENDANCE.

The survey data suggest that school staff could use a better understanding of the importance of regular school attendance and professional development on how to support children (and families) to attend regularly.

ENGAGE WITH EARLY LEARNING PARTNERS.

Head Start, NC Pre-K and other preschool staff and administrators report feeling more confident about their policies and practices around regular school attendance than do teachers and administrators in elementary schools. Elementary schools can reach out to their early learning partners to better understand their approaches to reducing chronic absence. For example, Head Start has specific protocols in place to support and engage families and encourage regular attendance.

LEARN FROM NEARBY ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS. As chronic absence data becomes more readily available, principals in schools with higher chronic absence rates

can request mentoring around addressing attendance from similar schools in their districts with lower chronic absence rates. Since the reasons for chronic absence are highly variable based on geography and sub-population, seeking support from a nearby school serving a similar population could be an effective approach.

SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY

BUILD ACCOUNTABILITY FOR REGULAR

ATTENDANCE. Survey data suggest that many schools are not currently addressing regular attendance in their school improvement plans. School leaders can lift up this issue and highlight it as a specific area of focus for improvement.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY SUPPORT. The survey data suggest that many NC schools are not currently in partnerships with community agencies that can support their efforts to improve regular attendance, and that community-based organization staff who are working in schools in North Carolina are not confident about current school attendance policies and practices. School leaders can invite community-based groups to engage with their schools around chronic absence. For schools who already have community-based groups engaged, principals can work to better understand their concerns about school policies and practices.

Free Tools for Schools from Attendance Works

Attendance Works offers a range of free tools that schools can use to improve regular attendance, including:

- An environmental scan and needs assessment tool can support school leaders to engage school staff, students, parents and community members in identifying strengths and opportunities to promote positive school culture and strong attendance. The scan is available at: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/scan-environment-attendance/>
- Messaging resources, including flyers and handouts for attendance campaigns that can reach families with young children, are available at: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/messaging/>
- An excel-based attendance tracking tool for preschool and K-5 that can be used to collect, monitor and analyze chronic absence data is available at: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/data-tools/>
- An online curriculum that can be used to provide joint professional development on chronic absence on how to create warm, welcoming climates, help families understand the importance of regular attendance, and do personal outreach with families who need more supports is available at: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/teaching-attendance-curriculum/>

Many other resources are available on the Attendance Works website at <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/>

Regular Attendance in Kindergarten Transition

Transition to kindergarten is a current focus in North Carolina through the state's Every Student Succeeds Act plan and the Preschool Development Grant. Of note, NC's Pre-K/K Transition Pilot is a partnership between the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Public Instruction to support communication between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers, give families a way to provide information about their children to kindergarten teachers, train teachers to use the child development data they receive, and provide a way to transfer the data from Pre-K to kindergarten. The pilot is now in 18 communities across the state and includes private child care settings, public school Pre-K classrooms and Head Start classrooms.

Transition to kindergarten is a critical time that schools can impact chronic absence. Chronic absence in preschool can serve as an early warning sign that families may not have the support they need before they transition into kindergarten. In North Carolina and nationally, more kindergarten students are chronically absent than first through third graders. Research suggests that the children who are chronically absent in kindergarten are the same ones likely to be chronically absent in middle and high school. Addressing chronic absence in the transition to kindergarten can make a measurable difference in a school's kindergarten chronic absence rates and lays the foundation for future school success.

Existing activities can be leveraged in the transition process to address chronic absence. Attendance Works' Early Matters toolkit provides ideas and resources for addressing chronic absence during the transition into kindergarten, including:

- Address attendance during transition events
 - » Example: Use a friendly attendance mascot to underscore the importance of strong attendance at transition events.
- Discuss attendance when welcoming families
 - » Example: Reach out to families with a warm, welcoming postcard, letter, call or text before school starts, talking about the importance of on-time attendance.
- Equip families to connect attendance with educational success
 - » Example: Show families a sample report card and explain how to interpret the data, including attendance.
- Use attendance to nurture a strong school community
 - » Example: Engage family members in developing and operating walking school buses, especially if unsafe routes or unreliable transportation to school are a challenge.
- Monitor, analyze and review chronic absence data
 - » Example: Use free excel-based preschool attendance tracking tool provided by Attendance Works.
- Offer supports to reduce health-related absences
 - » Example: Use data on chronic absence from preschool and kindergarten to identify where to target health- and trauma-related supports.

Attendance Works' Early Matters toolkit is available at <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/integrating-attendance-into-kindergarten-transition/early-matters-toolkit-resources/>. Opportunities for supporting kindergarten regular attendance are not limited to transition time. Attendance Works' Roadmap: What To Do When is a year-round guide to opportunities and supports for the kindergarten year. It is available at <https://www.attendanceworks.org/roadmap-attendance-awareness-at-transition-into-kindergarten/>.

BRIGHT SPOTS

NCECF would like to thank the leadership and staff of C.C. Wright Elementary in Wilkes County, Union Elementary and Midway Elementary in Sampson County, Selma Elementary in Johnston County, G.W. Carver Elementary in Edgecombe County and the New Hanover County School District for sharing their approaches to addressing chronic absence in their schools.

C.C. WRIGHT ELEMENTARY Using Data to Drive Change

C.C. Wright Elementary is a Title I school in Wilkes County, North Carolina. The school serves 375 students, nearly half of whom are economically disadvantaged.

BACKGROUND

For the past five years, Principal Kimberlee Stone has made student attendance her priority. Fueled by the recognition that attendance habits formed in elementary school influence a student's likelihood of graduating high school, Dr. Stone's vision provides direction for a dedicated team to use data driven practices to reduce chronic absence.

"Being present at school is the only way you can be successful at school. If I want my students to be successful, they have to be here." —Dr. Kimberlee Stone, Principal

GETTING TO ACTION

Each day the school's data manager pulls a report from NC PowerSchool on every child who was absent. Additional absences for the current school year are included in that report. On a case-by-case basis, Dr. Stone and her team—the teacher, school social worker, school nurse, assistant principal, and school counselor—review the student's history. If the team identifies a trend or concern, they request that the family attend a meeting to address the child's absences, identify barriers to attendance, and develop a path forward. In some cases, the student's absence is an anomaly. However, the skilled data manager at C.C. Wright is able to mine data in order to identify when there is a pattern, as in a case where a third grader had 86 cumulative absences since enrolling at C.C. Wright.

Dr. Stone acknowledges that chronic absence "didn't happen overnight and it isn't going to get fixed overnight. A lot of times there is a longer history than just the child's history. If anything, you are breaking a cycle." To address this, the school staff seek to foster an environment of trust and respect through regular engagement with parents at drop-off/pick-up, through phone calls and letters, and in the front office. Through these relationships, teachers and administrators look to get ahead of chronic absence issues so that future attendance reports continue to show a decline in chronic absence.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- * **Put in the time.** Each team member has a task to complete that is integral to meeting the needs of each student and his or her family. Team members attend meetings, gather and monitor data, contact families, and talk with students.
- * **Build relationships.** Teachers and staff are intentional in their efforts to let families know that they care about their children. Through home visits, phone calls and meetings, the C.C. Wright family makes every effort to build trust with students and their families.
- * **Teamwork.** C.C. Wright would not be successful without a driven leader and committed team members. Their knowledgeable data manager, committed teachers and social workers and caring staff make it possible.
- * **Data, data, data.** Data driven practices are at the center of efforts at C.C. Wright. Without the numbers, they cannot identify at-risk children. A skilled data manager is key to their success.

UNION ELEMENTARY Building Staff and Families' Capacity to Improve Attendance

Union Elementary is a Title I school in Sampson County, North Carolina. Seventy percent of the school's students are economically disadvantaged.

BACKGROUND

A shared vision is the key to Union Elementary School's work to combat chronic absenteeism. Principal Dondi Hobbs began the year by showing her faculty last year's chronic absenteeism numbers. Once people saw the data, she says, they were ready to confront the problem.

GETTING TO ACTION

All Union Elementary staff started by completing online modules developed by Attendance Works and the Virginia Department of Education to better understand the implications of chronic absenteeism and how to address it. "Once we unpacked the reason why we needed to do something about our attendance rate," Principal Hobbs says, "we got a lot more buy-in from the staff and faculty about doing the things that we put in place."

The school's next step was to share this new knowledge and focus with families. Just sharing the importance of attendance and the school's current performance was enough to raise average attendance from 85 percent before winter break to 93 percent after. This change underscores that getting the right information into the right hands is essential to addressing this problem.

Staff and administrators keep attendance on families' minds by talking about it at award days and sending home information about the risks of chronic absenteeism. Wall signs encourage and track attendance levels by class, and students can earn rewards including dance parties and gift certificates when they reach certain attendance thresholds. Principal Hobbs notes that efforts like these can only be successful if they are sustained, so she is careful to only institute programs that she knows can be carried out throughout the school year. Consistent implementation of programs sends the message to students, teachers and families that the school is serious about regular attendance and ready to support them to make it happen.

Union Elementary and Sampson County Schools are in the middle of a multi-year rollout of North Carolina's Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) program. Each school has an MTSS representative that leads school-based attendance committees and meets with the other MTSS representatives at the central office to review county-wide data and share lessons learned.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- * **Sharing data** with school staff described the problem for teachers.
- * **Engaging with families** encouraged daily attendance.
- * **Incentives.** Implementing positive attendance incentives for students with consistency was key.

SELMA ELEMENTARY School Social Workers Lead the Charge

Selma Elementary is a Title I school in Johnston County, North Carolina. The school serves 784 students, more than 90 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged.

BACKGROUND

Unlike any other elementary school in Johnston County, Selma Elementary has a dedicated school social worker. In order to improve the school's student support services, the principal made the decision to allocate Title I funds to the salary of a full-time, in-school social worker. Johnston County Schools also provides another social worker for part of each week to help meet the needs of Selma's students and families. The social workers help Selma increase community and family involvement and take action from data pulled by their data manager in their efforts to reduce chronic absence.

"We want them to come and get an education. We also want them to be safe, and to feel like they can come here and have someone at school who cares about them."

—Elizabeth Ashley, Social Worker

GETTING TO ACTION

The school staff at Selma realized that barriers to attendance at their school reach far beyond a student missing the bus. In response, the team advocates for continued community support and innovative ways to support families' and students' intrinsic motivation to attend school every day. The school's social workers help coordinate "Backpack Buddies" weekly donations of non-perishable foods from churches and community members for families who need that support. While this program does not explicitly address attendance, it strengthens the relationship between the school, families and the community, and it incentivizes parents to get students to school.

Teachers use classroom contracts inspired by "Capturing Kids' Hearts" that focus on peer support and accountability to build classroom success. The social workers also implemented a county-developed attendance contract for families of students at risk of chronic absence. They monitor attendance through weekly NC PowerSchool reports generated by the school's data manager. Powered by data, they meet with families to better understand attendance barriers. In these meetings, the social workers and families use the attendance contract to outline reasons for absence and get family commitment to improving student attendance. Thus far, all families contacted have attended in-person meetings. On weekly reports, Selma Elementary is seeing improvements to student attendance.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- * **Team of dedicated social workers.** The principal at Selma saw the needs of the students and made the decision to get more specialized instructional support personnel—a full-time social worker supplemented by a county social worker. The team of social workers champions the students and works to meet their needs.
- * **Community support.** Partnering with the community helps fill in gaps outside of academics. Selma looks to serve the whole child and working with the community helps them do that.
- * **Data.** Using NC PowerSchool and a data manager, the social work team can target the most at-risk children and families with the right support.

NEW HANOVER SCHOOLS

Assessing Risk to Come Back After Disaster

New Hanover County Schools serve 26,000 students, and the district is located on the eastern coast of North Carolina.

BACKGROUND

As a coastal county, New Hanover is no stranger to natural disasters. According to the county's director of student support services, the number of children that qualify for McKinney-Vento services has doubled since Hurricane Florence in September 2018 to approximately 1,200 students. Although they often face adverse circumstances due to their geographic location, the county is innovative in their approach to meeting student needs.

"I just can't stress enough the importance of the personal connection with attendance... [Social workers] really take to heart their advocacy to kids and families." —Kristin Jackson, Student Support Services Director

GETTING TO ACTION

About 10 years ago, top leadership within the county, including county commissioners, made specialized instructional support staff a priority. As of March 2018, New Hanover County Schools had 69 school counselors, 16 school psychologists, 48 social workers, and 13 county-provided clinical therapists to assist their 26,000 students.⁶ In addition to the listed support personnel, the county health department provides nurses at every school and a mobile dental clinic.⁷ With the commitment of these county funds, individual schools are not faced with the tough decision to fund or not to fund support services.

New Hanover County's allocation of student support services is approached with a needs-based lens. The county developed a rubric to determine each school's student body risk level. Using total number of students, number of economically-disadvantaged students, and the percentage of students passing end-of-year tests, the county identifies how at-risk each school's students are.

Data in hand, the county's student support services team allocates specialized instructional support service personnel to each school, rather than allocating student support services based on school size. A school with a lower population but higher risk—for example due to events like Hurricane Florence—may receive more support services than a larger school at lower risk. The county talks directly with principals and support personnel to notify them of upcoming changes. The

shared vision across the district to put the children's needs first makes responding to events like Hurricane Florence possible. Social workers, counselors and principals are prepared to make changes and do what is best for students and their families.

County and school staff also work with families to refer at-risk students to community support organizations. Families of students with severe behavioral or social-emotional needs are referred to a local day treatment center for early intervention. In addition, the county's mental health department and other agencies provide in-school therapists. This community relationship allows students to receive the services they need without having to leave school grounds or parents having to miss work.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- * **Community Involvement.** The county commission's support for the development of the whole child is the bedrock for the success in New Hanover County. Funds are allocated, there is a shared vision across county agencies, and a community is committed to students' and families' success.
- * **Support Personnel.** The additional specialized instructional support personnel provided by the county are invaluable. The needs-based distribution of these personnel amplifies their impact. Having the resources and flexibility to adjust allocations based on needs improves the county's ability to effectively serve each child and family.

MIDWAY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Working Collaboratively with Parents to Raise Attendance Rates

Midway Elementary is a Title I school in Sampson County, North Carolina. Seventy percent of the school's students are economically disadvantaged.

BACKGROUND

Principal Robbin Cooper has spearheaded Midway Elementary School's initiative to combat absenteeism since 2016, but the project is a team effort. Cooper strongly believes that "parents' understanding that attendance is important even at the elementary school level is crucial. Because if you start missing school at elementary level, you are going to be years behind." In this effort, she is supported by her school staff, including a data manager, a social worker, a counselor and teachers.

GETTING TO ACTION

The initiatives implemented in Midway Elementary School combine creativity with technology. Individual student attendance is tracked on wall charts in each classroom. At the end of each week, children with

perfect attendance that week are recognized in the classroom, and all the eligible students are entered into a school-wide drawing to raise student excitement for regular attendance.

Midway Elementary has defined four intervention tiers based on the number of instruction days a student misses. Fewer than nine days calls for a Tier 1 intervention—the school counselor speaks with the child to try to understand the reasons behind the absence. A counselor also contacts the student's family to check whether the child's school work is complete and to begin to problem-solve. The school targets their response based on feedback from this meeting, including sending wake-up calls through the Blackboard mass communication system if waking up for school is a barrier. As a student misses more days, the intervention tiers increase, and with 10 to 17 missed instruction days, a student is considered at risk of chronic absenteeism. The social worker then sends a letter to parents to schedule a conference and draft a formal attendance plan. After 18 to 35 absences, Midway considers the child to be in the "moderate chronic absence" category, and the social worker schedules a home visit to collaborate with parents.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- * Principal Cooper believes that most parents want to improve their children's attendance and take steps accordingly, so she and her team work hard to collaboratively solve attendance challenges with parents as partners.

G.W. CARVER ELEMENTARY

Getting Started on Improving Regular Attendance

G.W. Carver Elementary is a Title I school in Edgecombe County, North Carolina. The school serves 714 students, nearly 60 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged.

BACKGROUND

George Washington Carver Elementary has had three principals in the last three years. Last summer, Assistant Principal Kristin Miller looked for trends in the school's data, and she saw that chronic absence was a big predictor of academic performance. Miller is dedicated to reducing her school's chronic absence rates.

GETTING TO ACTION

Assistant Principal Miller meets monthly with her school's attendance committee, which also includes the principal, data manager, guidance counselor and social worker. The committee monitors student attendance trends and plans interventions. Teachers also play an active role and make personal calls home to parents when students hit thresholds at three, six, and 10 absences.

G.W. Carver Elementary relies heavily on community partners for programming. The Down East Partnership for Children provides logistical and curricular support for the school's Success Mentors Program. Assistant Principal Miller lauds the "full community effort" that enables Success Mentors to pair the school's fifteen most chronically absent students with community mentors. In addition to the Down East Partnership, the Edgecombe County Sheriff supports the program by screening community mentors. The program is designed to increase students' motivation to attend school and reinforce the importance of regular attendance with families. Mentor requirements reflect these goals—each mentor meets twice monthly at school with their mentees, sends them letters of encouragement each month, and calls their homes to speak with their families each month to remind them of the importance of getting their students to school each day.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- * Leader investment, a team effort, and community involvement are key to G.W. Carver's efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism. 2018-19 was the first year of the school's increased focus. Staff intends to look at data, determine what interventions worked and plan how they can better meet the needs of students and families.

NCECF would like to thank the dedicated team of Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy graduate students who committed their spring 2019 semester to gathering national research on best practices that schools can use to address chronic absence and collecting Bright Spots from across North Carolina. Ashwini Sunil Deshpande, Danelle Gamble, Sean Ryan and Nicole Santeiro reached out to NC elementary schools with largely economically-disadvantaged student populations that are actively addressing chronic absence, conducted interviews with school leadership and staff who work on attendance, and wrote the case studies shared in this report. They also found and documented examples of best practices that have been successful in communities across the country, which NCECF will be sharing over the course of the next few months.

APPENDIX • WHO DID WE ASK?

The online survey ran from February through June 2019 on the EducationNC Reach NC Voices platform, and the more than 1,500 responses were well distributed across the state. At least one survey response was received from 100 of the 115 NC school districts (87 percent).



Respondents included preschool and elementary school teachers, principals and administrators, attendance staff, other school staff, parents and volunteers, and came from rural, suburban and urban school districts. The percentage of respondents from rural schools is fairly representative of NC as a whole—about 40 percent of the state's public school students reside in rural counties.⁸

ROLE	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS*	SUBURBAN, URBAN OR RURAL SCHOOL	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS*
Elementary school teacher	28%	Rural	47%
Head Start, NC Pre-K or other preschool (for 3- or 4-year-olds) teacher or administrator	19%	Suburban	28%
Parent of a young child	16%	Urban	20%
Elementary school principal or vice-principal	14%	I don't know	4%
Another role at an elementary school	6%		
Work in a community organization or agency that is involved at an elementary school	4%		
Work on attendance at an elementary school	3%		
Volunteer at an elementary school	1%		

*10% of respondents were not involved in a preschool or elementary school in any way and were eliminated from the data collection.

Based on statewide race and ethnicity demographic estimates from the most recent census, survey respondents were fairly representative of the NC population by race.⁹ The survey under-sampled North Carolinians identifying as Hispanic.

RACE	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS	NC DEMOGRAPHICS
American Indian	2%	2%
Asian	<1%	3%
Black or African-American	24%	22%
White	73%	71%
ETHNICITY	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS	NC DEMOGRAPHICS
Hispanic	4%	10%
Non-Hispanic	96%	90%

Compared to the total respondent population, of the respondents who identified their role as “parent” (147 respondents), a slightly smaller percentage identify as Black or African-American (18 percent) and a slightly larger percentage identify as white (76 percent). Percentages of parents who identify as American Indian and Asian were about the same as in the total respondent population.

The survey over-sampled more highly-educated North Carolinians—approximately 30 percent of North Carolina adults have a Bachelor’s degree or higher, while 88 percent of survey respondents have a Bachelor’s degree. The respondents are also skewed towards the higher end of the income spectrum—the median household income in NC is around \$50,000, and three-fourths of survey respondents report making more than \$50,000. This is to be expected from a survey targeting mostly educators and school administrators, the vast majority of whom hold at least a Bachelor’s degree.

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS*	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS
Graduate degree	48%	More than 6x the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) (>\$150,600/year)*	5%
Bachelor’s degree	40%	5x FPL—6x FPL (\$125,501-\$150,600)	10%
Associate’s degree	6%	4x FPL—5x FPL (\$100,401-\$125,500)	14%
Some college	3%	3x FPL—4x FPL (\$75,001-\$100,400)	23%
Vocational	1%	2x FPL—3x FPL (\$50,201-75,000)	25%
High school diploma or GED	1%	FPL—2x FPL (\$25,101-\$50,200)	19%
Other	1%	Less than the FPL (<\$25,100)	4%

*Based on the 2018 Federal Poverty guidelines, for a family of four



NCECF's 2017-2019 Attendance Counts report series is dedicated to Major Agustin Gonzalez and his family. Augie contributed to the development of our 2018 report as a public policy student at Duke University's Sanford School. Tragically, Augie passed away in June, 2019, along with two of his young children. He was a strong leader who was dedicated to making the world a better place. He will be missed.

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EducationNC's Reach NC Voices is a statewide project designed to survey North Carolinians in real time to understand how they feel about the broad array of issues facing our students, parents, educators, and communities. Sign up to be connected to EdNC's weekly email newsletter and SMS conversations at <https://www.ednc.org/column/reach-nc-voices/>.



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