EVERY STUDENT, EVERY DAY:
MEETING THE CHALLENGE
OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM
ONE CHILD,
ONE TEACHER,
ONE BOOK,
ONE PEN
CAN CHANGE
THE WORLD.

– MALALA YOUSAFZAI,
2014 Nobel Prize Laureate
Community Partner:

This year, United Way of Greater Kansas City celebrates 100 years of service to our community. Throughout its history, the work of United Way has focused on improving lives and fostering success through a strong network of community services focused on health, education and financial stability.

While much of this work is rooted in helping individuals and families overcome obstacles—particularly those that stem from poverty and scarcity—the greatest impact comes from helping a person avoid these challenges in the first place. And the surest path to this result is a good education. So United Way and its partners have worked for decades to help students remain in school, stay on track and graduate high school with a plan for the future. As United Way of Greater Kansas City charts a course for the next 100 years, we will launch a major initiative focused on a key strategy for school success: reducing chronic absenteeism. This initiative will deepen the school and community partnerships that have defined much of our work in recent years.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the extent and nature of chronic absenteeism, a look at its root causes and a summary of approaches to addressing this systemic problem. Its title, “Every Student, Every Day” is borrowed from the work of the U.S. Department of Education and supported by Attendance Works, leaders of a nationwide initiative to focus communities on this shared challenge.

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, school leaders across the country have been challenged by federal and state education officials to find new ways to intervene with the students who miss the most days. This began with new accountabilities around the tracking of the number of chronically absent students—those who miss more than ten percent of days—and an expectation that schools work to reduce the number of students who fall within this group.

To guide our work, we have established a specific goal of reducing the number of chronically absent students in the Kansas City metro by one-third by 2028. In a metro area with 300,000 students in 500 public schools, this means working to change the trajectory of more than 11,000 students, and positively impacting tens of thousands more who fall below the chronic absence threshold, but for whom more days in school will mean better outcomes. Over the next decade, United Way of Greater Kansas City will commit time, staff and financial resources to a new partnership with area educators who are already working to pursue this goal. We will identify ways that our current investments and collaborative initiatives with area nonprofits can be refocused to lend support to those efforts. And we will research, invest in and deploy proven and promising strategies that help reduce the number of chronically absent students in the six-county metro area.

As we pursue these goals, United Way of Greater Kansas City will look to many of its most trusted partners—public and private, business and nonprofit—to join us in this work. As you read this report, we invite you to consider a way that you or your organization may play a role.

W. Russell Welsh
Chair, Board of Trustees
United Way of Greater Kansas City

Brent Stewart
President and CEO
United Way of Greater Kansas City

October, 2018
INTRODUCTION

Schools today have a great number of responsibilities. In addition to providing a good education and keeping students safe, they are expected to instill character, promote health and teach skills that prepare students for the workplace. Many schools have the added challenge of helping students overcome the effects of poverty, trauma and other social challenges.

Critical to meeting these challenges and academic benchmarks is showing up. There is little a school can do to support a student’s success when they are not consistently in attendance. And there is an increasing understanding among educators and advocates nationwide about the impact of missing too many school days and the importance of intervening on behalf of the students with the highest rates of absenteeism.

Poor attendance is correlated with a host of negative outcomes across the K-12 trajectory and beyond:

- Chronic absence in preschool and kindergarten is associated with greater likelihood of being held back in the third grade; students who are chronically absent in middle school are more likely to drop out of high school; and chronically absent high schoolers who do graduate are less likely to make it to their second year of college.\(^1\)

Nationwide, more than 7 million students (15 percent of the total K-12 population) were chronically absent during the 2015-16 school year, meaning they missed more than 10 percent of school days.\(^2\) While chronic absenteeism affects students from all backgrounds and schools in all geographies, it disproportionately affects underserved groups, including low-income students, students of color, those with special education needs, and those facing disruptive life circumstances, such as homelessness.\(^3\)

The long-term consequences of chronic absenteeism spread far beyond just education. Stakeholders exist in all sectors of the community, including employers who rely on a pipeline of qualified workers, public and private organizations working to establish strong local economies, and the agencies that serve families and children. Because the effects of chronic absenteeism are so far-reaching, solutions must include the engagement of educators, families, students, local businesses, and the community.

The United Way of Greater Kansas City is uniquely positioned to partner with a variety of stakeholders in the community to address the issue of chronic absenteeism in the Kansas City region. This report is one piece of that effort. It begins by defining chronic absenteeism and exploring its causes and consequences. It then presents data on the issue of chronic absenteeism in the Kansas City region, exploring where the issue is most pronounced. The paper concludes with a discussion of existing research on national and local solutions to the problem of chronic absenteeism.

DEFINING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

While there is no consistent definition of chronic absenteeism, either in scholarly writing or in education circles, it is commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason — excused or not. In most states, this is the equivalent of missing two days of school per month or 18 days throughout the academic year.\(^4\)

Chronic absenteeism is distinct from other commonly used measures of attendance and absence, such as average daily attendance (ADA) and truancy. ADA measures the number of students who are in school on a given day, averaged over a set period of time. In most schools, ADA tends to be high (above 90 percent). While this calculation can give a general sense of how many students are typically present, it is an average and therefore does not identify or focus schools’ attention on individual students who are repeatedly absent and who may need additional support services.
Schools also commonly report truancy rates, which measure only unexcused absences, so students who miss school frequently for “excused” reasons, like illness or out-of-school suspension, are not captured in this calculation.

Chronic absenteeism rates, on the other hand, track student-level attendance data and do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. Missing school, regardless of the cause, has negative effects on students’ academic outcomes, and students who are absent frequently — whether they are sick or simply choosing not to attend — likely need additional attention and support. In recent years, states have begun to capture chronic absenteeism data more rigorously. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights required schools to report the data for the first time beginning with the 2013–14 school year. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, also requires states to track and report chronic absence data and allows districts to use federal dollars to train staff to address the problem.

ESSA also requires states to create accountability systems that track and report five indicators of school performance. The first three indicators measure math and reading achievement, the fourth holds states accountable for improving the English proficiency of English language learners, and the fifth is a state-chosen measure of school quality or student success. Thirty-six states (including Missouri) and Washington, D.C. have adopted...
measures of chronic absenteeism as their fifth indicator in their accountability plans.\textsuperscript{6}

Definitions and measures of chronic absenteeism vary across these states. Twenty-seven states are using the most common definition — students who miss more than 10 percent of school days. Four states and Washington, D.C. are using the equivalent inverse: students who attend less than 90 percent of school days. Three states define chronic absence as missing a set number of school days, and two are using other measures of attendance as their definitions.\textsuperscript{7}

The Kansas City metro area comprises districts in two states that have taken different approaches to their ESSA plans. Missouri is one of the 36 states and Washington, D.C. using a measure of chronic absenteeism as its fifth indicator. It falls into the second group outlined above, defining chronic absenteeism as being present less than 90 percent of the school year. Missouri’s ESSA plan sets a goal of having at least 90 percent of students present at least 90 percent of the time (the 90/90 principle).\textsuperscript{8}

Kansas, on the other hand, is not among the states using chronic absenteeism as its fifth indicator in its ESSA plan; it uses an additional measure of students’ academic progress instead. However, the Kansas Department of Education has begun collecting chronic absenteeism data from districts to support teachers and schools in reducing the problem. The Department also plans to publicly release this data before the end of 2018.

Regardless of how states define chronic absenteeism and whether reducing it is an explicit goal in their ESSA plans,
it remains a challenge facing students and schools in every state across the country.

WHO IS AFFECTED?

In the 2015-16 school year, 7.3 million students nationwide were chronically absent. The problem is widespread, affecting schools in every state and students from all backgrounds and geographies. It does not affect all groups of students equally, however. Students of color and those from low-income families are more likely to miss school than their more affluent white and Asian classmates. English language learners are somewhat less likely to be chronically absent than their peers, while students receiving special education are more likely than their peers to be chronically absent. Moreover, students facing significant disruptive events, like foster care placement or homelessness, are more likely to be chronically absent than their peers. One study of children ages 5-8 in Philadelphia's foster care system found that they missed, on average, 25 days of school per year (approximately 14 percent of school days). In Sacramento, 27 percent of students in foster care were chronically absent during the 2012-13 school year.

Students who experience homelessness are also more likely to miss school; one study estimates that they are 80 percent more likely to be chronically absent than their stably housed peers. Even students in families who are able to avoid homelessness are vulnerable, as housing

Defining Student Attendance and Absence in Missouri and Kansas

Both Kansas and Missouri track two sets of attendance and absenteeism data: daily attendance and chronic absenteeism.

To collect student attendance data for the purposes of receiving state per-pupil funding, both Missouri and Kansas track students’ attendance in school in increments smaller than full school days. The Missouri Department of Education requires districts to report student attendance and absence data by the hour. Schools may do so by either collecting the data by the minute or by the hour. Both full-day absences and early departures/late arrivals count toward a student’s overall accumulated absent minutes. Students serving out-of-school suspensions are counted as absent and do not generate daily attendance for state aid purposes.

Kansas schools must also report the number of minutes students attend school to the Kansas Department of Education. These data are used to calculate full-time equivalency (FTE) for the purposes of receiving state funding, as determined on an annual “count day”, on or around September 20th, in which state funding for the year is based on the number of enrolled and attending students on that day, with some exceptions.

The states use slightly different methods for defining chronic absenteeism and collecting relevant data. In Missouri, students who are chronically absent are those who attend school less than 90 percent of the time. In Kansas, chronically absent students are those who miss 10 percent or more of the days that school has been in session at any point in the school year, for any reason. In Missouri, districts are required to offer a school year that is at least 174 days or 1,044 hours of instruction. In Kansas the school year is generally at least 186 days. As a result, the calculation of ten percent of school days can vary slightly by state and by district.
Chronic Absenteeism is an Equity Issue

School attendance is connected to physical, social, and environmental factors. Many of the physical, social, and environmental barriers that contribute to poor attendance (like illness, suspension, or transportation) disproportionately affect low-income students of color, leading them to be absent more frequently, which can exacerbate the problems these communities already face.17

Although chronic absenteeism is widespread, the majority of cases are highly concentrated; more than half of all chronic absenteeism takes place in just 4 percent of the nation’s districts and 12 percent of schools.18 In the Kansas City region, more than one-quarter of all chronically absent students (26 percent) attend the region’s four large urban districts, while those district serve only 15% of total students.

Funding formulas that base school funding on average daily attendance also have a disproportionately negative impact on districts serving high numbers of low-income students of color. In Missouri’s funding formula, “weighting” for factors such as poverty, limited English proficiency, and special education needs is offset by factoring into the funding calculation average daily attendance, which is typically lower in high-poverty districts.

Because chronic absenteeism disproportionally affects already-underserved groups of students, improving school attendance is critical to closing achievement gaps and improving educational equity. Strategies focused on tackling the challenge of chronic absenteeism must incorporate approaches to closing equity and achievement gaps.

instability due to poverty can result in frequent moves for a variety of reasons — for example, to avoid eviction, to take advantage of “first month free” offers, or to “double up” by necessity or by choice to reduce expenses. Often, these moves cross school building attendance boundaries and even district boundaries, resulting in delays as families settle and complete a new school’s enrollment process. Students who are transient for other reasons, including those in military families, migrant families, or those displaced by natural disasters, are also more likely to be chronically absent.22

Chronic absenteeism is a problem across all grade levels, beginning as early as pre-K, but rates of chronic absenteeism vary by grade. National trends show that chronic absenteeism tends to be high in preschool and in the early elementary grades — one in 10 kindergarten and first-graders misses 18 or more days of school per year23 — before dropping in the middle elementary years (grades 3-5) and then ticking up again in middle school and into high school, which tends to have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism (see Figure 1 below). Nationwide, about one in five high school students is chronically absent, compared to 13 percent of middle schoolers and 11 percent of elementary-aged students.24

Why Chronic Absenteeism Matters

Chronic absenteeism is concerning because it correlates with negative future educational outcomes for students and it can also be a warning sign of other problems. High rates of chronic absenteeism may also affect school-level
culture and finances in ways that undermine learning even for children who are not chronically absent.

**Effects of chronic absenteeism on students**
Most directly, chronic absenteeism has negative effects on students’ academic achievement and social skills development. It is associated with reduced math and reading achievement outcomes and reduced school and social engagement. As early as pre-k, chronic absenteeism is associated with weaker reading skills, greater likelihood of being retained in at least one grade level, and lagging development of the social skills needed to persist in school.

Chronic absenteeism is also a warning sign that a student will drop out of or be off track to graduate from high school, affecting both test scores in the near term and students’ longer-term outcomes. One study found that chronically absent students are more than seven times as likely to drop out of high school than their peers with better attendance. Chronically absent middle schoolers are also more likely to be off track for high school graduation. In one district, 81 percent of 9th graders who missed 20 percent or more of school days during their 8th-grade year were not on track to graduate.

**The effects of missing school and not graduating compound over the longer term.** Better-educated people are more likely to live longer, be healthier, be stably employed, and earn higher wages. The opposite is also true: Less-educated people are more likely to be un- or underemployed, earn less, and be less healthy, resulting in greater costs to society.

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**FIGURE 1. CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES BY GRADE**

Chronic Absenteeism Occurs at a Greater Rate in Kindergarten, Middle and High School

Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2017 Proportional Attendance Report for schools in Jackson, Clay, Platte and Cass Counties
And chronic absenteeism affects the larger school community, not just those students who miss school. High rates of absence can disrupt the pace of classroom instruction and make it challenging for teachers to adjust to having different groups of students present in the classroom each day. This can negatively impact the education of the students who attend school regularly.30

**Effects of chronic absenteeism on schools**

In addition to the negative effects on students, student absences can have fiscal costs for schools. Many states base school funding levels on the number of students who attend that school, providing a set amount of funding per pupil. Methods that states use to count students vary, however (see below).

When states use student-count methods, like ADA, that rely on students being in attendance on a specific day (or set of days), student absences can create a funding disadvantage for school districts with higher rates of absenteeism, a factor over which schools have limited control.32 Under ADA systems, schools must budget and plan to serve 100 percent of enrolled students but receive funding based on a smaller percentage of those students.

This discrepancy is particularly damaging for schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism, which likely also serve populations of high-need students experiencing other barriers to learning, such as poverty. Several national studies have demonstrated that schools with high percentages of low-income students have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than schools serving fewer low-income students.33 And educating high-need student populations costs more.34 In other words, schools serving disadvantaged populations that tend to be more expensive to educate receive even less funding because of school funding formulas that do not appropriately account for student absences.35

This is the case in Missouri, one of seven states nationwide using the ADA method to calculate school funding. To adjust for the gap between high-poverty and low-poverty schools that results from ADA funding formulas, the Missouri legislature adopted a weighted

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**How States Count Students to Determine School Funding**

States send money to schools based on how many students attend each school. However, there are many methods for counting how many students attend a given school. The following six methods are the most common:31

1. **Fall enrollment count**: the number of students enrolled or in attendance on a given day in the fall of the school year (usually on or around October 1)
2. **Multiple count dates**: a count of the number of students enrolled or in attendance on two or more nonconsecutive dates (typically one in the fall and one in the spring)
3. **Average daily attendance (ADA)**: the number of children actually in attendance each day, typically averaged on a bi-monthly or quarterly basis. Absent students are excluded from this count.
4. **Average daily membership (ADM)**: the number of children enrolled to attend a specific district throughout the year. Absent students are included in this count.
5. **Single count period**: an average of a daily count during an established period of time, typically at the beginning of the year
6. **Multiple count periods**: an average of a daily count during two or more periods of time during the year
average daily attendance (WADA) formula in 2005. This formula adjusts a district’s attendance number if it serves a higher-than-average concentration of students in any of the following three subgroups: students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, students who have an individual education plan (IEP), or students who are learning English. This adjustment, or weighting, allows Missouri districts that serve high concentrations of these student populations to receive additional funds. However, the use of average daily attendance as an additional factor in calculating funding reduces the benefit of need-based weighting because high-need districts tend to have lower rates of average daily attendance.

Kansas, on the other hand, is one of 12 states nationwide that use a single count date method, counting the number of students “enrolled or attending” on a single day (typically September 20). According to the Kansas State Department of Education handbook, students can be counted as enrolled even if absent on September 20 if they both attend at least once prior to September 20 and at least once after September 20 but before October 4.

Kansas’ per-pupil funding calculation, which allows districts to account for some student absences, helps address some of the inequality inherent in Missouri’s ADA system by ensuring that districts are not unfairly penalized for high rates of student absence.

Ultimately, chronic absenteeism is a problem for both students and schools. Understanding the root causes and identifying solutions is imperative for improving the education outcomes of all young people.
EXAMINING ROOT CAUSES

Children miss school for a lot of reasons. While many of them overlap and intertwine, these reasons can be broadly classified into the four categories in the diagram below.

**Student-specific factors**
Health-related absences are among the most common reasons that students miss school, particularly in the early grades. Fifty-four percent of absences in preschool are due to illness.\(^39\) Many of these absences can be linked to chronic health conditions, like allergies, asthma, diabetes, or obesity, or to those, like dental problems, associated with limited access to routine care.\(^40\) Asthma alone accounts for about 14 million absences each school year.\(^41\) In 2015, the four Missouri counties serving the Kansas City region saw 3,016 child asthma emergency room visits.\(^42\) Untreated dental problems account for nearly 2 million lost school days each year.\(^43\)

A lack of access to health insurance may exacerbate illness-related absences. Families without medical insurance may not seek medical care early, leading to illness progression and resulting in additional absences from school.\(^44\)

Beyond illness, students — particularly in older grades — may decide for themselves not to go to school.

**Family-specific Factors**
- Housing instability/homelessness
- Low parental involvement
- Transiency
- Caregiver instability
- Poverty
- Food insecurity
- Abuse or neglect

**School-specific Factors**
- School culture
- Lack of connection
- Discipline/suspension policies
- In-school supports (e.g. special ed)
- Physical disrepair of buildings

**Community-specific Factors**
- Violence
- Poverty
- Lack of transportation
- Illness connected to environmental factors
Research finds that in middle and high school, “didn’t feel like going” is one of the top three reasons students miss school. Teenagers may not feel like going to school for a variety of reasons, ranging from bullying to disengagement. Nineteen percent of students report being bullied at school, and 160,000 high schoolers skip school each day to avoid being bullied. Challenges like pregnancy, substance abuse, and emotional or psychological problems all contribute to absenteeism in the upper grades. And when students are disengaged, lacking connection to either the school community or to what they are learning in the classroom, they are less likely to attend school.

Family-specific factors
At a family level, factors like poverty, transiency, and caregiver instability can all lead to increased student absences. Family poverty and poor attendance are closely correlated, as families struggling to access basic necessities, like food and shelter, may place less emphasis on regular school attendance. One study found that children living in poverty are 25 percent more likely to miss at least three days of school per month than their non-poor peers. Food insecurity — when families do not have reliable access to a sufficient amount of nutritious food — is also strongly correlated with absenteeism. This means that children who miss school also miss the benefits of free and reduced-price meals when they are absent, exacerbating the impacts of food insecurity.

Housing instability also contributes to chronic absenteeism. Frequent moves can disrupt schooling routines and potentially require students to un-enroll and re-enroll in multiple schools throughout the year. While school districts in the metro area that serve high numbers of homeless students have become adept at expediting the transition and minimizing the number of “missed days” due to homelessness, at times administrative delays in new-school enrollment — particularly those involving moves across district boundaries — can cause children to miss school. In addition, the mental and emotional stress caused by needing to adjust to new academic and social environments can lead to students not wanting to attend school.
In the Kansas City metro area, 7,816 students qualified as homeless under criteria established by the McKinney-Vento Act in the 2015-16 school year. While this group of students faces some of the greatest barriers to school success, it represents only a portion of students experiencing housing instability. A study by the Kansas City Area Research Consortium found that in school districts serving Jackson, Clay, and Platte counties, 36,799 students — out of a total enrollment of 161,610 — had transferred schools at least once. While some of these moves were planned and supported, many were the result of housing instability and other factors associated with poverty. The highest rates of mobility were seen among the highest-need districts. “Mobile students” had a 4.5 percent lower attendance rate, on average, than students who did not switch schools. On average, these students missed four days with each transfer. Ten percent of students who transferred missed an average of 12 days.52

The availability and ability of adult caregivers to emphasize regular school attendance can also impact absenteeism rates. For young children who rely on adults to wake them up and help them get ready for school, caregiver instability can negatively impact attendance. If the adults in a family work hours incompatible with assisting children in getting ready for school at home, or if they struggle with challenges like psychological problems or substance abuse, children may lack the adult support and supervision they need to attend school regularly.

Children may also miss school frequently when they are exposed to violence, abuse, or neglect at home. Students experiencing this kind of trauma tend to be less engaged in school and have lower school performance, both of which are correlated with higher rates of absenteeism.53

Even children removed from a home where they have experienced abuse or neglect often experience higher rates of absenteeism than their peers. Despite protections in federal law designed to ensure educational stability of youth in foster care — including the right to remain in the school they attend when taken into care, if it is in their best interest — children in foster care miss more days than their peers not in foster care.

One 2017 analysis of statewide data in California showed that children in foster care had a 25.1 percent chronic
absenteeism rate — more than twice that of the statewide average. A study of chronic absenteeism among young children in foster care showed that absenteeism rates increased with the degree of “instability” of placements — meaning the more placements/moves foster children experience, the higher their rate of absenteeism — suggesting that placement transfers often come with missed days of school.

School-specific factors
School culture plays an important role in student attendance. Positive school cultures can increase student engagement, which encourages attendance. Students are more likely to attend school when they do so in an environment where they feel respected and cared for. On the other hand, a negative school culture or lack of connection to peers and teachers can lead to increased school absences.

In addition, schools’ responses to behavior problems, appropriate diagnoses of special education needs, and availability of support all contribute to school absenteeism. Disciplinary methods like out-of-school suspension contribute to chronic absenteeism, as these policies require students to not attend school for a set number of days. If schools cannot correctly diagnose students' special needs, students may become frustrated, leading to disengagement and lower attendance.

In addition to the human aspects of schools, the physical appearance of the school building may also contribute to student absenteeism. One study found that absenteeism rates are higher in schools that are in disrepair, use temporary buildings or portable structures to address overcrowding, or have understaffed janitorial services.

Community-specific factors
The characteristics of the communities and

CHRONIC ABSENCE IN HIGHER-POVERTY DISTRICTS IS NEARLY TWICE AS HIGH AS IN LOWER-POVERTY DISTRICTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Poverty Districts</th>
<th>Lower Poverty Districts</th>
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<tr>
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<td>91.2%</td>
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Six KC metro area school districts that have greater than 60% Free and Reduced Lunch population (with a total of 59,000 students) in 2017 - Source: MO Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education

Fifteen KC metro area school districts that have less than 30% Free and Reduced Lunch population (with a total of 82,000 students) in 2017 - Source: MO Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education

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neighborhoods in which children live can also affect attendance rates. Witnessing or experiencing community violence is associated with chronic absenteeism. Students who live in high-poverty areas and who walk to school may need to do so through neighborhoods that pose real threats to their safety, which may cause them to avoid going to school.

And illnesses that keep students home may be closely tied to environmental factors. For example, asthma—which is a leading illness keeping young students out of school—is linked to poor air quality and high levels of mold.

The reasons that students miss school are complex and varied. Often, students are facing multiple barriers and challenging circumstances simultaneously. Possible solutions for the challenge of chronic absenteeism locally must be informed by analyzing existing data to understand how the issue is manifesting itself in the local community.

### CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN THE KANSAS CITY METRO AREA

Chronic absenteeism affects communities nationwide, and Kansas City is no exception. The Kansas City metro area encompasses communities on both the Kansas and Missouri sides of the Missouri River. This includes more than 302,000 K-12 public school students attending school in 41 school districts and 21 charter schools. According to data (on Kansas Schools) from the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights and the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, in 2015-16, 11.5 percent, or nearly 35,000 of those students were chronically absent. Table 1 below compares the demographics of the region’s student population overall to those of its chronically absent students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>All Kansas City Metro School District Students</th>
<th>Chronically Absent Students in Kansas City</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MALE</td>
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<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEMALE</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>WHITE</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS</td>
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</table>
The demographics of Kansas City’s chronically absent students are largely similar to its demographics overall. However, these data demonstrate that a higher percentage of chronically absent students are black or Hispanic, and receive special education services compared to those populations region-wide. The differences in rates of white and black chronically absent students compared to the student population overall are particularly noteworthy. While 61 percent of the Kansas City metro region’s students are white, only 47 percent of its chronically absent students are white. Sixteen percent of the metro region’s students are black, but one-quarter of chronically absent students are black. By the same token, districts serving high populations of black students tend to have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism in the region.

At a district level, chronic absenteeism rates range from a low of 2 percent to a high of 23 percent. Sixteen districts have chronic absenteeism rates below 10 percent; 20 between 10 and 20 percent; and five at or above 20 percent.64

The four large urban districts serving the Kansas City region together account for more than one-quarter (26 percent) of all chronically absent students in the metro area. All four have large populations of low-income students, which, as discussed previously, is a factor strongly correlated with chronic absenteeism. Even so, chronic absenteeism is a challenge across the region, in all districts and in all geographies.

Within districts, variation in school-level rates of chronic absenteeism is even greater than variation between districts. Of the 547 school buildings for which data was considered in this review, 236 (43 percent) have chronic absenteeism rates greater than 10 percent. Seventy-seven schools (14 percent) have chronic absenteeism rates above 20 percent. And 25 schools (5 percent) have chronic absenteeism rates above 30 percent.65

These student-, district-, and school-level data offer a picture of Kansas City metro’s chronic absenteeism problem that is broadly consistent with national trends: Chronically absent students tend to be students of color and/or students with special needs and the districts serving high-need student populations tend to have higher rates of chronic absenteeism.

### 43% OF METRO AREA SCHOOLS FALL SHORT OF NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED GOAL OF AT LEAST 90% OF STUDENTS IN ATTENDANCE 90% OF THE TIME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronic Absence Rate</th>
<th>Share of Schools</th>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; 20%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11% - 20%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10% or less</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 547 schools in the six-county Kansas City Metro Area, 57% have a chronic absence rate of 10% or less, 43% have a chronic absence rate greater than 10%, and 14% have a chronic absence rate greater than 20%.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (KS data); Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MO DATA)
Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

As states, districts, and schools increase their focus on addressing chronic absenteeism, there is a growing body of research about what works. Researchers have identified a set of general best practices for schools, while some national programs and local initiatives have proven successful in reducing chronic absenteeism.

Attendance Works, a national and state initiative to address chronic absenteeism, recommends a three-tiered intervention and support system to help reduce chronic absenteeism. The graphic below summarizes these tiers.

Tier 1 interventions represent strategies that are prevention-oriented and can help support schoolwide attendance for all students. The following five best practices are examples of Tier 1 supports to address chronic absenteeism in schools.

1. Engage Students and Parents: Schools must develop a positive culture that ensures that students know they are cared for and that parents know they are welcome.

2. Recognize Good and Improved Attendance: Schools should develop incentive systems to encourage students to attend school regularly. Simple recognition of good and improved attendance through school awards ceremonies or certificates can be enough to motivate students to have good attendance.

3. Monitor Attendance Data and Practice: Schools should collect and analyze student attendance data regularly by grade level and by subgroup. Early identification of schoolwide or grade-level trends or of particular students who struggle can help the school intervene early with the necessary support structures and resources.

4. Provide Personalized Early Outreach: When schools use data effectively, they can more quickly identify students whose attendance is a problem or who are at risk of developing an attendance problem. Quick outreach to these families, in the form of a postcard...
or phone call, for example, can help correct the issue (see sidebar below).

5. Develop Programmatic Responses to Barriers:
When families are engaged in the education process and early outreach processes are in place, school administrators are better positioned to understand the barriers to attendance that students and families may face. If barriers are community-wide, teachers, school administrators, and the larger community can work together to identify and implement solutions.

Tier 2 supports provide early interventions for students who are struggling to attend school regularly, who have a history of moderate chronic absence, and/or who are facing a risk factor (like a chronic illness) that could make regular attendance challenging. Tier 2 interventions include strategies like creating personalized action plans for individual students, pairing students with a mentor or attendance buddy, or connecting families with resources to help address barriers (e.g., food pantry, clothing assistance).

A recent study by researchers at Harvard University and the University of California demonstrated that making parents aware of their child’s absences — both the total number and the number relative to the student’s classmates — can improve the attendance rates of chronically absent students.68

The study randomly assigned more than 40,000 high-absence students in the School District of Philadelphia to one of four groups:
1. Reminder: Parents received general communication about the importance of attendance.
2. Total Absences: Parents received communication about their child’s total number of absences.
3. Relative Absences: Parents received information about their child’s absences relative to the total number of absences among the student’s classmates.
4. Control: Parents received no additional communication about the importance of attendance or about their child’s absences.

Over the course of the school year, parents in each of the first three groups received up to five letters mailed to their homes, with a reminder about the importance of attendance and additional student-specific information, depending on their group. The study found that students in the Reminder group were 8 percent less likely to be chronically absent than students in the Control group; students in the Total Absences group were 10 percent less likely; and students in the Relative Absences group were 11 percent less likely to be chronically absent.

Interventions like this are significantly less costly than others, demonstrating that schools can take straightforward and relatively inexpensive steps toward addressing chronic absenteeism and improving student attendance.
Tier 3 supports are designed for students with severe chronic absence (typically defined as missing 20 percent or more of school time) or those who face significant barriers to school attendance, like homelessness or involvement in the juvenile justice system. Tier 3 interventions include intensified outreach to family members, enhanced coordination with social and/or medical service providers as needed, and, as a last resort, legal intervention.70

In addition to these general best practices, there are some specific programs that have demonstrated success nationally. Check & Connect is a mentorship program developed in collaboration by researchers at the Institute on Community Integration, the University of Minnesota, and school-based professionals in Minneapolis Public Schools. It is an intervention program designed to match K-12 students who show signs of disengagement with a trained, community-based mentor. Mentors monitor student data, including absences, tardies, and grades, while simultaneously building trusting relationships with students to help them meet their needs in and out of school.

Since the 1990s, schools in 27 states nationwide have implemented Check & Connect. Student participants in the program demonstrate an increase in attendance, persistence in school, accrual of credits, and school completion rates while showing a decrease in truancy.

The Importance of Data in Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Accurate, consistent and timely data collection and analysis play an important role in systemic efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism. While school districts have collected average daily attendance rates for decades, chronic absenteeism rates are a relatively new way of looking at the problem.

Most states are now asking districts to report chronic absenteeism data—the percentage of students missing more than a certain number of days (usually 10 percent)—since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 and many states have included the measure in their ESSA plans.

In Missouri, chronic absenteeism data is gathered in the form of “proportional attendance” rates and reported in terms of the percentage of student present 90% or more of the time. Missouri’s annual proportional attendance rates are available for districts, schools and grade levels as far back as the 2008-09 school year.

In Kansas, while districts in the state have been reporting chronic absenteeism for several years as part of the Office of Civil Rights school survey, a new set of chronic absenteeism data that will allow for more in-depth analysis will become publicly available for the first time in the fall of 2018. This data set will allow for analysis of the problem similar to what is
shown for Missouri schools in this report. Many schools in the Kansas City metro area and around the country are using attendance data effectively in addressing the problem of chronic absenteeism. Some schools post updated daily attendance data prominently inside the school's entrance as part of a campaign to raise student and staff awareness of the issue and to mobilize action to improve it. Strategies within a school building that make use of data focus on the three tiers of chronic absenteeism—school-wide efforts that incent improved attendance across the student body, focused efforts that target those at risk of becoming chronically absent, and intensive interventions for those with the highest rates of absenteeism. Often, cross-functional staff “attendance teams” monitor attendance data to identify and conduct outreach to students most at risk.

Average daily attendance data and chronic absenteeism data can also be used to identify patterns, trends and causes. For example, by identifying specific dates and date ranges when attendance is lower or by segmenting absence rates by subgroup, district and school leaders can gain greater insights into the factors contributing to higher absenteeism rates.

Another important form of attendance data collection captures the reasons for a student’s absence from school to help schools shape their response to absenteeism. Generally, school districts utilize a system for categorizing absences as they are recorded (whether in their student information system or a more low-tech form, such as on paper or in spreadsheets). These tracking systems typically code absences for purposes related to funding formulas, monitoring of truancy, and inclusion on report cards. Whether or not an absence is excused, whether it is in-school or out-of-school, and whether it is tied to a suspension are examples of the way absences may be coded in a school.

Many schools’ absence coding protocols do not include reasons for an absence or fall short of the full continuum of reasons. The National Forum on Education Statistics, an entity within the U.S. Department of Education, has developed an attendance taxonomy that provides a set of 16 mutually exclusive attendance categories that are divided into two groups—5 categories for “present” and 11 categories for “absent”. Every individual absence is assigned one code. An “unknown” category is intended as a placeholder until the reason is identified. The Forum offers resources to support incorporating the voluntary taxonomy into a school’s existing system for tracking absences.†.

There is an opportunity for district and school leaders interested in using data to improve attendance and willing to commit to the added effort involved in doing so. Because the reasons for absences are often unknown at the time they are recorded, implementing the taxonomy is not a small undertaking, but one which requires added staff time and oversight. However, effective implementation of the taxonomy offers school leaders an opportunity to gain actionable insights into the root causes of school absences.

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or in conjunction with a state initiative or the support of a research institute, like the American Institutes for Research. These systems typically track student attendance, behavior, and academic data to identify those most at risk of disengagement or dropping out.

Though reducing chronic absenteeism is not the sole purpose of EWIMS — rather, they include attendance as part of a larger initiative to support students through high school graduation — some research demonstrates a positive impact on student attendance. Specifically, one study found that schools using EWIMS had lower percentages of chronically absent students than schools that did not use EWIMS.\(^7^3\)

Some jurisdictions have taken it upon themselves to implement strategies aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism. New York City School District, for example, used Race to the Top grant funds to purchase new data software that allowed schools to track chronic absenteeism. The district required each school to track and report chronic absenteeism rates. At the same time, the mayor’s office, in conjunction with the NYC Department of Education, launched a task force on truancy and chronic absenteeism. This initiative, called Every Student, Every Day, included a citywide public awareness campaign and a coordinated strategy at a handful of pilot schools. The school-based initiative included five components:

1. Matching Success Mentors to target students: Students whose attendance data suggested they needed additional support were matched with a Success Mentor who monitored that student’s data, called home when students missed school, and participated in weekly meetings with school staff to identify and address areas of challenge.
2. Implementing schoolwide strategies to promote good attendance.
3. Holding weekly student success meetings that include the school leadership team and success mentors.
4. Increasing parental engagement.
5. Improving data collection, monitoring, and action through a new dashboard that allows staff to track student demographic information, attendance data, suspension information, and any interventions that a student receives.\(^7^4\)

Students who received the support of a Success Mentor through this program gained, on average, a full month of school days.\(^7^5\)

Kansas City Public Schools, one of the larger districts in the metro area—and one with significant socioeconomic needs—has a robust Success Mentors program in place and implemented many aspects of the attendance team approach. The district has seen significant impacts on attendance rates as a result of these efforts in a number of buildings across the district.

In California, the Allentown School District requires each school to form an attendance team that meets regularly to review attendance data, identify at-risk students, and devise interventions to improve attendance. Interventions range from establishing incentives to improve attendance, to pairing students with a community mentor, to having school staff conduct a home visit. With this system in place, one of Allentown’s schools saw a drop in chronic
absenteeism of 11 percentage points, and another school saw a drop of six percentage points between the 2012-13 and 2013-14 school years.\textsuperscript{76}

Also here in the Kansas City region, Winnwood Elementary in the North Kansas City School District has seen success in combating chronic absenteeism. School leaders implemented a four-pronged approach that includes a school attendance team, personalized contracts with concrete action steps to help students improve attendance, additional parent outreach and engagement, and a rigorous focus on data.\textsuperscript{77}

The school attendance team, which includes staff members like the principal, nurse, and social worker, meets monthly to discuss the needs of individual students who are struggling with attendance. They develop personalized contracts for each student, with varying incentives and goals depending on that student’s unique needs. Assigning children special duties that require them to be in school, such as leading morning announcements, has proven successful.

School staff have also increased communication with parents, including interventions like morning wake-up calls as needed. Finally, Winnwood staff members are rigorously examining the school’s attendance and absence data to identify trends on daily, weekly, and monthly bases. So far, this effort has had a positive impact on the school’s attendance rates. Winnwood has increased its average daily attendance by 10 percentage points (from 82 percent to 92.8 percent) and reduced the number of chronically absent students from 98 to 14.

There are many other success stories of effective practices to improve attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism at work in schools in the Kansas City metro. In the coming months, United Way of Greater Kansas City and its partners will explore ways to help other schools and districts learn more about these approaches and consider ways to scale up the most effective strategies. This work will also involve choosing promising strategies from other parts of the country and bringing them to Kansas City.

**CONCLUSION**

Chronic absenteeism affects schools and districts nationwide. However, it disproportionately affects already-underserved student populations, including low-income, minority, and special education students, as well as those facing challenging life circumstances, like homelessness.

In the Kansas City region, nearly 35,000 students were chronically absent during the 2015-16 school year, or almost 12 percent of total students. And these students’ chronic absence has adverse consequences for their educational and long-term success, for schools they attend, and for other students in those schools. Fortunately, there are several research-based, practical, and low-cost steps that school and district leaders can take to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism and their consequences for schools and students. In districts with the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, these steps may more than pay for themselves by boosting districts’ average daily attendance and resulting state funding levels.

More broadly, because the effects of chronic absenteeism hurt students’ academics and ultimately their ability to be successful, productive members of society, stakeholders from all sectors of the Kansas City region must work together to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism, and develop and implement solutions that benefit the entire community. An addendum to this report, “Beyond the Classroom—Community Supports that Contribute to School Success” summarizes the work of organizations who partner with area school districts in meeting a range of challenges—and whose work plays a key role in addressing many of the root causes of chronic absenteeism.
EDUCATION IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON YOU CAN USE TO CHANGE THE WORLD.

-Nelson Mandela
Schools in the Kansas City metro provide a tremendous amount of support for their students beyond the classroom. From services for homeless students to strategies that support the social and emotional development of all students, area educators place a high value on a comprehensive approach to supporting student success.

Kansas City area school leaders have long understood the value of leveraging external resources to support the academic success and social-emotional development of their students. The Kansas City metro area is rich with such supports. It is home to many nonprofit organizations whose mission includes fostering positive youth development; empowering teachers and advancing the teaching profession; and addressing the effects of poverty, violence and other social challenges. Other programs take a direct approach to supporting students academically through both in-school and out-of-school services. Many organizations address poverty and other social service problems that inhibit school success, partnering with schools in carrying out their mission. And area foundations have made substantial investments in many of these community-based supports that advance the success of area schools.

No conversation about systemic approaches to reducing chronic absenteeism would be complete without considering the important role played by these community support in addressing the issue, either directly or indirectly.

While the extent of these community resources is too great to be fully described in this report, summarized here are some of the most important initiatives aimed at supporting school success and addressing some of the root causes of chronic absenteeism.

**Kindergarten Readiness**
Preparing young children for Kindergarten—and empowering their parents to ensure Kindergarten readiness—is at the core of many early childhood programs throughout the metro, both within school district and in nonprofit (or for-profit) centers. These programs have a great deal of influence in preparing children for Kindergarten and equipping parents to support their child’s development.

While the availability of quality early learning opportunities falls far short of serving all children, Kansas City is fortunate to have a strong network of early learning providers, offered in school districts as well as in private center-based and home-based settings. Many of the programs that service low-income families incorporate the Head Start service delivery model, which comes with wraparound supports for participating families.

**Out-of-School Time Programming**
The provision of school-age child care, character-building and leadership development programming and the connection of students to caring adult volunteers are frequently the purview of nonprofit organizations that work in close partnership with schools. Local Investment Commission and the YMCA of Greater Kansas City, for example, each serve thousands of school children every year through quality before- and after-school
programming onsite at area school buildings. Programs such as Boys & Girls Club of Greater Kansas City, Upper Room, Guadalupe Centers, Mattie Rhodes and others offer programming in community-based facilities, working in close partnership with school districts to enroll and support students in their programs.

Mentoring relationships made possible through organizations like Big Brothers and Sisters, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and other organizations frequently come about through partnerships with area schools, with a particular emphasis on reaching disadvantaged youth who stand to gain the most from their services. These programs all help foster stronger connections to the school community, removing barriers that contribute to higher rates of absenteeism.

**Early Grade Literacy**
A number of nonprofit organizations that work in partnership with schools aim to close the literacy gap among low-income children, with a focus on helping them to read at grade level by third grade.

Several programs work to empower parents and caregivers to install a love for reading in their children and greater use of the services offered by public libraries. These programs include The Family Conservancy’s Talk Read Play initiative, Literacy Kansas City's Let’s Read family reading program and book distribution programs offered by Turn the Page KC, United Way, and Reach Out and Read.

Two community-based programs—Phoenix Family's Hike Program and the Upper Room program of Swope Corridor Renaissance—each deploy a rigorous model of volunteer reading tutors who work with children in the out of school time hours and have demonstrated success in helping children make significant progress in reading. Lead to Read provides volunteer tutors during the school day.

PREP-KC’s literacy benchmarking initiative works in urban districts to close the achievement gap in early grade reading by empowering teachers through support around instructional practices and expert coaching. Literacy Lab places highly-trained reading tutors in urban schools, providing daily one-on-one interventions that help more students achieve grade-level targets.

**In-School Student Supports**
Two organizations—City Year and Communities in Schools—take an intensive approach to providing a range of services that support student success within the school building. Both organizations deploy staff in targeted high-need school buildings, engaging students and families in partnership with school staff.

City Year uses “near peer” Americorps members to provide targeted students with added academic and social-emotional support. Communities in Schools places professional staff who work as site coordinators to bring into the school community resources that address both academic and non-academic barriers.

Other programs—including Teach for America and Kansas City Teacher Residency—help fill the need for qualified teachers in the area’s urban schools. LEANLAB Education works to close the achievement gap by promoting innovation in Kansas City area K-12 classrooms.

**Connecting Students and Families with Health and Social Services**
Overcoming barriers to academic success that are rooted in poverty is one of the greatest challenges of area school leaders—particularly those serving high-poverty neighborhoods. To meet this challenge, schools rely on close partnerships with social service providers.

One of the farthest-reaching partnerships of this kind is with Harvesters—the food bank serving the Kansas City metro area. Harvesters’ BackSnack program provides nutritious food to more than 20,000 children each week, distributed in backpacks each Friday, closing the weekend gap of the free school meal program.

In an innovative partnership designed to link the families of homeless students to the social services they need, the Kansas City, Kansas launched Impact Wednesday,
a partnership with Avenue of Life, a faith-based nonprofit, and other social service providers. Together, social service providers address the health and human service needs of the district’s homeless students and their families by coming together each Wednesday in “one-stop” service delivery approach. The Impact Wednesday approach has been replicated and tailored to meet the needs of families in the Kansas City, MO and Shawnee Mission districts.

In other parts of the metro, districts work closely with social service providers to address the needs of students from low-income families. (For example: the Independence School District partners with Community Services League, the Raytown School District partners with Raytown Emergency Assistance Program, and the Hickman Mills School District partners with Community Assistance Council.) Several social service providers—including Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas, Della Lamb Community Services and Jewish Vocational Service—specialize in meeting the social service needs of immigrant and refugee families.

The First Hand Foundation works with area school districts in providing health screenings and referrals, along with financial assistance to cover the cost of health care services, when needed. Kansas City University of Medicine and Biosciences also provides health screenings to area school children. Several nonprofit and public agencies in the region provide access to free dental services—a major unmet need among children from low-income families, immunizations and prescription medications—all of which are potential areas where lack of access can translate into school absences. A strong system of safety net healthcare providers, including federally qualified health centers, hospital outpatient clinics and neighborhood health clinics help ensure access to medical care and mental health services to families who are uninsured or under-insured. Many of these health providers work in close partnership with area schools and school districts.

Another group of service providers that work closely with area school districts serve a particularly vulnerable population—victims of violence, abuse/neglect and bullying. Students with these risk factors are particularly at risk for chronic absence, so their ability to access interventions and preventive services are critical not only to their social and emotional well-being but also their academic success.

Preparing for Life After High School
Several organizations partner with area school districts to help ensure that high school students have a plan for postsecondary education. This work has the impact of making high school more relevant and engaging for many students, positively impacting attendance.

Many high schools partner with postsecondary institutions—especially community colleges—to help students earn early college credit and even industry-recognized credentials prior to graduating high school. PREP-KC partners with several urban school districts to support these goals through “career academies” that include workplace experiences in high-growth, high-demand fields and support that ensures they are academically on track for pursuing their college and career plans.

Missouri College Advising Corps uses an intensive focus on college preparation through the use of “near peer” staff placed into schools that help students with the college planning process, contributing to higher college-going rates among targeted schools.

The work of high schools in preparing students for standardized college admission tests, particularly among schools with high numbers of low-income students, is supported through programming offered by the Urban League of Greater Kansas City. KC Scholars helps low- and modest-income high school students plan for and pay for college through scholarships, 529 College Savings Accounts and related support offered to hundreds of area high school students each year.
Endnotes


5 Bauer et al., “Reducing Chronic Absenteeism.”


7 Jordan and Miller, “Who’s In.”

8 Jordan and Miller, “Who’s In.”


10 Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Attendance Hour Reporting.”


14 Bauer et al., “Reducing Chronic Absenteeism.”


16 Jacob and Lovett, “Chronic Absenteeism.”


18 Attendance Works, “Preventing Missed Opportunity.”


22 National Center for Homeless Education, “In School Every Day.”


26 Jordan and Miller, “Who’s In.”

27 Jordan and Miller, “Who’s In.”


35 United Way of Greater Kansas City