

2016 Iowa Chronic Absenteeism Advisory Council Final Report

Nov. 29, 2016



Chronic Absenteeism Council Members:

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Introduction

Our goal is to help every student attend school every day. Given higher academic expectations for all students to succeed in a knowledge-based economy, it is critical they are in class to learn. Educators across Iowa work extraordinarily hard to give children the best education possible, and deserve more support to meet the challenge of some students being chronically absent.

Chronic absenteeism also is one factor that may interfere with students learning to read by the end of third grade. Twenty-four percent of third-graders were not proficient readers on the most recent state test, which is one of the earliest signs of the skills gap that Iowa is working to close. That is why Gov. Terry Branstad and Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds in June 2016 created the Iowa Chronic Absenteeism Advisory Council, with a focus on kindergarten through third grade.

The 32 members of the Iowa Chronic Absenteeism Advisory Council met once a month from August through November 2016. Our recommendations are based on the expertise of council members, a review of state and national reports, and presentations from community, state and national leaders. We used a collaborative, consensus-based process to arrive at these recommendations, meaning the entire task force stands behind each recommendation.

Eliminating chronic absenteeism is a goal that everyone shares. Making progress will require more collaboration by schools and their communities. The good news is that some schools and communities already have effective partnerships in place, so we have a strong foundation for the work ahead.

2016 Iowa Chronic Absenteeism Advisory Council

Lisa Bartusek	Iowa Association of School Boards Executive Director
Irma Becerra	English Language Learner and Migrant Program Assistant, Marshalltown Community School District
Connie Boesen	Des Moines Community School District School Board Member
Martha Bruckner	Council Bluffs Community School District Superintendent
Charles Bruner	Child & Family Policy Center Emeritus Founding Executive Director
Anne Discher	Child & Family Policy Center Communications Director/Senior Research Associate
Jaci Feuss	Cedar Falls Community School District Kindergarten Teacher
Ruth Ann Gaines	State Representative, Des Moines
Rita Hart	State Senator, Wheatland
Roark Horn	School Administrators of Iowa Executive Director
Aimee Hospodarsky	Iowa School Counselor Association President-Elect and Monticello Community School District Elementary School Counselor
Chad Jensen	Fifth Judicial District of Iowa Chief Juvenile Court Officer
Kevin Koester	State Representative, Ankeny
Jean Kresse	United Way of Story County President and CEO/ United Ways of Iowa Past Board Chair
Kari McCann Boutell	Iowa Council of Foundations President
Becky Miles-Polka	Campaign for Grade-Level Reading Senior Consultant, Iowa Lead
Scott Parry	Kluckhohn Elementary School Principal, Le Mars Community School District
Analisa Pearson	Child Health Nurse Clinician, Iowa Department of Public Health
Deborah Reed	Iowa Reading Research Center Director
Jerry Riibe	Muscatine Community School District Superintendent
Kevin Rohne	Waverly-Shell Rock Community School District Middle School Special Education Teacher and Professional Educators of Iowa Representative
Amy Sinclair	State Senator, Allerton
Elliott Smith	Iowa Business Council Executive Director
Chad Steckel	New Albin Elementary School Principal, Eastern Allamakee Community School District
Annette Taylor	Assistant Polk County Attorney
Tammy Wawro	Iowa State Education Association President
Amy Whittington	PK-6 Elementary Principal, Central Decatur Community School District
Paulette Wiley	Des Moines Community Activist and Family Advocate
Thatcher Williams	Iowa PTA
Amy Williamson	Iowa Department of Education Bureau of School Improvement Chief
Ryan Wise	Iowa Department of Education Director

2016 Non-voting Advisory Council Membership

Linda Fandel	Branstad-Reynolds Administration Special Assistant for Education and Iowa Chronic Absenteeism Advisory Council Facilitator
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2016 Meeting Schedule

<u>Date</u>	<u>Facility</u>	<u>City</u>
Aug. 16	Grimes State Office Building	Des Moines
Sept. 20	Pappajohn Higher Education Center	Des Moines
Oct. 18	Grimes State Office Building	Des Moines
Nov. 28	Grimes State Office Building	Des Moines

Executive Summary

Growing attention is being paid to chronic absenteeism in schools. When students are chronically absent for any reason, they risk falling behind academically and eventually dropping out. Meanwhile, their classmates are affected because teachers must spend time re-teaching missed material. In Iowa, an average 8.3 percent of public school students were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year, according to the Iowa Department of Education. Some districts, however, reported percentages in the double digits.* Please find 2015-2016 statistics here:

<https://governor.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Chronic%20Absenteeism%20Breakdown.pdf>

Chronic absenteeism is a problem across the nation as well, affecting more than 6 million students, reports the U.S. Department of Education. Chronic absenteeism often is called a “hidden crisis” because high average daily attendance can mask significant chronic absenteeism. The impact of chronic absenteeism for children living in poverty is greater than for their more affluent classmates.

The purpose of understanding the extent of chronic absenteeism in Iowa is to figure out how to improve attendance, not to blame schools. Chronic absenteeism typically is due to factors outside schools. But schools are in the best position to lead efforts to improve attendance by positively engaging students and their families in collaboration with communities.

In Iowa, the problem of chronic absenteeism is more nuanced than the state average indicates. The wide range in the share of students chronically absent by district reflects a number of things, including:

- 1) The extent of challenges in different communities, such as low-income families struggling with child care, transportation and other issues.
- 2) The effective work some schools and communities already are doing to improve attendance.
- 3) Possible differences in how districts locally track absences, such as whether they count students every period or once a day, and whether they include students who are suspended.

Agreement is broad, however, that it is important to better address chronic absenteeism to help students succeed. This is reflected in the four recommendations of the Iowa Chronic Absenteeism Advisory Council:

- 1) Establish a uniform way to define and track chronic absenteeism, including adopting a statewide definition of chronic absenteeism: Missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason, excused or unexcused. Meanwhile, the Iowa Department of Education should define how school districts should count and track students’ absences, so reporting is consistent.
- 2) Launch a statewide campaign to raise awareness about the importance of good attendance and the impact of chronic absenteeism on students’ success. The campaign will highlight bright spots where schools and communities are working together to promote good attendance.
- 3) Create a statewide mechanism for disseminating best practices and resources.
- 4) Establish an advisory group through the Iowa Department of Education to explore how to better collaborate across systems and with families to reduce chronic absenteeism.

*To assure Iowa’s chronic absenteeism numbers are as accurate as possible, the Iowa Department of Education is examining how it counts students. Currently, for example, statewide average percentages include only students who attend a school or school district full time for the entire school year without exiting within the school year. The department is looking at ways to better account for the under 6 percent of students who do not fall into that category, such as students who transfer between schools or districts mid-year. It plans to make any updates needed by the 2017-18 school year.

Our Recommendations

- 1) **Establish a uniform way to define and track chronic absenteeism, including adopting a statewide definition of chronic absenteeism: Missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason, excused or unexcused. Meanwhile, the Iowa Department of Education should define how school districts should count and track students' absences, so reporting is consistent.**

Iowa does not have an official definition of chronic absenteeism. Attendance Works, a national nonprofit initiative that promotes the importance of good attendance to improve student success, recommends defining chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason, excused or unexcused. Ten percent equals about two days a month or 18 days per school year. That is nearly a month of school over the course of a school year, demonstrating how fast absences can add up. A 10 percent definition is based upon research, promotes early identification of students academically at risk due to poor attendance, and helps offer comparable data. A common definition of chronic absenteeism at every level is needed to provide more reliable information about the extent of the problem.

- 2) **Launch a statewide campaign to raise awareness about the importance of good attendance and the impact of chronic absenteeism on student success. The campaign will highlight bright spots where schools and communities are working together to promote good attendance.**

It is important to raise awareness that chronic absenteeism is not only a school issue, but a community responsibility. Many school districts already make promoting good attendance a high priority and some offer extra support to families facing barriers. Iowa has good examples to build upon, including efforts under way in Council Bluffs, Cardinal, Denison, Des Moines and Muscatine, among other places.

Stressing the importance of attendance so all students can learn is critical. Parents may not always realize how damaging it can be to miss even a few days a month. Iowa children who were chronically absent in early elementary grades from 2010-11 to 2013-14 were less likely than classmates with good attendance to read proficiently by the end of third grade, according to the Child & Family Policy Center.

- 3) **Create a statewide mechanism for disseminating best practices and resources for reducing students' absences, including information about community supports.**

Currently, some school officials around the state may feel as though they are on their own when it comes to figuring out how to address chronic absenteeism. A statewide distribution mechanism would help school districts better address chronic absenteeism by creating a repository of what works, including national, state and local examples. For example, the Des Moines Independent Community School District is using chronic absenteeism as one factor to identify students at risk of struggling academically, connecting families with district case managers, and more recently contracting with outside agencies whose counselors provide more intensive services to families with students in early grades.

- 4) **Establish an advisory group through the Iowa Department of Education to explore how to better collaborate across systems and with families to reduce chronic absenteeism.**

Schools already work with students and their families, nonprofits, human services and the courts, among others, to address chronic absence. This advisory group would study ways Iowa schools and partners might better communicate across those systems.

Conclusion

Eliminating chronic absenteeism is one of many steps that will help Iowa schools give all students a globally competitive education. It also is important to meet the Future Ready Iowa goal of 70 percent of the workforce having education or training beyond high school by the year 2025. When young children miss a lot of school they are less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade, which will limit their success in school and the careers they are prepared to pursue as adults.

Although eliminating chronic absenteeism seems like a simple idea, it will take focused and sustained action to accomplish the goal. Iowa can accelerate the good work already under way in many places by adopting a common definition of chronic absenteeism; raising statewide awareness about the importance of good attendance; creating a state repository of proven strategies to help school districts learn from each other as well as from other state and national initiatives; and encouraging greater collaboration among schools, families, nonprofits, human services and the courts, among others.

We are confident that Iowans will rise to the challenge by doing more to eliminate chronic absenteeism. A great deal is at stake for the thousands of Iowa students who are chronically absent each school year. Improving school attendance promises to help transform their lives.

Key Resources

- 1) Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools
<http://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>
Source: U.S. Department of Education
- 2) School Attendance Patterns in Iowa: Chronic Absence in the Early Grades
http://www.cfpciowa.org/documents/news/CFPC_report_Chronic_absence_in_earl_989B40665EDC0.pdf
Source: Child & Family Policy Center
- 3) Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight
<http://www.edweek.org/media/chronicabsence-15chang.pdf>
Source: Attendance Works and Child & Family Policy Center
- 4) Strategies to Address Chronic Absence: A Multi-Tiered Approach
http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/AW_-_Tiers-Workshop_Final.pdf
Source: Attendance Works
- 5) Chronic Absenteeism in Iowa in the 2015-16 School Year
<https://governor.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Chronic%20Absenteeism%20Breakdown.pdf>
Source: The Iowa Department of Education

A special thanks to local, state and national leaders who made presentations to the council:

- 1) Ryan Wise, Iowa Department of Education Director
- 2) Anne Discher, Child & Family Policy Center Communications Director/Senior Research Associate
- 3) Amy Williamson, Chief, Bureau of School Improvement, Iowa Department of Education
- 4) Hedy Nai-Lin Chang, Attendance Works Executive Director
- 5) Martha Bruckner, Council Bluffs Community School District Superintendent
- 6) Mike Pardun, Denison Community School District Superintendent
- 7) Joel Pedersen, Cardinal Community School District Superintendent
- 8) Marvin DeJear, Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families Director
- 9) Jean Kresse, President and CEO United Way of Story County, Past Chair of United Ways of Iowa Board
- 10) Becky Miles-Polka, Campaign for Grade-Level Reading Senior Consultant/Iowa Lead
- 11) Arlene McAtee, Mid-Iowa Community Action Executive Director
- 12) Charles Bruner, Child & Family Policy Center Emeritus Founding Executive Director
- 13) Marsha Kerper, Principal at Capitol View Elementary School in Des Moines
- 14) David Sharkey, Dean of Students at Capitol View Elementary School in Des Moines
- 15) Debora Aguilar, Parent who has served as a Teacher's Associate in Des Moines

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