



Policy Brief

The Impact of Health Disparities on Chronic Absenteeism in K-12

Executive Summary

In the 2013-2014 school year, more than 6.5 million students were chronically absent, meaning they missed 15 or more school days during the school year. 18% of all high school students, and 11% of all elementary school students were chronically absent. Research tells us that on average, schools with higher chronic absenteeism rates have lower proficiency rates, and vice versa, for students overall and for each subgroup. Schools with chronic absenteeism rates also have higher discipline rates for students overall.

To impact student attendance requires a thorough examination of the root causes of student absenteeism, and a multi-faceted approach to providing the supports students, families, and communities need. In Shelby County, it is important to recognize the link between income, health, and attendance. With an array of research supporting the link between chronic health issues and chronic absenteeism, examining health disparities in children of color and their effect on school attendance in Shelby County is critical for informing the conversation on student attendance.

At a Glance:

- Snapshot of the impact of chronic absenteeism on student achievement
- Examination of the role of school nurses in combatting chronic absenteeism
- Overview of the provision in the ESSA related to Specialized Instructional Support Personnel, which includes nurses
- National Association of School Nurses ESSA Resources

Introduction

Conexión Américas is pleased to invest in PeopleFirst Partnership's efforts to address the issue of health disparities in children of color affecting school attendance in K-12. PeopleFirst Partnership will collaborate with Shelby County Schools, the Achievement School District schools, Latino Memphis, and Memphis NAACP. By way of the Equity & Excellence sub-grants, PeopleFirst Partnership will convene community stakeholders, conduct research, support crafting a legislative engagement plan, and develop an outcomes distribution framework around the connections between chronic illness and chronic absence.

Research suggests that missing ten percent or more of school leads to lower academic achievement, which impacts gainful employment. While there are robust federal, state, and local efforts to improve attendance, there is a gap in targeted intervention to address the impact of health-related barriers. The following brief will provide information regarding the impact of chronic absenteeism on academic achievement, the role of school nurses in combatting chronic absenteeism, and an examination of provisions within the ESSA regarding school nurses.

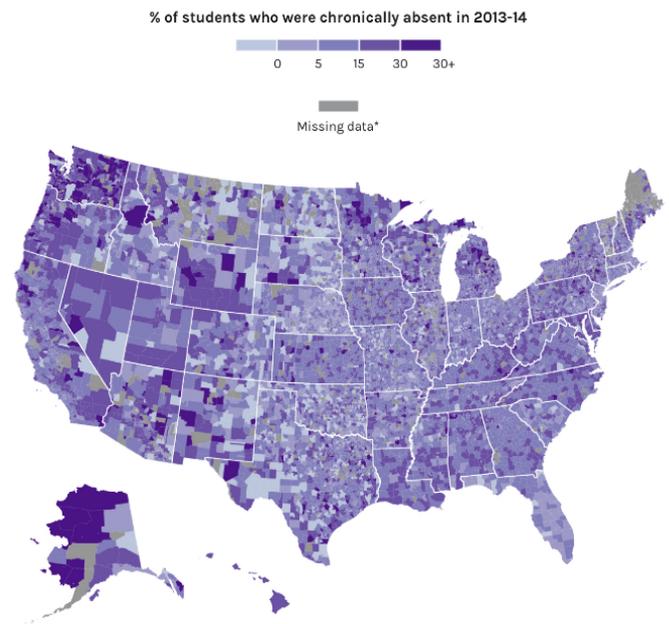
The Impact of Chronic Absenteeism

One in eight students was chronically absent in the 2013-2014 school year, according to a [civil rights data collection report](#) released by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR). The U.S. Department of Education defines chronic absenteeism as missing 15 or more days of school a year. Additional common definitions for chronic absenteeism include: missing 10% or more of the school year or in the previous year having missed a month or more of school. Chronic absenteeism is not equal to average daily attendance or truancy. Chronic absenteeism includes all absences, excused and unexcused, as opposed to truancy, which only includes unexcused absences. Average daily attendance measures the average number of students who show up any given day.

Chronic absenteeism affects 13% of the student population, however, significant disparities are evident across demographic groups. Compared to their white peers who are recorded at 12.2% chronically absent, American Indian and Pacific Islander students are 50% more likely to lose three weeks of school or more, while their Black peers are 30% more likely, and their Latino peers 9% more likely. Students with disabilities are 1.3 times more likely to be chronically absent than students without disabilities (OCR [Chronic Absenteeism StoryMap](#), 2016).

Chronic absenteeism disproportionately impacts students of color, and students living in areas of poverty. Multiple factors impact chronic absenteeism, such as psychosocial needs, lack of transportation, and health disparities.

Chronic absenteeism in early grades has been linked with students not reading on grade level. Additionally, a strong relationship was found between attendance and students graduating on time, within a year of expected high school graduation, or graduating at all. All in all, chronic absenteeism has been linked to low academic attainment, and in turn challenges obtaining and securing gainful employment.



Source: USED, [Chronic Absenteeism StoryMap](#)

The Role of School Nurses in Combatting Chronic Absenteeism

Reducing the number of students who are chronically absent across all grade levels requires a long-term, multifaceted approach that should be a joint effort between the state, districts, schools, and community members. One targeted intervention response has emerged due to the research links between chronic health issues (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) and chronic absenteeism. School nurses play a vital role in identifying students suffering from illnesses, educating students and families on dealing with health conditions, and working with school staff and administration to disseminate information and programs to contribute to the wellbeing of students.

As school nurses work with students to manage chronic conditions (such as helping kids use their inhalers), identify students who may have undiagnosed health condition, and reinforce medical and legislative policies related to student health, they contribute to reducing the number of students who are chronically absent.

Ultimately, school nurses work to ensure kids are ready to learn. They provide valuable support and information to school leaders about major concerns that can affect a child's ability to attend school and learn.

Researchers have shown that when nurses are present, they can help decrease the rate of student absenteeism and early dismissals due to health concerns. Nurses help assess unknown or uncontrolled chronic conditions, and help students and families better manage conditions, leading to improved attendance. By increasing the time a student is present in the classroom and supporting a safe learning environment, nurses can directly impact a student's ability to succeed academically.

In other words, in school districts with smaller nurse-to-student ratios, there were fewer violent deaths, fewer teen births, and higher high school graduation rates. Bonny et al. (2002) found that students who did not feel part of the school community were more likely to visit the school nurse. School nurses are in an ideal position to identify and work with at-risk groups.

School nurses are also cost-effective and save time for principals, teachers, and other administrative staff. According to a 2011 study by Baisch, Lundeen, & Murphy, a school nurse in a building can save principals an hour a day, teachers 20 minutes a day, and clerical staff more than 45 minutes a day. Using this data, the authors calculated the savings per school to be \$133,174.89. This translates to \$1.84 return on investment for every dollar invested. Another analysis from Massachusetts found that for every dollar spent on school nurses society gains \$2.20, as measured by savings in the costs of medical procedures, parent's lost productivity, and teacher's lost productivity.

About 50% of schools have a full-time RN for at least 30 hours per week, and 18% of schools do not have a nurse at all.

School Nurses & the ESSA

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law on December 10, 2015. The ESSA represents a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and will replace its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The ESSA transfers the bulk of decision-making from the U.S. Department of Education to state and Local Education Agencies (LEA), and requires states to seek community engagement at various planning and implementation levels.

The ESSA cites “Specialized Instructional Support Personnel” (SISP) throughout the law. ESSA defines Special Instructional Support Personnel to mean “(i) school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists; and (ii) other qualified professional personnel, such as school nurses, speech language pathologists, and school librarians involved in the providing assessment, diagnosis, counseling, educational, therapeutic, and other necessary services (including related services as that term is defined in the section 602 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1401)) as part of a comprehensive program to meet student needs.” (Definition found in Title VIII Sec. 8002(47)).

The ESSA directly refers to school nurses in Title IV (A): “Chronic Disease Management led by School Nurses”. Twenty-five percent of school children have chronic health issues. ESSA specifically recognizes the connection between health and education.

The following is a list of provisions related to SISP, which could serve to incorporate the voice of school nurses, and to identify areas of opportunity within the ESSA to enhance health services.

Title I

- LEAs can use their title I dollars – where at least 40% of students are low-income) to develop school-wide programs for all students, which includes hiring a school nurse, as well as nutrition programs, physical education programs, and bullying prevention programs. Schoolwide programs must be developed in consultation with SISP.
- ESSA explicitly requires consultation with SISP in the development of Title I state and LEA plans.
- Targeted assistance schools may use funds for professional development for school personnel, including SISP if appropriate.

Title II

- States and school districts must consult with SISP in developing their application for Title II funds.

Title IV

- Title IV funds may not be used for medical services or drug treatment or rehabilitation, except for integrated student supports, SISP services, or referral to treatment for impacted students.

- Title V block grant funds may be used for high quality training for SISP and other school personnel on suicide prevention, effective trauma-informed practices in classroom management, crisis management and conflict resolution techniques, human trafficking, school-based violence prevention strategies, drug abuse prevention, and bullying and harassment prevention.
- Under the Charter School Grants program, grantees may use funds to prepare school staff, including SISP, by paying costs of professional development and hiring and compensating, during the grant planning period, teachers, school leaders, and SISP.
- Under Full-Service Community Schools grants, funds must be used to, if applicable, coordinate and integrate services provided by community-based

Title VIII

- SISP are included in the list of educators in the definition of “professional development.”

Title IX

- State plans for grants for the education for homeless children must include a description of programs for school personnel, including SISP, to heighten awareness of specific needs of homeless and runaway children and youth.

Click [here](#) for a detailed list of citations in law highlighting the role and inclusion of SISP visit.



National Association of School Nurses ESSA Resources

- [ESSA: What School Nurses Need to Know](#)
- [ESSA Talking Points for School Nurses](#)
- [Implementation Comments from NASN to USED, August 2016](#)
- [Implementation Comments from NASN to USED, May 2016](#)

Conclusion

The Tennessee Department of Education Office of Coordinated School Health's (CSH) [2014-15 Annual Report](#) identifies as an on-going challenge that out of 1,811 public schools in Tennessee, only 47 percent – or 844 – schools employed a nurse full time at their school. The CHS model, which was developed by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), identifies the urgency of full-time school nurses at every public school due to the research that links promotion of healthy school environments with academic success.

Recognizing the link between student absenteeism and health conditions helps students stay healthy and ensures they are prepared to learn so they can graduate and be productive citizens. Investing in school nurses is one method that is research driven to improve absenteeism in K-12 schools, especially among the most at-risk populations, and which results in return on investments in dollars saved and time spent on instruction.

Successful programs that aim to improve student attendance must be multi-faceted: they must involve changing policies, changing a culture, educating parents, family members and community stakeholders, including entire administration, and investing in school nurses.

Including the impact of health disparities and economic levels on attendance rates is crucial in cities like Memphis, which has been named the Asthma Capital of the Nation and currently holds a poverty level of 27%. By examining the data specific to Shelby County, teachers, principals and policy makers can develop a better understanding on the extent of chronic absenteeism, and be in a better position to provide students the supports needed to ensure all students – especially the most disadvantaged – are in school every day.

Recommendations

- The CDC and American Academy of Pediatrics recommend one nurse per 750 students. Based on the current Shelby County ratio of school nurse to students, develop a proposal for fully funding a full-time nurse at every school over three to five years. Examine a variety of funding sources, including local government, and local hospitals for partnerships (see [Michigan example of hospital funded school nurse program](#)).
- Research highlights the importance of school nurses collecting and using their school's data to illustrate the importance of what they do, and how it affects student health. Promote the investment in up-to-date and relevant data tracking methods and strategies among school nurses.
- Ensure that school nurses in Shelby County are aware of the changes brought on by the ESSA, and prepared to be involved in the implementation process, particularly when provisions require SISP involvement. Encourage school nurses to advocate to their local districts, and the states, to seek option sources of funding for SISP development and enhancement of chronic disease management programs.

References

- Balfanz R., & Byrnes, V. 2012. *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University for Social Organization of Schools.
http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf
- Centers for Disease Control. 2013. *Make a Difference at Your School*. Chronic Disease.
<http://digitalcommons.hsc.unt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=disease>
- Jacobsen, K, Meeder, L, & Voskuil, Vicki R. 2015. *Chronic Student Absenteeism: The Critical Role of School Nurses*. The Journal of School Nursing. <http://nas.sagepub.com/content/31/3/178.abstract>
- Maughan, Erin D. 2016. *Building Strong Children: Why We Need Nurses in Schools*. American Educator. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1094215.pdf>
- National Alliance of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel. 2016. *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA): References to Specialized Instructional Support Personnel*.
http://www.nasisp.org/uploads/SISP_ESSA_References_2016.pdf
- National Association of School Nurses. 2016. *Policy and Advocacy: Official Documents and Recent Efforts*. <https://www.nasn.org/policyadvocacy>
- National Association of School Nurses. 2015. *White Paper: School Nurses' Role in Combating Chronic Absenteeism*. <https://www.nasn.org/portals/0/advocacy/whitepaperabsenteeism.pdf>
- Pianalto, Alexanda M., & Wall, Mitchell C. 2016. *The Effect of School Based Nursing on Health Related Outcomes in Children: A Review of Literature*. Honors Research Projects.
http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1295&context=honors_research_projects
- Tennessee Department of Education. 2015. *Office of Coordinated School Health Annual Report 2014-2015 School Year*. https://www.tn.gov/assets/entities/education/attachments/csh_annual_report_2014-15.pdf
- U.S. Department of Education. 2016. *Chronic Absenteeism In the Nation's Schools: An Unprecedented Look at a Hidden Education Crisis*. <http://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#four>
- U.S. Department of Education. 2016. *2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look*.
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>