Call to Action: Early Childhood Absenteeism
Northern Illinois University Center for P-20 Engagement

Absenteeism prevents a child from partaking in essential early learning and this often puts them at-risk for falling behind throughout their future education. Chronic absenteeism in early childhood also results in the formation of poor attendance habits which carry into elementary school, leading to long-term negative effects on academic achievement, discipline and likelihood of graduating. Based on these concerns, the P-20 Network offers some background on the effects of early childhood absenteeism and six recommendations for addressing this hidden problem.

The Effects of Chronic Absenteeism
Despite the well-publicized benefits of high quality early childhood education programs, absenteeism from those programs receives little attention. Unfortunately, the impacts of being chronically absent during these formative years result in long term issues that affect a child’s ability to stay on track throughout their schooling. This is especially true for children living in poverty, who are already at risk for educational delays, and are four times more likely to be chronically absent (Attendance Works, 2014). Three documented concerns include

1. Chronic absenteeism in early childhood means that the child never fully realizes the potential to “keep up” or “catch up” for kindergarten readiness due to missing much of their high quality program. Chronically absent children score lower than their less absent peers in math, letter recognition, and socioemotional development (Ehrlich et al., 2014).

2. Chronic absenteeism carried into kindergarten and early elementary school can also mean that any gains made in early childhood are at risk of being lost as the student progresses in school, reducing the well-documented impacts and long-term successes from participating in the high quality early childhood programs (Attendance Works, 2011).

3. Chronic absenteeism in early childhood creates attendance habits that are difficult to overcome as students get older and will result in having the child fall further behind peers, leading to discipline problems, court involvement, and dropping out. Chronically absent preschoolers are more likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten, and five times more likely to be chronically absent in second grade (Ehrlich et al., 2014).

P-20 Network Call to Action on Early Childhood Absenteeism
The Birth-3rd Grade Work Group of the Northern Illinois Regional P-20 Network sends out this call-to-action for recommended changes in the way Illinois collects attendance data and intervenes in early childhood attendance issues. Illinois can’t continue to ignore this hidden, yet devastating issue in our early childhood programs.

Recommendation #1 – Collect statewide early childhood absenteeism data in all programs funded with public dollars.
Concern: Chronic early childhood absenteeism has been found to be prevalent in some programs, yet the statewide scope of the problem is unknown. Research conducted in 2011-2012 about preschool attendance in Chicago Public Schools found that 45% of three year olds and 36% of four year olds missed more than 15 days, or 10% of the school per year (Ehrlich et al., 2014). Currently, there is no statewide information about early childhood attendance. Compulsory attendance begins at age 6 in Illinois (105 ILCS 5/26-1), and any statewide attendance data is only collected once a child is enrolled in
Kindergarten (105 ILCS 5/26-2). State-funded programs are currently required to collect attendance data within the local programs but the presence of this data is only checked through regular compliance and quality reviews. There are no coordinated efforts at analysis of the data or prevention of the issue.

Action: The state of Illinois must collect statewide data on absenteeism in early childhood programs. The block grant re-competition during FY 17 presents an opportunity to include a requirement that attendance data be submitted to the state. Analysis of the data would lead to recommendations for addressing the problem statewide.

Recommendation #2 – Focus on chronic absenteeism instead of chronic truancy statewide.
Concern: At this time the Illinois School Code attendance statutes focus on children subject to compulsory attendance (age 6-17) and absent without a valid cause (unexcused absence). There are two problems with these definitions. First, the state and counties can’t intervene until the compulsory attendance age of 6, which eliminates attention to early childhood programs. Second, the state and counties can only intervene in instances of unexcused absences, which eliminates children chronically absent for reasons determined by the districts as valid. Absenteeism for any reason undermines learning.

Action: Illinois should not lower the compulsory attendance age but the duty to collect data, report data and intervene should begin with enrollment in any publicly-funded program and not just kindergarten. Additionally, all focus on truancy in statute, prevention programs or data collection efforts should focus on absenteeism instead.

Recommendation #3. Include activities to prevent early childhood absenteeism in all state-funded programs currently funded for truancy prevention.
Concern: At this time the largest truancy prevention program funded by the state is the Truancy Alternative and Optional Education (TAOEP) fund described in 105 ILCS 5/2.3.66 and administered according to the rules in Section 205 of the Illinois Administrative Code for Education and Cultural Resources, Chapter1: State Board of Education. Illinois appropriated $11.5 million for this program in FY 16. This funded 73 statewide programs in higher education, regional offices of education and school districts. http://www.roe26.net/taoep/documents/TAOEPDirectoryFinal.pdf These funds should be expanded to include early childhood programs. Even though early childhood programs have some of the greatest returns on investment (The Ounce, 2016), the students must attend to benefit from the programs. Without a focus on attendance, the benefits promised will not be realized.

Action: The state of Illinois should reserve a portion of the TAOEP funds for prevention of chronic absenteeism programs in early childhood as a way to better invest in solutions that impact the roots of truancy and discipline problems that cause future dropouts.

Recommendation #4. Use absenteeism instead of attendance rate as a metric in Illinois accountability for districts from P-12th grade.
Concern: The Every Student Succeeds Act is an opportunity to adjust the Illinois accountability framework to include a more accurate method of measuring absenteeism. Even though our former accountability system under No Child Left Behind included attendance rate as a factor for the elementary schools in the state, the system began with kindergarten, was self-reported by the schools, and usually didn’t include students who were unenrolled for various reasons, most of whom had poor attendance. Bruner and colleagues (2011) highlight that many schools focus on ADA (average daily attendance) which is a calculation of the days of attendance instead of focusing on the attendance rate
of individual students. Seemingly high ADA rates of 93-97 percent might could mask a significant chronic absence problem, because we assume that this rate is the result of many students with a few absences when it is really the result of a few students with many absences. Since ADA rates are typically seen as high, many schools do not perceive absenteeism as a concern, and therefore, fail to develop initiatives to prevent absences or intervene with children with poor attendance (Bruner et al., 2011).

Action: Illinois’ accountability expectations must include student attendance in publically-funded preschool programs and a more accurate metric that is based on the number of students with high attendance instead of averaging the number of days of attendance across the whole school.

Recommendation #5. Provide professional development on early identification, common causes and proven interventions for early childhood absenteeism.
Concern: Early childhood program providers must develop a better understanding of how to identify children with attendance issues and then how to intervene to address the reasons for the absences. In an article written in 2014, Linda Olson highlighted that missing two to four days in September can result in an average of 25 days missed during the rest of the school year. Using information like this, along with other early-warning signs, will help providers catch our at-risk students early and intervene before harmful habits are formed. Once children are identified, determining the root of the poor attendance is essential because intervention programs must address those specific causes. Are attendance issues intermittent or chronic? Are they one-time issues or ongoing? One common reason can be the health of the child, caregiver, or both. A host of reasons encompass family-related concerns and may include non-traditional and unpredictable work schedules; logistics such as who is responsible for dropping off or picking up the child; availability and predictability of public transportation; lack of a reliable social network; unmet needs, such as housing, food, security, and so forth; and families not understanding the long-term benefits of regular attendance in the child’s early years (Madelyn James, personal communication, 2016). Children may also be absent due to one-time significant events, such as staying at a relative’s residence or going on vacation, or there might be a persistent pattern of absenteeism.

Identifying the root problem causing the attendance issues and then working with the family to address the problem should be part of a well-development system of case management.

Action: Professional development must be created and delivered to program providers on best practices in identifying children with attendance issues early, determining the causes of the absences, and then implementing and monitoring plans for intervention. This work could be included in a case management system of support or other more general system of support offered to children and families in the program.

Recommendation #6. Prevent absenteeism by focusing on the importance of good attendance with parents and community members.
Concern: Several well-known supports for attendance issues for older children can be revised for the early childhood focus areas of child health, social emotional growth and cognitive development. Ongoing efforts by providers to address attendance issues through prevention will result in the most impact across the state. Prevention can be addressed with at least four different approaches:
- Parent education – including the importance of attendance in school publications and events (e.g., pamphlets, newsletters, program websites/blogs, parent-teacher conferences and school open houses, and group workshops). Addressing cultural norms and needs are important components of any educational campaign (Ehrlich et al., 2014).
Staff and parent communication and engagement – Attendance goals and policies must be clearly and regularly communicated to parents in the language in which they communicate. Engaging parents in a positive and proactive manner increases comfort and trust which are essential if school staff members are going to be able to determine the reasons for absences (Katz et al., 2016).

Direct assistance to families with identified needs – Family transportation, community resources for childcare, housing or nutritional needs all need to be considered in creating the awareness campaign for good attendance.

Community advocacy and/or impact projects - Important community needs can be brought to the attention of municipal entities or governing boards involved in a collective impact approach to supporting families (e.g., lack of public transportation, access to food banks, limited homeless shelters) (Ehrlich et al., 2014, Katz et al., 2016).

Action: Early childhood programs should include a focus on preventing absenteeism through parent education, family support and community advocacy.

Conclusion
Early childhood absenteeism is an often-overlooked issue with lasting implications for children. Research shows that children who are chronically absent will fall behind their less-absent peers as they progress through school. A child may come to kindergarten academically ready, and then lose important gains due to absenteeism in the first two years of elementary school. This is especially unfortunate for children living in poverty, who greatly benefit from early childhood education, but are at the highest risk of being chronically absent. Much can be done to address this issue in Illinois. The Northern Illinois P-20 Network recommends a range of actions from changing current attendance statutes, refocusing of current truancy efforts, and investing in professional development for early childhood providers as key efforts which could be leveraged to address this important issue. Parental/guardian education, connecting families with community resources, and informing community advocacy, early childhood providers can prevent poor attendance. Through better data and understanding of the statewide problem, capitalizing on current systems and then supporting providers in prevention and intervention, Illinois can increase the impact of our high quality early childhood efforts.

References


