



To: The Honorable Ronald Rice, Co-Chair
The Honorable Mila Jasey, Co-Chair
Members, Joint Committee on the Public Schools

From: Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst, Advocates for Children of New Jersey
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RE: Chronic Absenteeism

For nearly five years, ACNJ has had the unique experience of both reviewing absentee data at the state, district and school level as well as talking to the people most affected by it: school administrators, teachers, school nurses, school social workers, community members, parents and teens about why too many students are missing too much school. Those rich conversations have provided us with important information about this issue. During this time, we have published several statewide reports as well as two reports focused on chronic absenteeism in Newark, in an attempt to bring attention to the issue and highlight how schools, families and communities are working together to improve attendance. We have learned that there are challenges and opportunities in battling chronic absenteeism, but during this time period, two things have become clear:

1. **No education reform initiative or quality learning experiences will ever be successful if students aren't attending school.** Although state funding for public education is consistently the largest piece of New Jersey's annual budget, the effectiveness of that funding, however significant, will be diluted because too many kids continue to miss too much school. In the 2016-2017 school year, approximately 136,000 or 10 percent of all K-12 students in New Jersey were identified as being chronically absent. During the same school year, more than 20,000 or 31 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds participating in state-funded preschool were chronically absent. While we know that school administrators and teachers are working diligently to provide a quality education to their students, the chronic absenteeism data throughout the state is alarming. While a major mission for our schools is to improve student outcomes, those outcomes are inextricably linked with student attendance. Schools can only prepare students adequately after they address why they are not coming to school. Focusing solely on the academic side will never get the student results necessary for them to be college and career ready.
2. **What schools do to address chronic absenteeism makes a difference.** While schools are only part of the equation to improve attendance, what they do matters immensely.

ACNJ's statewide reports provide examples of how schools are working to improve attendance, and consequently make it easier for students to succeed. In Pemberton, the district made a commitment to improve its attendance rate and began addressing the problem on multiple fronts, including strengthening parent outreach and communication, developing school-specific strategies and targeting interventions at root causes of student absences. In North Brunswick, the elementary school nurses have taken the lead and began an initiative to provide supports for first graders with chronic absences. District preschool administrators throughout the state have recognized the link between preschool attendance and a strong educational and social/emotional foundation and are implementing innovative approaches to ensure that our youngest students are obtaining that critical foundation. Here in Trenton, two remarkable school administrators have turned the curve on chronic absenteeism by creating an environment in which students want to come to school. In September 2015, when Adrienne Hill and Gregory Green became the principal and vice-principal of Hedgepeth/Williams Middle School, their chronic absenteeism rate was 23 percent. The administrators made improving attendance a school priority and strategically set into play changes that made students accountable, but helped them and their families when help was needed. Through a rebranding of the school, working with students and families struggling with high absences, providing incentives to classes with improved attendance, promoting student activities and sending "We Miss You" cards to students who were beginning to miss too much school, the administrators and staff turned attendance around. In November and December 2016, the chronic absenteeism rate at Hedgepeth/Williams was just 8 percent, 2 percent lower than the state average. The actions of both the school's administrators and staff made the difference in the lives of those students lucky enough to attend.

In all of these cases, and many more throughout our state, all of the effective strategies include reviewing the data "early and often", finding out the reasons why students are missing school and then developing solutions that address the problems identified both for individual students and for specific student subgroups, such as special education or low-income students. What these examples have in common is a level of intentionality that has been the framework of their successes. In the years that we have worked on this issue, we have seen first-hand that many schools, while well-intentioned, often lack that intentionality necessary to address chronic absenteeism and have placed too much of an emphasis on compliance. While compliance is a critical piece to improving attendance, when it is the primary or only strategy, the absentee rate will most probably remain high.

Once fully implemented, the new chronic absenteeism law will require schools with 10 percent or more of their student population identified as being chronically absent to develop a corrective action plan that includes parent input. This requirement forces schools struggling with attendance to be more intentional in developing strategies to improve attendance.

While schools cannot control all of the reasons why students miss too much school, when 10 percent or more of students fall into that category, it is critically important that

those schools work with their families and students to think, plan and do things differently.