

Chronic Absenteeism and Students with Disabilities: Frequently Asked Questions

2018



Chronic Absenteeism and Students with Disabilities: Frequently Asked Questions

Candace Cortiella and Kathleen B. Boundy, Esq.

A publication of:

NATIONAL CENTER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

April, 2018

This work was supported through a Cooperative Agreement (#H326G160001) with the Research to Practice Division, Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. The Center is affiliated with the Institute on Community Integration at the College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota. The contents of this report were developed under the Cooperative Agreement from the U.S. Department of Education, but does not necessarily represent the policy or opinions of the U.S. Department of Education or Offices within it. Readers should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

All rights reserved. Any or all portions of this document may be reproduced and distributed without prior permission, provided the source is cited as:

Cortiella, C., & Boundy, K. B. (2018, April). *Chronic absenteeism and students with disabilities: Frequently asked questions*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Available at <http://www.nceo.info>

Chronic Absenteeism and Students with Disabilities: Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why is chronic absenteeism getting so much attention?

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that amended and reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2015, requires states to develop a new accountability system that annually differentiates public school performance. Under ESSA, the system of accountability must include four academic indicators plus one or more new measures of an indicator called “school quality or student success” (20 U.S.C. §§6311(c)(4)(B)(v)).

To meet this new requirement, designed to expand beyond test-based accountability systems, the majority of states (36 and DC) have chosen to measure student chronic absenteeism – either as the sole metric or one of a group of metrics. Although many states have been paying attention to chronic absenteeism in recent years, elevating it to a component of a state accountability system heightens the attention this important metric will receive.

See map in NCEO Brief Number 15: <https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOBrief15.pdf>

2. What are the requirements of ESSA’s measure of school quality or student success?

ESSA requires that any metric used in a state’s accountability system as an indicator of school quality or student success (SQSS) must:

- Annually provide an aggregate measure for all students and separately for each subgroup of students who are members of major racial and ethnic groups, economically disadvantaged students, children with disabilities (as identified under IDEA), and English learners.
- Allow for meaningful differentiation in school performance.
- Be valid, reliable, comparable, and statewide.
- Be given less than “substantial weight” in accountability calculations; ESSA’s four required academic indicators (i.e., academic proficiency, growth, graduation rate, English proficiency) must be given “*much greater weight*” than the measure of SQSS.

Because children with disabilities are one of the required subgroups of students, these students cannot be excluded from any metric used for SQSS, including chronic absenteeism.

To learn more about how this increased focus on absences may impact students with disabilities, see *Chronic Absenteeism and Students with Disabilities* (NCEO Brief #15) <https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOBrief15.pdf>

3. How are states defining chronic absenteeism?

Most of the states that are using chronic absenteeism as an SQSS metric are defining it as the number and percentage of students missing 10 percent or more of their school days in a year. For a typical school year of 180 days, this means that chronic absenteeism is missing 18 or more days or an average of 2 days per month. However, the definition and the number of days vary from state to state. Generally, students who are chronically absent are those absent for any reason (e.g., illness, suspension, the need to care for a family member), regardless of whether the absences are excused or unexcused.

4. Why is the focus on chronic absenteeism important to students with disabilities?

Available data on chronic absenteeism show that compared to all students, those with disabilities experience significantly higher rates of absences and are overrepresented among those chronically absent. The latest national and state level data on chronic absenteeism, including among students with disabilities, comes from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) – a biennial survey that collects data from a universe of all public local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools conducted by the Office for Civil Rights within the U.S. Department of Education.

CRDC defines chronic absenteeism as **students absent 15 or more days during the school year**. About 13.5% of all enrolled students met this definition in 2013-14. Yet, as indicated in the table below, IDEA-eligible students made up 16.8% of all students who met or exceeded that threshold while students served solely under Section 504 made up 2.3%. Therefore, 19% of all chronically absent students were those identified as having a disability while making up just 14% of overall student enrollment of 49.9 million. Based on the CRDC data, students with disabilities likely missed a minimum of **19.3 million days of instruction in 2013-2014**.

Student Group	Total #	# in Chronically Absent Group¹	% of All Students Chronically Absent¹	% of Students in Chronically Absent Group
IDEA students	6,109,314	1,131,813	16.8%	18.5%
504 students	901,223	153,346	2.3%	17.0%
TOTAL	7,010,537	1,285,159	19.1%	18.3%

¹N=6,731,214

Source: Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), 2013-2014 State and National Estimations on Enrollment, IDEA Enrollment, Section 504 Enrollment, Student Absenteeism.

https://ocrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/Estimations_2013_14

As states begin to apply the measure of chronic absenteeism to school accountability, consideration should be given to ensuring that policies and practices do not have unintended consequences for students with disabilities. Possible unintended consequences for these students include encouraging push-outs, de-enrollment, or referrals to juvenile or family courts.

To learn more, see *Chronic Absenteeism and Students with Disabilities* (NCEO Brief #15) <https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOBrief15.pdf> and *Chronic Absenteeism and Students with Disabilities: Health Issues of Students with Disabilities: Impact on Attendance* <https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/ChronicAbsenteeismHealthIssuesSWD.pdf>

5. How might this increased focus on chronic absenteeism affect the identification of students with disabilities?

The increased focus on chronic absenteeism has the potential to lead to more students being found to have a disability that makes them eligible for protections under Section 504 or in need of special education and related services under IDEA.

States should be cautious in developing policies and procedures for chronic absenteeism with respect to the affirmative obligation of schools and districts to identify, evaluate, and serve all students with disabilities. States will want to be sure that their policies and procedures for relying on comprehensive, valid, and reliable evaluations using multiple measures are implemented and enforced. State policies and procedures should also address the need to “rule out” environmental, social-economic, and other relevant factors.

This obligation, known as “Child Find,” is examined in *Chronic Absenteeism: Recognizing Child Find Obligations* <https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/ChronicAbsenteeismChildFindObligations.pdf>.