Attendance and the Early Grades: A Two-Generation Issue

Published: Thursday, 18 September 2014 12:00
Written by: Terry Haven

Chronic Absence is a Two-Generation Problem

Policies that help parents keep kids in school, such as family leave policies and effective transportation systems; coupled with programs that help the child, such as attention to bullying; and improved policies at the school level, such as collecting the right data and working with families to identify barriers to school attendance will ensure that every child succeeds.

"The reality is an absence is an absence, excused or not, and that child is not in that classroom benefiting from the instruction on that day. We have to work in our community, with our schools and our families to build a culture of attendance." Ralph Smith, Executive Vice President, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Download the printer-friendly report:
Attendance and the Early Grades: A Two Generation Issue

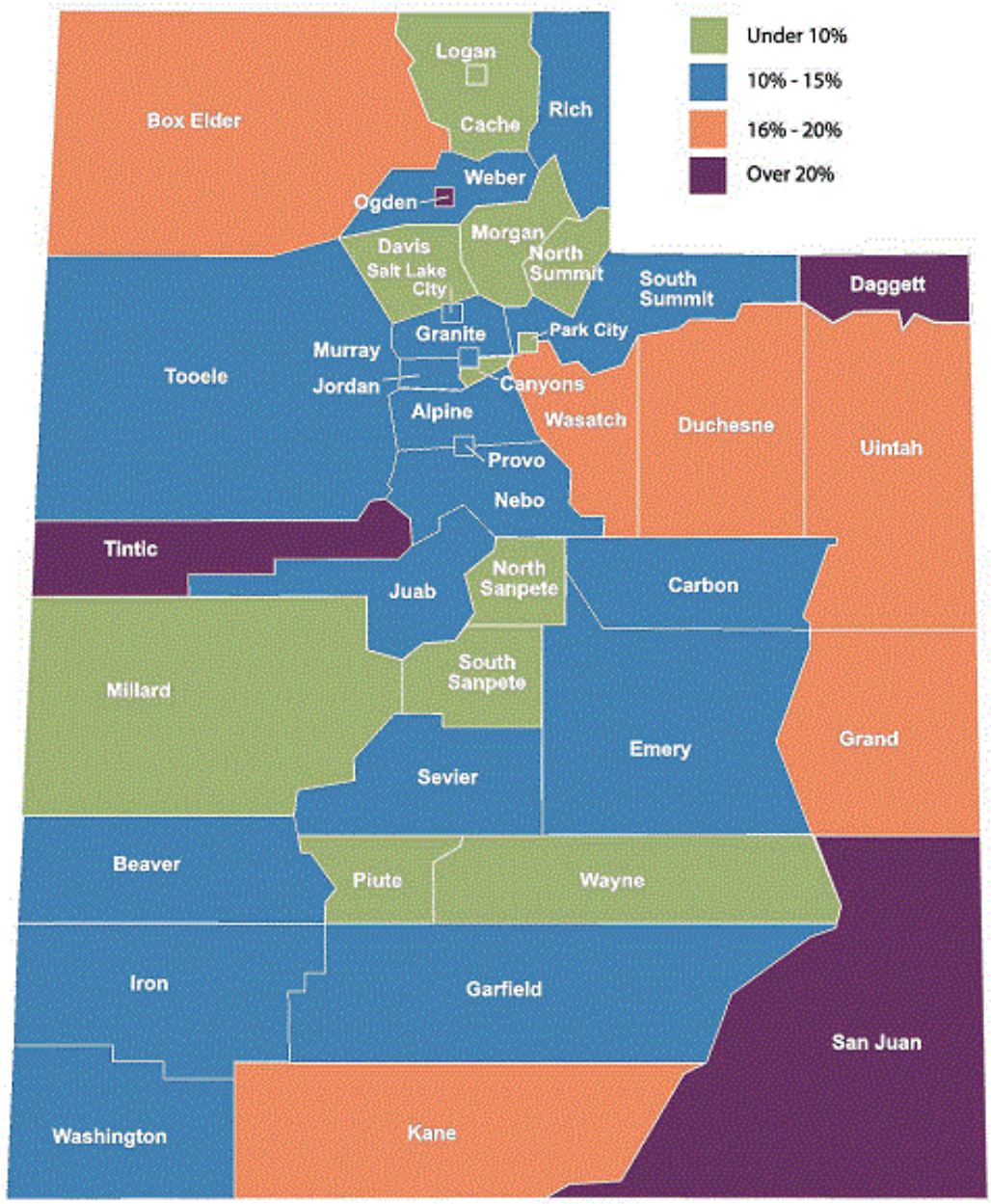
Chronic absence, missing 10 percent of the school year or more, is an early warning indicator of academic trouble for students and later;dropout. Excused and unexcused absences easily add up to too much time lost in the classroom. Students are at risk academically if they miss 10 percent of the school year, or about 18 days. Once too many absences have occurred, it affects learning, regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused.

The map below shows the percent of elementary school students who were chonically absent in school year 2013. On average, no district had less than 90 percent of their students absent on a given day, despite exceptionally high rates of chronic absence in some schools and districts. Clearly, average daily attendance can mask a chronic absence problem.

Phoca PDF

Attendance and the Early Grades: A Two-Generation Issue

Published: Thursday, 18 September 2014 12:00
Written by: Terry Haven



Phoca PDF

Utah Elementary Schools by School District, 2013
Attendance Versus Chronic Absence

School District	Average Percent of Students Present Each Day	Percent of Students Who Are Chronically Absent	Percent of Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch
ALPINE DISTRICT	95.2%	10.5%	30.4%
BEAVER DISTRICT	94.6%	13.5%	56.6%
BOX ELDER DISTRICT	94.2%	15.9%	49.3%
CACHE DISTRICT	95.8%	6.9%	36.1%
CANYONS DISTRICT	95.6%	9.2%	34.5%
CARBON DISTRICT	94.6%	12.7%	52.1%
DAGGETT DISTRICT	90.5%	35.5%	26.4%
DAVIS DISTRICT	95.7%	8.9%	25.7%
DUCHESNE DISTRICT	94.1%	17.8%	38.6%
EMERY DISTRICT	94.5%	12.1%	53.9%
GARFIELD DISTRICT	94.5%	11.6%	49.7%
GRAND DISTRICT	94.0%	15.7%	56.3%
GRANITE DISTRICT	95.1%	12.9%	59.1%
IRON DISTRICT	95.0%	12.8%	54.5%
JORDAN DISTRICT	95.0%	11.9%	26.8%
JUAB DISTRICT	94.7%	12.8%	44.9%
KANE DISTRICT	94.3%	17.2%	58.6%
LOGAN CITY DISTRICT	95.6%	9.6%	67.9%
MILLARD DISTRICT	97.4%	5.6%	62.0%
MORGAN DISTRICT	95.3%	6.7%	22.7%
MURRAY DISTRICT	95.3%	11.6%	40.5%
NEBO DISTRICT	94.5%	13.9%	46.2%
NORTH SANPETE DISTRICT	97.2%	6.4%	53.1%
NORTH SUMMIT DISTRICT	95.5%	7.4%	36.2%
OGDEN CITY DISTRICT	93.6%	22.2%	80.7%
PARK CITY DISTRICT	95.4%	8.1%	27.1%
PIUTE DISTRICT	97.1%	3.9%	82.9%
PROVO DISTRICT	95.2%	11.1%	55.9%
RICH DISTRICT	94.5%	11.5%	66.8%
SALT LAKE DISTRICT	95.3%	11.4%	62.6%
SAN JUAN DISTRICT	92.6%	26.9%	72.4%
SEVIER DISTRICT	93.8%	14.4%	58.8%
SOUTH SANPETE DISTRICT	95.4%	9.8%	47.5%
SOUTH SUMMIT DISTRICT	94.6%	11.1%	23.1%
TINTIC DISTRICT	93.0%	24.3%	57.3%
TOOELE DISTRICT	94.7%	13.5%	45.0%
UINTAH DISTRICT	94.1%	16.8%	45.4%
WASATCH DISTRICT	94.3%	16.1%	42.0%
WASHINGTON DISTRICT	94.9%	10.9%	55.1%
WAYNE DISTRICT	95.2%	9.1%	59.3%
WEBER DISTRICT	95.0%	12.3%	41.0%

Source: Utah Office of Education, Data and Statistics

Voices for Utah Children

Phoca PDF

Reducing chronic absence can help close achievement gaps. Chronic absence especially affects achievement for low-income students who depend more on school for opportunities to learn. Because they are more likely to face systemic barriers to getting to school, low-income children, many of whom are children of color, have higher levels of chronic absence starting as early as kindergarten.

A 2012 research brief by the Utah Education Policy Center that looked at the percent of chronically absent students by school year, found that kindergarten and first grade students tended to be chronically absent more often than their older elementary school peers. Further, on average, being chronically absent in one grade increased the odds of being chronically absent in the next grade by nearly 13 times. For each year that a student was chronically absent, his or her odds of dropping out nearly doubled. Studies from multiple states have shown that chronically absent high school students are less likely to graduate. Improving student attendance is an essential, cost-effective but often overlooked two-generation strategy for ensuring that students are on-track to learn and succeed, and to decrease the chance of living in poverty as adults.

Chronic absence does not just affect the students who miss school. If too many students are chronically absent, it slows down instruction for other students, who must wait while the teacher repeats material for absentee students. This makes it harder for students to learn and teachers to teach.

CHRONIC ABSENCE IS A RESULT OF A COMBINATION OF FACTORS: SCHOOL, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

All schools enroll some students who have injuries or illnesses leading to frequent absences, and schools should know who these students are and design individual strategies to support them. Schools where five percent of students are chronically absent do not have systemic attendance failures. However, in schools where 20 percent of students are chronically absent, the extent to which schools, families and communities each might play a contributing role needs to be considered.

While illness is a leading factor in chronic early absence, others such as poverty, teenage parenting, single parenting, low maternal education levels, unemployment, poor maternal health, and household food insecurity all can affect school attendance. The 2012 Utah Education Policy Center Policy research brief found that students

Phoca PDF

from low-income homes were 90 percent more likely to be chronically absent. Students who are absent from school miss opportunities to learn and develop positive relationships within the school community. During the early elementary school years, children develop important skills and approaches to learning that are critical for ongoing school success. Through their experiences in K-3 classrooms, children build academic, social-emotional and study skills. Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten show lower levels of achievement in math, reading and general knowledge in first grade.

Children who are homeless or formerly homeless experience poor educational outcomes related to school absenteeism and mobility. Other families may be dealing with serious problems (e.g. mental illness, child or domestic abuse, incarceration of a parent, etc.) that make school attendance difficult because family life has been disrupted and public agencies and schools lack a coordinated response.

Chronic absenteeism also can result from poor quality education, ambivalence about or alienation from school, and chaotic school environments, including high rates of teacher turnover, disruptive classrooms and/or bullying.

Improving student attendance is an essential, cost-effective but often overlooked strategy for ensuring our students are on-track to learn and succeed. While addressing some attendance barriers- such as health, poor transportation, and unstable housing- can require longer-term strategies, everyone can make a difference by helping students and families understand that going to school every day and avoiding absences whenever possible is critical to realizing success in school and success in life.

Voices for Utah Children is proud to be a part of the Aspen Institute Ascend Network. The goal of the Aspen Institute Ascend Network is to mobilize empowered two-generation organizations and leaders to influence policy and practice changes that increase economic security, educational success, social capital, and health and well-being for children, parents, and their families. Learn more at http://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/network

Phoca PDF