



July 25, 2022

To: The Texas House Committee on Public Education

Re: Interim Charge #4, Chronic absenteeism in public schools and its impact on student outcomes

Chairman Dutton and members of the committee,

Thank you for including chronic absenteeism as an issue worthy of interim study, as it is often misunderstood and overlooked by education leaders in Texas despite its essential connection to learning outcomes.

This is hardly surprising as chronic absence is not defined in the Texas Education Code. **Lawmakers should start by codifying this commonly used definition: students who miss 10% or more of the total number of days enrolled during a school year regardless of the reason.** The reasons can and do vary - excused, unexcused (the distinction between these can be more subjective and biased than you might think), even disciplinary suspensions.

Whatever image you might have in your head of a chronically absent student, I urge you to ignore it. The reasons why students miss school are as complex and varied as the students, families and communities of Texas. Whenever a student is absent - especially repeatedly - we should have one response, always in the form of a question: *Why is this student missing school?* Answering this question is the first, most important step to developing and implementing solutions that work. Despite what the answers could tell us - about a student's well-being, their sense of belonging and engagement in school, the quality of their family's relationship with their school - our education systems are remarkably under-equipped to answer this question and then act on it.

This should be alarming given the wealth of research demonstrating the powerful link between chronic absence and learning outcomes, especially in the early grades¹ and high school years², when Texas data show the highest rates of chronic absence.

So, how are we doing in Texas? Before answering, consider that **TEA is not currently required to report chronic absence data - another change that policymakers should prioritize.**

In 2020-21, 15% of all Texas students were chronically absent. Disparities by household income reached the highest level in a decade: **nearly 1 in 5 (19.9%) students from low-income backgrounds were chronically absent compared to 7.3% of their more affluent peers.**³

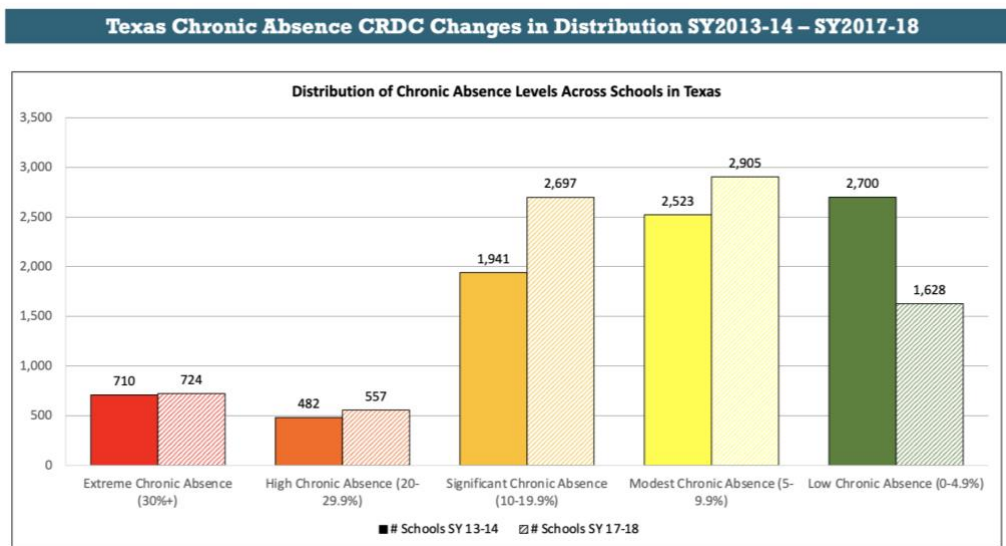
¹ Attendance in the Early Grades: Why It Matters for Reading, Attendance Works and the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Attendance-in-the-Early-Grades.pdf>

² Why Attendance Matters, E3 Alliance: <https://ace.e3alliance.org/why-attendance-matters>

³ E3 Alliance Attendance Data Dashboard: <https://data.e3alliance.org/attendance-profile/p20/TX/x/p20/ELP/>

With nearly 4 in 10 students receiving asynchronous instruction, it is likely that many of these students were under-engaged despite their attendance being counted. And preliminary data from other states for the current 2021-22 school year suggest that chronic absence has continued to rise dramatically.⁴

Unfortunately, this challenge pre-dates the pandemic. **Data from Attendance Works comparing chronic absence in 2013-14 to 2017-18 show Texas headed in the wrong direction.** In 2017-18, nearly 2,700 Texas schools had significant rates of chronic absence (10-20% of students), another 557 had high rates (20-30% of students), and 724 had extreme rates (more than 30% of students).



Don't let anyone tell you this is not a solvable problem. **If we choose to treat chronic absence as the powerful indicator that it is, it can be addressed with the right data, focus, and resources.** There are a number of evidence-based interventions ranging from relationship-building home visits⁵ and text messaging⁶ to telehealth,⁷ early warning systems, and mentors.⁸ At the core of students' regular attendance: positive relationships between school, student, and family.

With a comprehensive and intentional policy framework, Texas can reverse this trend and dramatically reduce chronic absence at scale. While our state was moving in the wrong direction, Connecticut dramatically reduced its number of schools with high rates of chronically absent students.

⁴ COVID-19 and education: An emerging K-shaped recovery, McKinsey & Company: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-an-emerging-k-shaped-recovery>

⁵ Student Outcomes and Parent Teacher Home Visits, Johns Hopkins School of Education: <https://pthvp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/student-outcomes-and-parent-teacher-home-visits.pdf>

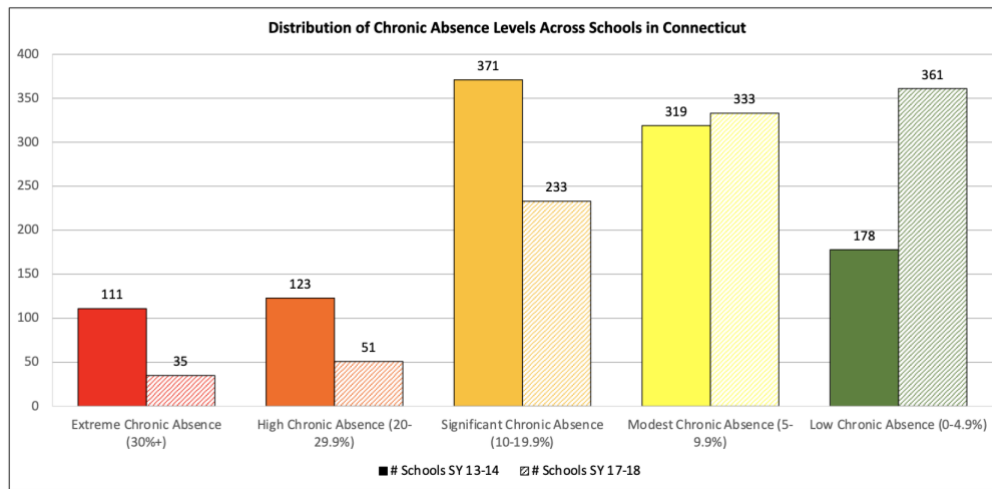
⁶ Can Texting Parents Improve Attendance in Elementary School? A Test of an Adaptive Messaging Strategy, Institute of Education Sciences: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/2020006/pdf/2020006.pdf>

⁷ Roadmap for Action, The Children's Partnership, Nemours Foundation and the Winter Park Health Foundation:

<http://www.movinghealthcareupstream.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Roadmap-For-Action-Advancing-the-Adoption-of-Telehealth-1.pdf>

⁸ Attendance Playbook: Smart Solutions for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the COVID Era, FutureEd: <https://www.future-ed.org/attendance-playbook/>

CT Chronic Absence CRDC Changes in Distribution SY2013-14 – SY2017-18



As you consider policy solutions to reduce chronic absence, please consider the following:

1. Because factors and degrees of chronic absence vary widely across systems and schools, **quality data is essential to analyze and develop a tiered system of support** that establishes foundational statewide strategies and then prioritizes those schools with more severe levels.
2. Because Average Daily Attendance (ADA) is a campus-level measure, it masks the student-level data necessary to address chronic absence. **Reliable and actionable reporting systems are critical to identify and provide targeted support for students** at greater risk of chronic absence.
3. Every school should have enough resources to meet the unique needs of every enrolled child. **The state’s current ADA funding model serves as an important but insufficient incentive** that results in resource instability and inequity - and has failed to improve chronic absence over time. Defining students who are chronically absent as “at risk” will ensure schools receive resources specifically intended to support these students.
4. **Any shift away from ADA must be paired with other policies that emphasize the importance of addressing attendance.** Should there be an opportunity to revisit the state’s accountability framework, attendance-related measures are worth consideration along with the necessary guidance, resources, and technical assistance for schools and school systems to create and implement effective action plans.

Sincerely,

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