

NEW JERSEY'S LEAVE OF ABSENCE: A BRIEF ON STATE SENATE BILL 1876

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Overview

This past June, Governor Phil Murphy took a great stride in making sure that every day counts for the students within New Jersey's Public Schools when he signed Senate Bill 1876 into law. This new policy will work to ensure that schools and districts understand the level to which chronic absenteeism occurs and guarantee that schools disproportionately afflicted have plans to help fight absenteeism. Specifically, the policy identifies schools that have a greater than 10% absentee rate and requires them to establish a plan for improving attendance. It also requires schools to report the share of students who are absent more than 10% of the time on their School Report Card. Attendance is one of the most important aspects of ensuring a successful education for students of all ages. The New Jersey Governor and state legislature, alongside advocacy groups like Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), have taken the first steps in fighting one of the largest issues within New Jersey schools. With that being said, it is still extremely important to consider how the State Board of Education, along with individual districts and schools, will interpret and comply with the law.

What is Chronic Absenteeism?

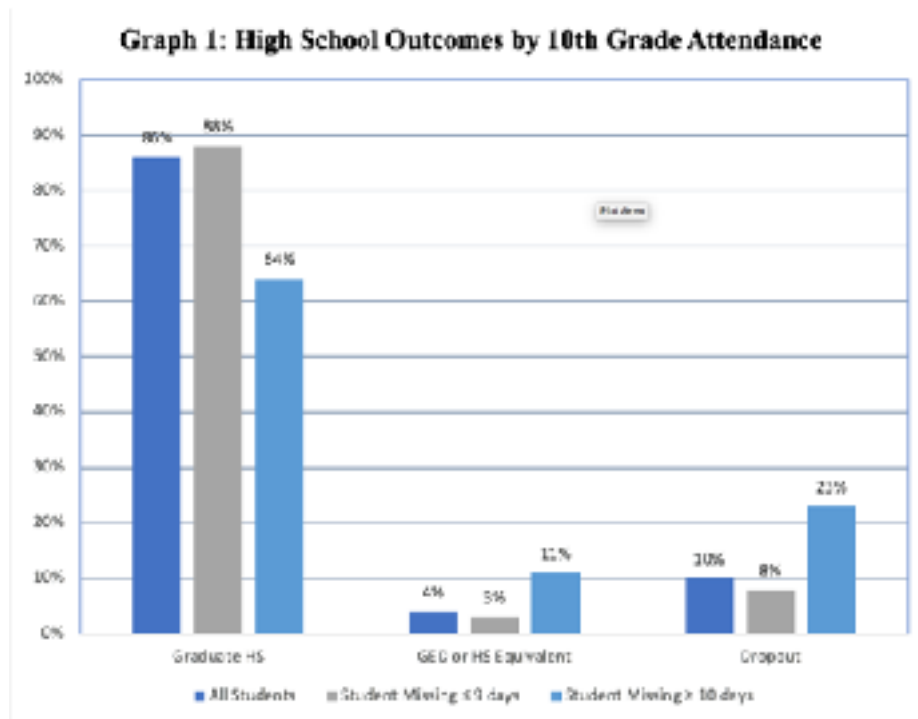
A student is known as chronically absent if they miss 10% or more of the total number of days enrolled at a particular school. Similarly, a school's chronic absenteeism percentage is calculated as the percent of students within the school who are chronically absent. The exact details of how and when chronic absenteeism levels are calculated is left up to the specification of the State Superintendent. In short, a student's absenteeism rate is calculated as the number of days absent while enrolled as a student at the school divided by the total number of days enrolled at the school. Additionally, students may be absent without penalty for the following reasons: college visits, observance of a religious holiday, Veterans Day, Take Your Child to Work Day, or an absence due to the closure of a bus district. Adjustments are made for time present when students leave school early.

Why Absenteeism is important?

Absenteeism, especially chronic absenteeism, has lasting impacts on students. Research shows that the effects of absenteeism are most prevalent among students during the first few years of school and during high school (Bruner, Discher, & Chang, 2011; Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012). Furthermore, the effects of absenteeism are far greater for those children living in poverty than they are for students who are not (Bruner, Discher, & Chang, 2011). This is because students living in poverty already face significant challenges both within schools and their communities.

The effects of chronic absenteeism are especially pronounced in students' early years of school. Once students, particularly those living in poverty, fall behind it is very difficult for them to make up the knowledge and skills they have missed. This gap leads to students being persistently behind in reading over time. Additionally, students who are absent in the earliest years of schooling are more likely to continue that trend, which only widens the achievement gap between chronically absent students and their peers (Gottfried, 2009; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

A national survey of student attendance shows that attendance in the 10th grade is correlated with later high school outcomes such as graduation and dropout rates (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Graph 1 below demonstrates that not only are students who miss more than 10 school days more likely to dropout and less likely to graduate, but they are also more likely to receive GEDs and alternative high school diplomas than their peers.



Every Student Succeeds Act

New Jersey set groundwork for a new focus on chronic absenteeism with decisions made by the State Superintendent and Board of Education on how the state would comply with the federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA is the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and successor to No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Largely ESSA leaves many of the frameworks established in NCLB intact, namely testing and accountability, while simultaneously granting more flexibility to the states.

New Jersey is one of multiple states that have begun to adopt chronic absenteeism as their fourth “non-academic” indicator of student achievement and success under ESSA. Other states’ adoption of this indicator has helped to promote chronic absenteeism as a crucial issue transcending states—one that is worth monitoring and linking to systems of accountability

Spotlight on Newark

As New Jersey’s largest and highest profile district, Newark Public Schools has focused on reducing chronic absenteeism for more than a decade. The past two

superintendents, Cami Anderson and Christopher Cerf, as well as the current superintendent, Roger Leon, have seen the issue of dealing with absenteeism as one of critical importance.

However, after sweeping reforms, cuts to attendance counselors, and a refocus on the follow-through of current policy by the two former superintendents, the chronic absenteeism rate has actually risen in Newark schools. Thus, districts need guidance in how to effectively address the issue of absenteeism within their districts.

“You don’t gut out the social support network in a system like Newark, and anticipate that we’re going to have great improvements.”

-Sheila Oliver

Lt. Governor of New Jersey

In response to Cami Anderson’s policy

Important Note on Average Daily Attendance

New Jersey’s new attendance law is intrinsically linked to school funding through a school’s average daily attendance (ADA). This means that schools are incentivized to reduce chronic absenteeism not only to comply with the mandate, but also to increase the amount of funding they receive from the state. However, increasing ADA does not always mean reducing chronic absenteeism, as even schools with high ADA can still have large numbers of students who are chronically absent. For example, even in a school of 200 students with 95 percent average daily attendance, 30 percent (or 60) of the students could be missing nearly a month of school over the course of the school year. In general, situations like this arise when school absences are highly concentrated amongst a relatively small portion of students within a single school. Thus, ADA remains relatively high within these schools, while a significant number of students still struggle with chronic absenteeism.

Absenteeism in New Jersey

Understanding how chronic absenteeism shows up in New Jersey will help us to better understand how and where to recommend improvements to the way the state currently addresses absenteeism. Additionally, understanding this context will help to contextualize New Jersey’s policy for others who are looking to borrow from its framework. There was progress made both at the grade-level and at the district level. New Jersey has had a decrease in chronic absenteeism in important grades. Students in their last two years of high school are usually the groups most likely to be absent. However, 12th grade saw the largest drop in chronic absenteeism of any grade from 2015

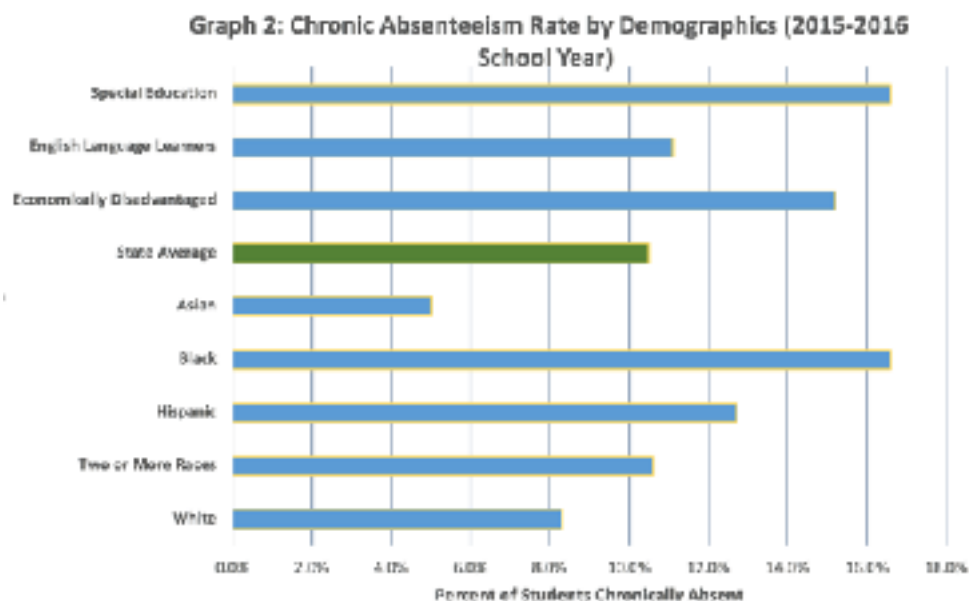
to 2016, decreasing by just over 1.6 percentage points. Overall, there were decreases in every year, except for sixth grade. Kindergarten, another important grade, also saw noticeable declines in absenteeism, decreasing from 12.1% to 11.4% (Chen and Rice, 2017).

There was also a decrease in chronic absenteeism at the district level. Of the 678 school districts within New Jersey, 192 districts were classified as having chronic absenteeism rates higher than 10% in 2016. This number declined by 24 districts between 2015 and 2016. However, the 192 districts, accounting for 40 percent of the state's student population, still make up only about 60% of the chronically absent students in the state.

Even with rates of chronic absenteeism declining across the state, many of New Jersey's most vulnerable groups continue to experience disproportionate levels of chronic absenteeism when compared to other student populations within the state. In particular, black students, economically disadvantaged students, and special education students all have chronic absenteeism rates higher than 15% compared to the state average, as demonstrated with Graph 2. The data may mean that there are specific barriers that keep these student populations from attending school more regularly.

While the causes of and reasons for individuals becoming chronically absent are highly individualized, research in New Jersey finds several commonalities among individuals and across populations. Those reasons include:

- Health issues
- Transportation
- Family Responsibilities
- School Discipline
- Community Safety (Chen and Rice, 2016)



Recommendations

Understanding the landscape of chronic absenteeism in New Jersey and what research has to say about the importance of addressing the issue, the authors of New Jersey's Senate Bill 1876 have taken a new approach to addressing the issue. However, the policy could benefit from more specificity and a keen eye towards addressing the ways in which chronic absenteeism may hide within districts. There are three policy recommendations to bolster New Jersey's work reducing chronic absenteeism:

1. Help districts build capacity to provide research-based interventions to chronic absenteeism. New Jersey can do this by establishing units which are devoted to informing stakeholders at the district level about interventions that are backed by research.
2. Disaggregate data by demographics including race, socioeconomic status, and ability when determining if districts comply with SB 1876. This will help to ensure that district address populations which have historically had higher rates of absenteeism.
3. Incentivize districts that decrease chronic absenteeism in ways that are not strictly linked to ADA. Linking decreases in chronic absenteeism directly to additional funding will help incentivize school to address the issue and implement interventions that may be more expensive.

Implementing these three policy recommendations would help to ensure that districts not only have the ability to address chronic absenteeism in an effective way, but also help address the multiple ways in which it can manifest within schools and district. The success of these recommendations and the policy as a whole will help to ensure not only that students attend school more regularly, but will also aid schools and students to achieve higher marks across multiple measures of student success.

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