

TRANSCRIPT

## Reducing Chronic Absenteeism: Every Day Counts!

NARRATOR

Hello and welcome!

We're excited to bring you Reducing Chronic Absenteeism: Every Day Counts!, one in a set of videos and related materials from our team at the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL West) at WestEd.

The main message in this video is that attending school every day really does matter.

There's plenty of evidence from schools, cities, and states that far too many students are missing a lot of class time and, in turn, missing out on the learning that leads to success in school.

There's no doubt that keeping up with schoolwork is a challenge for students who are "chronically absent." By chronically absent, we mean missing 10% or more of school for any reason – excused or unexcused. That adds up to as little as 2 days per month.

Nationwide, as many as 6.5 million students miss nearly a month of school each year. It's also a problem at all grade levels. Chronic absence is high in kindergarten, dips in the elementary grades and then increases steadily from the middle grades up, peaking in the last few years of high school. Although absences are highest in schools that serve children living in poverty, chronic absence is a problem in all types of communities.

Here in Utah, 1 in 7 students is chronically absent each year. A statewide study showed that these students had lower test scores, lower grades, and lower graduation rates than students who were not chronically absent. It also showed that students who were chronically absent for just one year during 8th through 12th grade were 7 times more likely to drop out than their classmates who didn't have attendance problems.

Given these numbers and what recent research says about the effects of missing class time, chronic absence is no longer a hidden crisis in our schools. It's an urgent problem but one we can address, and many schools, cities, and states are making it a priority for students to be present and accounted for every day.

First, let's hear from one of the nation's leading advocates for reducing chronic absenteeism. Here is Hedy Chang, director of Attendance Works and a White House-named Champion of Change, speaking to an audience of Utah educators.

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HEDY CHANG

I have to say, to me, if you're going to improve the educational outcomes for kids in schools, don't you want to know whether the problem is kids are showing up but they're not learning, or kids are not showing up, so they can't even benefit from what you're offering in the classroom? Because those seem to me to involve different kinds of solutions. And it's hard to get to better outcomes unless we know why kids aren't learning.

NARRATOR

Let's turn now to the causes and consequences of missing school and how daily attendance in grades K-12 affects student achievement and graduation outcomes.

To get started, let's meet two students, Ricky and Sara, who are like many students we know.

NARRATOR

Ricky loves school. Every day he arrives on time and is ready to participate in class.

Sara likes school, too, but has missed so many days this year that she's fallen behind academically and is increasingly disconnected from her classmates. She also missed a lot of school last year and the year before.

Students like Sara don't attend school for a number of reasons: family instability, illness and lack of health care, poor transportation, avoiding unsafe conditions or bullying on the way to and from school or on campus, feeling discouraged about academic struggles or being behind in schoolwork, or needing to take care of family members or to work. Particularly in the early grades, students may also miss school because the importance of daily attendance was not clearly communicated to families, in a home language, in culturally appropriate ways, or at all.

Whatever the reasons, students can't keep up with their studies if they aren't attending school.

While Ricky is on a pathway to advance from grade to grade and earn a high school diploma on time, Sara's absences have contributed to a number of obstacles. She failed a math class last year, so is behind her peers. She is also struggling to keep up in other classes, affecting her attitude and behavior at school, which escalated to office visits and a suspension – causing her to miss yet more class time. Due to poor grades, Sara was also cut from the soccer team.

What we know from research is chronically absent students lag in reading and math achievement in the elementary grades compared to classmates who attend school regularly. By middle school, they are on a slippery slope to not graduate from high school. In fact, Utah students who are chronically absent for 2 or more years are even more likely to drop out than to graduate on time.

And the harmful effects of being chronically absent are cumulative, increasing achievement gaps at elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Chronically absent students like Sara need help eliminating barriers that get in the way of good school attendance.

To get these students on track with their classmates, schools are using a number of promising practices.

#### NARRATOR

Now we'll focus on three promising strategies for addressing chronic absence: building a schoolwide culture of good attendance; using data to identify students missing school to trigger outreach; and personalizing outreach and support to these students.

The foundation for reducing chronic absence is having a schoolwide culture that supports students attending school every day.

By schoolwide, we mean everyone who touches the lives of students: their classmates, families, teachers, counselors, and administrators, as well as custodial, transportation, and cafeteria staff and local businesses.

Building a school culture where all students are expected to attend daily can be conveyed in many ways: for example, through safe and supportive environments, engaging classrooms, and authentic family participation. It can also be communicated through special schoolwide events and attendance awareness campaigns and reinforced with incentives and rewards for good and improved attendance.

Let's see how one school in Utah, South Hills Middle School, is making a difference – schoolwide.

#### GEORGIA WING

We need to fix our attendance here. And so, because our attendance was, you know, not where we thought it should be, that's when I decided to start researching and finding out different strategies that I could use to improve the attendance here. The first thing I did is got the data and put it in a flyer that we sent out to parents at parent-teacher conference. And basically that was the first step; is getting the parents aware that it's a problem. We've been announcing daily what our attendance is – what our attendance percentage is. And so just...that's another way just to keep it in their minds.

We did a lot of fun things. We had a ROAR Day. So, ROAR stands for Respect Our Attendance Rules. A lot of the kids that did the flash mob were kids that had...who were struggling with their attendance. And we pulled them all together and they got to come up with, first of all, the slogan – Respect Our Attendance Rules – and then they together created the words to the song as well. And so we do a contest for the students in their TA class to create a poster that's going to advertise our ROAR Day. And then, as a school, we had everybody vote on which one they thought was the best.

And then we also have a Tiger Store where students get...so teachers give them cards – we call them Principal 200 cards – for exhibiting our Tiger Traits. So it kind of goes along with our attendance, but it also is using our positive behavior system. And so the teachers will give the students those cards and they are able to spend them at the Tiger Store for fun things.

We have a contest for our TA class that has the best attendance. And we have a traveling trophy that goes to that class that they get to display in their room for that month. And the kids get really excited about it. And they're so proud when they get to be the class that gets that.

Every week we pull our data on... We reward the 100 percent attendance, of course, but then we reward the improved attendance. Those kids get a certificate. Additionally, I have an attendance secretary who will call home and contact the parents and just let them know...just some talking points about how important attendance is and why they need to be in school. And to go along with that...I mean, really, it's important that when the kids are here the teachers are giving them engaging lessons.

MONICA SIMMONS

My job is to help the kids get excited, get here to school, be on time. I run the attendance report every day; 5 tardies we start pulling them in. I make sure that there's not a problem or a concern in the halls that's keeping them from getting to class on time. I always encourage them by saying, you know, "Great! It's a great day for learning. Let's get to class. Let's learn something exciting today."

NARRATOR

Since schoolwide attendance, or average daily attendance, reports on all students as a group, it masks individual student attendance histories. Using student-level data is key to monitoring and tracking attendance and for identifying students who are chronically absent. That is, student-level data shows who is absent, how often, and when. Once the reasons for a student's absence are understood, the school can follow up by removing barriers to attending daily and individualizing student supports.

Highland High School provides a good example of a school team using data to help students to be present and accounted for daily so they stay connected to school and graduate on time.

KATIE ESKELSON-IEREMIA

The biggest thing, I think, was lately when we started calculating and being responsible for graduation rates. And looking at those graduation rates and those reports from the state and the reports that we ran ourselves and seeing the correlation between the absenteeism and between the graduation rate. So what we have decided to do here at Highland is we run reports by the quarter, and sometimes every other week. And so, when we look at those individual absences we'll take those numbers, and very often those kids from that report are the kids that we have do Student Services Council. So we have a huge table of people and resources that are there every Thursday, all day Thursday. We meet from 8 in the morning

until...usually we end about 2:30. But we can meet with up to 20...25 kids a day. Invite the parent to Student Services meeting because we like to have parents there and the kids there; everybody at the table that can solve the problem. And then we'll pull all their reports. We'll pull their transcript. We'll pull their absent report. We'll pull their current grades, their quick lookup report. I'll get any emails from teachers that they've sent me about "this is the information I have." And then we'll sit down at the SSC table and say, "Here's the issue. Let's talk about what's going on. Why is this happening? What can we do to resolve it? Let's look at this information. This is the information we have." Or, "What would be the best thing for your child individually?" It's so easy to see the correlation. All you have to do is look and you'll see if the kid's here they're passing, if they're not here generally they're not passing.

Helping... You know, when you sit in a meeting and you sit with parents and a kid and you help them and we make a plan, and they are successful and three weeks later we call them down and their grades are up and their attendance is up, that's why I got into education. That's what I want to do, is help those kids be successful.

#### NARRATOR

After identifying which students are chronically absent, the next step is for school staff to personalize outreach to them and their families and to remove barriers that interfere with attending school daily.

Of course, interventions vary depending upon a student's personal circumstances and grade level. Supports may include extra academic help, encouragement to join an afterschool activity that increases engagement, counseling to support students, or connecting families to community resources.

Also, the attention adults pay to each student's attendance conveys caring, encourages a connection with school, and can even change student behaviors.

Now let's visit a school where schoolwide systems help students and their families to participate and succeed, but supports are also individualized for students who need an extra boost to attend daily. At Guadalupe, the school is organized to remove barriers to missing school.

#### KYLE PRICE

Last year when we moved to our new school we doubled our student enrollment, and we really started looking at our attendance issues. We found out close to 30 percent of our students were chronically absent, meaning they were missing more than 10 percent of school days. So one of the things we were looking at in really addressing our attendance issues here was our messaging. First we wanted to make sure the whole school understood that attendance is important and that every day counts. So we started out with a...kind of a broad schoolwide goal in September and October. And we had attendance competitions. We had art competitions. Kids explained to us why every day counts.

So each week we like to declare WAR on absenteeism. WAR is our Weekly Attendance Review meeting. We go through our list of kids and we flag which kids have missed five days, and we send a first letter home to those kids. Yeah, we meet as a team on a weekly basis so that we have a really accurate snapshot of what's going on in terms of attendance. And we're able to find out right away if kids are having attendance issues and how we can address those.

We try to make this kind of a one-stop shop for services and then identifying additional supports maybe outside the school that they might need. And so looking at historical attendance data we were able to identify students who had attendance issues. Because these attendance issues, they tend to repeat themselves. If a kid doesn't learn good attendance habits in kindergarten he's not going to have those in first grade. It's something that's learned. So working with the principal and our social worker, we tried to really address those individual issues, but we soon realized it was way too much work for just the three of us. And any time issues in the school came up the attendance issues fell by the wayside. So that's when we started thinking, "Is there a way we can get a mentor or some person just to work solely on attendance?" And so we found Adriana, and she's part of the Americorps Mentor For Success program. And all she does is work on attendance.

ADRIANA LOPEZ

Yes, in the morning I get here, and I have to check the kids; check them in. I have 82 in my...74 now because some of them moved. I have them in my caseload, so I have to check them in every single day and check them out. So then I have to go make sure that everyone is going to class. And then after that, at 8...8:15, I go class by class to make sure that everyone is in class. If they're not in class I have to call parents and make sure that they bring the kids to school.

KYLE PRICE

We found that with the individualized approach we're really able to understand family dynamics. We go...Adriana and our social worker, they go to the home when a student isn't attending every day and when they start having higher absence rates. And they really identify what's going on in the home; how we can support them. One thing we found, too, is going to the home really helped the parents and the student understand that people here care about them attending.

We provide busing for our students in a pretty big area. They're able to move around from one home to another but still go to the same school so that they don't have to start over every year. In terms of attendance data, we found that of the kids we were working with just this last year, they've gone from the high 20s – the high 20 percent of our students being chronically absent – to those kids now being less than 7 percent chronically absent. It's been a huge shift.

ADRIANA LOPEZ

So, yeah, I always try to work with families, and I always try to work with parents, with the principal, with the social worker, with the teachers. So, I mean, attendance is not just

basically check the kids in; it's basically like, you know, being involved in every aspect of their lives.

NARRATOR

Everyone has a role to play in reducing chronic absenteeism.

Let's hear from some people in our home state of Utah!

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER

Yeah, in Utah every day counts for kids. We want them here at school ready to learn.

GARY HERBERT

Regular attendance matters, even in kindergarten. As governor, I ask each of you to help Utah children build a habit of good attendance. If we want a strong economy in the future, our youth must get a good education today.

SPENCER J. COX

We can have the best teachers in the world, and we can have the best curriculum, and we can have the highest standards, and the most incredible programs, and it doesn't matter at all if kids aren't there.

FAMILY MEMBER

I have lots of family and friends in Utah, and they all send their kids to school every single day because you have to show up to play in the game.

EDUCATION SPECIALIST

Afterschool programs can be a great tool in the fight against chronic absenteeism.

POLICY ANALYST

The key to building a strong academic foundation is attendance in the early grades.

STUDENT

I go to school every day and so will she.

KIDS

Make every day count.

PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE

Did you know that your children can suffer learning problems if they only miss one day of school every two weeks? This can happen before you realize it. Ensure a good start when your children return to school. Bring them on time every day because "cada día cuenta – every day counts."

NARRATOR

As we've seen, chronic absence is a problem we can address. There are many promising approaches in Utah schools and elsewhere.

For more information on this and other topics related to dropout prevention, please contact REL West at [relwest@wested.org](mailto:relwest@wested.org).

Thanks for watching.

We'd appreciate it if you would complete our online survey regarding this video at: [surveymonkey.com/r/ReducingAbsenteeism](https://surveymonkey.com/r/ReducingAbsenteeism). Your feedback matters and is used for planning future events and videos.