



Make Every Day Count

Reducing **Chronic Absence**
in Arkansas Schools



October 2016





The **Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (AR-GLR)** was launched in 2011 by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF) to move the needle on education outcomes in Arkansas by focusing on third grade reading proficiency. AR-GLR is managed in partnership with Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, the Arkansas Community Foundation, and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. AR-GLR is part of a growing movement led by the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading that includes over 240 communities in 42 states.

AR-GLR is a collaborative effort of over 25 organizations that believe the only way we can make progress on grade-level reading is to work collectively and in partnership with families, educators, policymakers, and business leaders around the state.



Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) leads the policy, advocacy, and research components of AR-GLR. AACF has focused on ensuring adequate funding for the state-funded preschool program, advocating for more summer and after-school programs, and ensuring that children with dyslexia and other reading challenges get the help they need.

Make Every Day Count: Reducing Chronic Absence in Arkansas Schools

Written by Kathryn Hazelett

Edited by Ginny Blankenship

The first time that leaders from Monitor Elementary School in Springdale looked at their data on chronic absences, their response was disbelief. “This can’t be right,” school counselor Sierra Engelmann remembers. But they soon confirmed that **19 percent** of students missed 18 or more days in excused and unexcused absences in 2012-2013 — losing **almost a month of instruction during the school year**.

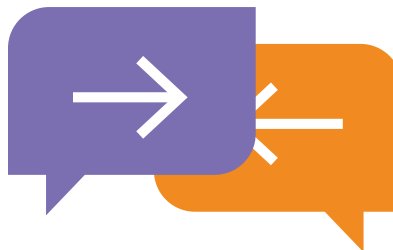
Unfortunately, Monitor’s chronic absence problem is not unique among schools in Arkansas. In 2014-2015, more than 12 percent of kindergarten through third graders in Arkansas (17,361 students) missed 18 or more days of school. Our state’s chronically absent elementary school students could fill up every seat in Little Rock Central High School’s football stadium. **We must change this!**

In 2014-2015, more than 12 percent of kindergarten through third graders in Arkansas (17,361 students) missed 18 or more days of school.



The good news is that families, schools, and communities can work together to determine a new course — and the result is dramatic and significant. Through strategic, culturally-sensitive interventions, Monitor Elementary School reduced its chronic absence rate to 6 percent within one school year.

We also learned from our state’s other schools like Marvell-Elaine Elementary School and Parson Hills Elementary School that they too can move the needle. This report documents what we know works for students, families, and schools to reduce chronic absence in order to ensure that every student in Arkansas reads proficiently by the end of third grade.



What Is Chronic Absence and Why Does It Matter?

Missed Days Add Up

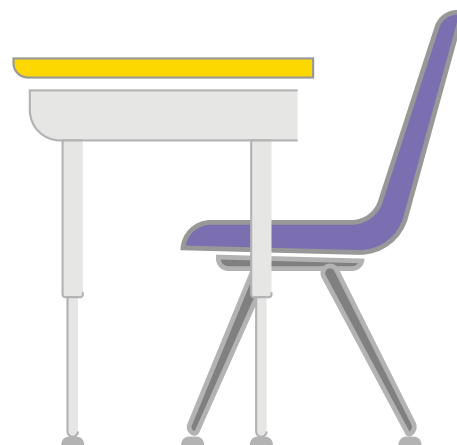
Chronic absence is defined as students missing ten percent or more of the school year for any reason, excused or unexcused. In Arkansas, that means missing 18 days of school, or just two days a month.

Chronic absence is different from Average Daily Attendance (ADA), which the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) requires all schools to report. ADA is defined as the average of the total number of days that all students attended school, divided by the number of days taught. While ADA provides an overall picture of attendance at the school level, ADA does not capture how often individual students are absent and which students and subgroups are at academic risk due to absences. For that reason, it is possible for a school to have a high ADA while also having a high percentage of students who are chronically absent.

Whether excused or not, if absences add up, the resulting loss of instructional time can be substantial and, for many students, the academic consequences are decidedly negative. Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade and are more likely to have poor attendance in later grades. By middle and high school, chronic absence is a proven early warning sign that a student will drop out. This is especially true for lower-income students who sometimes get the least amount of time in the classroom.

Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade.

Students are chronically absent for different reasons. Parents may think that absences only matter when they are unexcused or that attendance matters less in the early grades. Children may face barriers such as chronic health issues or poor transportation. Families may have an aversion to school because the child is being bullied or the parent had negative experiences when they were in school. Or students may not feel connected to school because the instruction does not engage them or they have no meaningful relationships with adults at school.



Make Every Day Count

Methodology

Behind the Data

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) analyzed statewide attendance data from ADE to determine which student subgroups are more likely to be chronically absent and the potential impact of chronic absence on achievement. The report includes a case study from Parson Hills Elementary in Springdale and additional examples from Monitor Elementary in Springdale and Marvell-Elaine Elementary, with recommendations on how school leaders can reduce chronic absences in the early grades.

Since attendance policy is set at the local level in Arkansas, the Arkansas Department of Education does not provide an official definition or calculation for chronic absence. The results presented in this report are based on AACF's analysis of statewide data for students in kindergarten through third grade in the 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015 school years. To calculate chronic absence, AACF looked at the percentage of children who missed 10 percent or more of school for any reason (whether excused or unexcused), which in Arkansas is almost 18 days. This definition is commonly used by researchers who have investigated school attendance.



What Does the Data Tell Us?

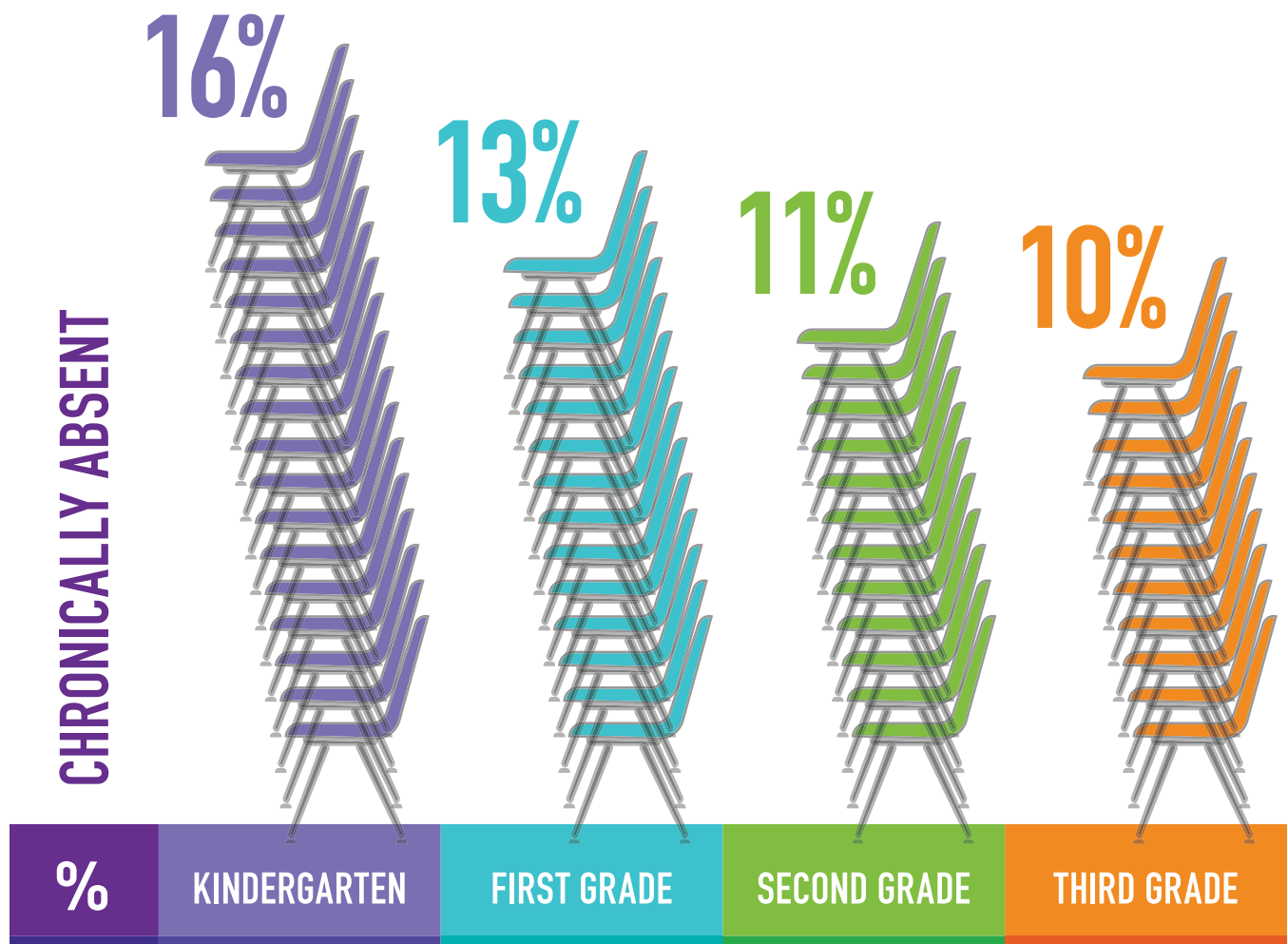
Chronic Absence Starts Early

AACF's analysis found chronic absenteeism in every grade level from kindergarten through third grade in Arkansas in 2014-2015. More than 10 percent of Arkansas students are missing more than 18 days of the school year — **almost an entire month of learning**.

Kindergarteners were significantly more likely to be chronically absent than students in third grade

(16.18 percent vs. 10.32 percent). One hypothesis is many parents may believe that missing a few days in kindergarten does not have as significant an impact on their child's achievement compared to absences in later grades. However, the reality is much different, as the building blocks of learning start early. Regular attendance in early grades is essential for later success.

Chronic Absence in Arkansas by Grade



This chart uses data for 2014-2015.

Chronic Absence Is Worse Among Certain Schools

Nearly all elementary schools in Arkansas had chronically absent students in 2014-2015. However, one-quarter (25 percent) of chronically absent students were concentrated in 52 of the state's 522 elementary schools (10 percent).¹

Nearly All Elementary Schools in Arkansas
Had Some Chronically Absent K-3 Students, but...

25% OF CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS IN ARKANSAS IN GRADES K-3 WERE CONCENTRATED IN { **52 / 522** } ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN 2014-15



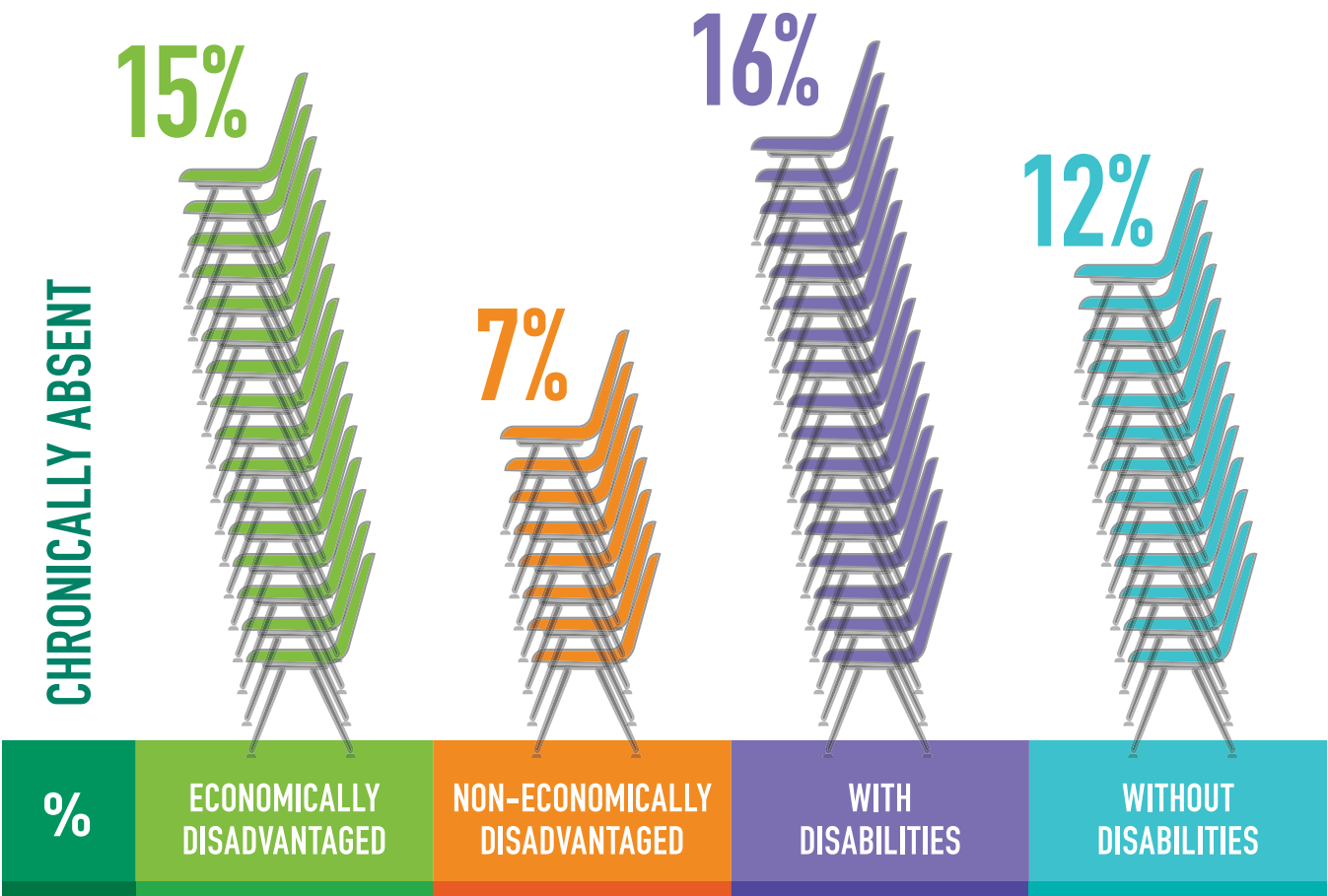
Chronic Absence Is Worse Among Third Graders Who are Economically Disadvantaged or Have Disabilities

The numbers and characteristics of students who are chronically absent vary across schools over time. The following charts provide a snapshot of differences among subgroups of third graders in 2014-2015, since third grade is the critical transition when students make the transition from **learning to read** to **reading to learn**.

The chart below shows that in 2014-2015, third graders who were economically disadvantaged

were more than twice as likely to be chronically absent than those who were not.² Students with disabilities were more likely to be chronically absent as well, perhaps because they are less likely to be able to access the services and support they need within a regular school day. Unfortunately, students with disabilities are also more likely to need additional learning time to catch up or to stay caught up during the school year.

Third Graders Who are Economically Disadvantaged and Those with Disabilities are More Likely to be Chronically Absent



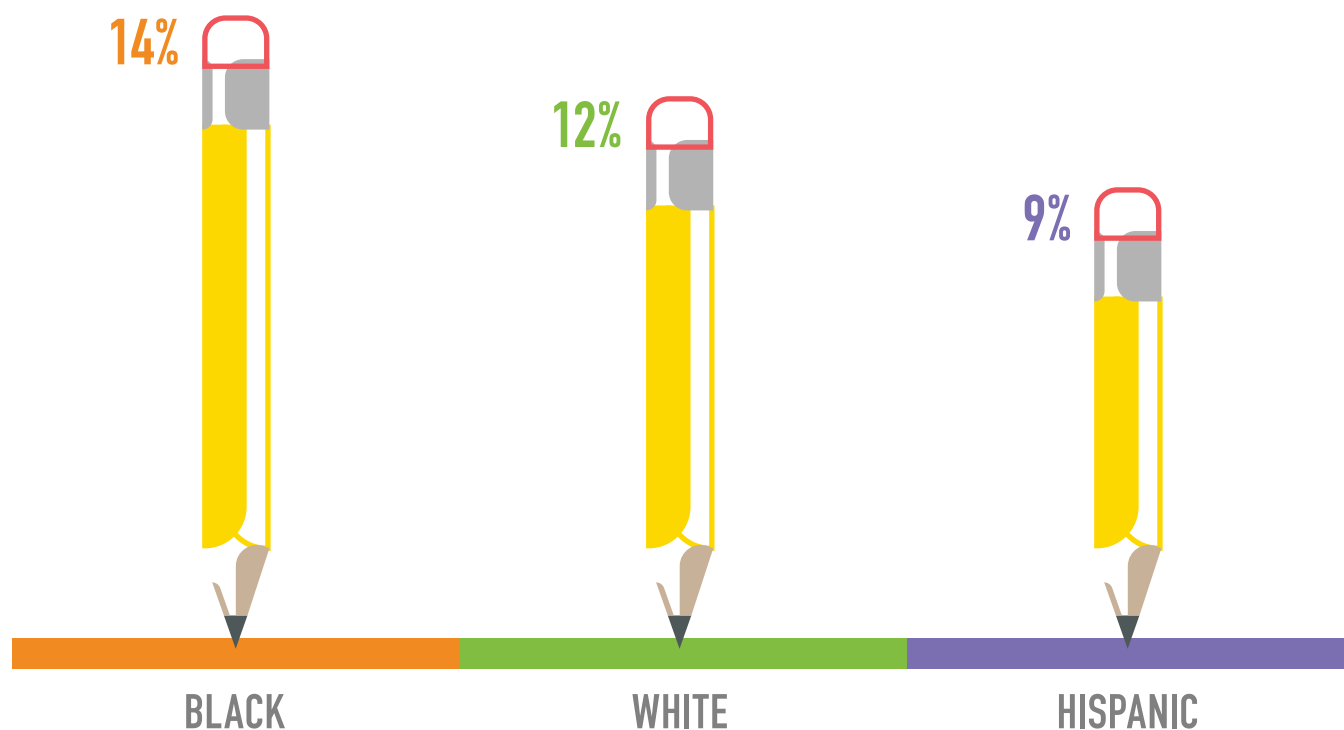
This chart uses data for Arkansas third graders in 2014-2015.

Chronic Absence Varies Across Race and Ethnicity

In this snapshot from 2014-2015, chronic absence statewide was more strongly correlated with economic disadvantage than race and ethnicity. However, black third-grade students were more likely to be absent than white students. Hispanic students were the least likely to be chronically absent, at a rate of 9.14 percent. Third-grade boys and girls missed about the same number of days (12.32 percent vs. 12.55 percent, respectively).



Hispanic Third-Grade Students are the Least Likely to be Chronically Absent



This chart uses data for Arkansas third graders in 2014-2015.

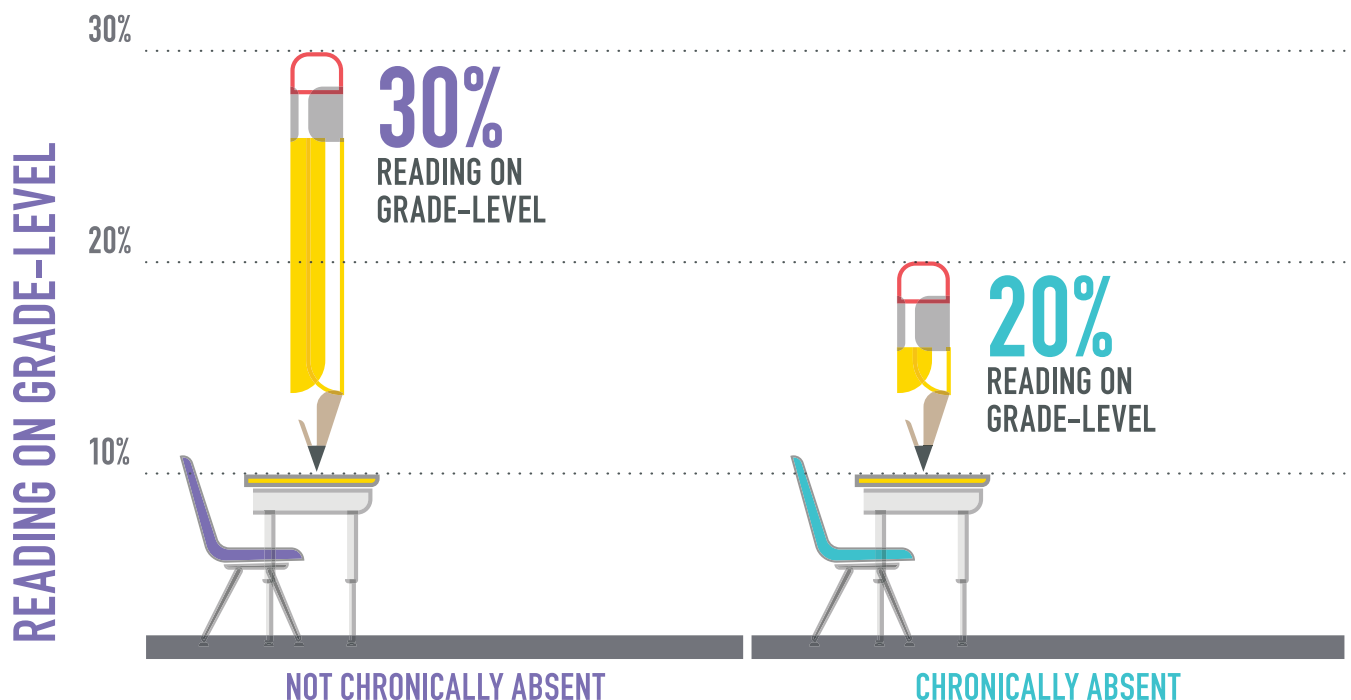
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Chronically Absent Third Graders Are Less Likely to Read on Grade Level

Arkansas's third-grade proficiency scores on the 2015 PARCC assessment in reading were low overall.³ The scores were even lower for students who were chronically absent in 2014-2015. While 30 percent of third graders who were not chronically absent met or exceeded expectations on the PARCC, only 20 percent of third graders who were chronically absent did so.

ADE does not release test scores for individual students in first and second grades; therefore, we could not track individual students' scores over time. However, the overall results for third graders were the same in each of the three years of data received (2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015): Kids who were chronically absent each year scored lower on the given assessment than those who were not. While chronic absence alone may not be the driving force for lower achievement, it may be a contributing factor.

Chronically Absent Third Graders are Less Likely to Read on Grade Level

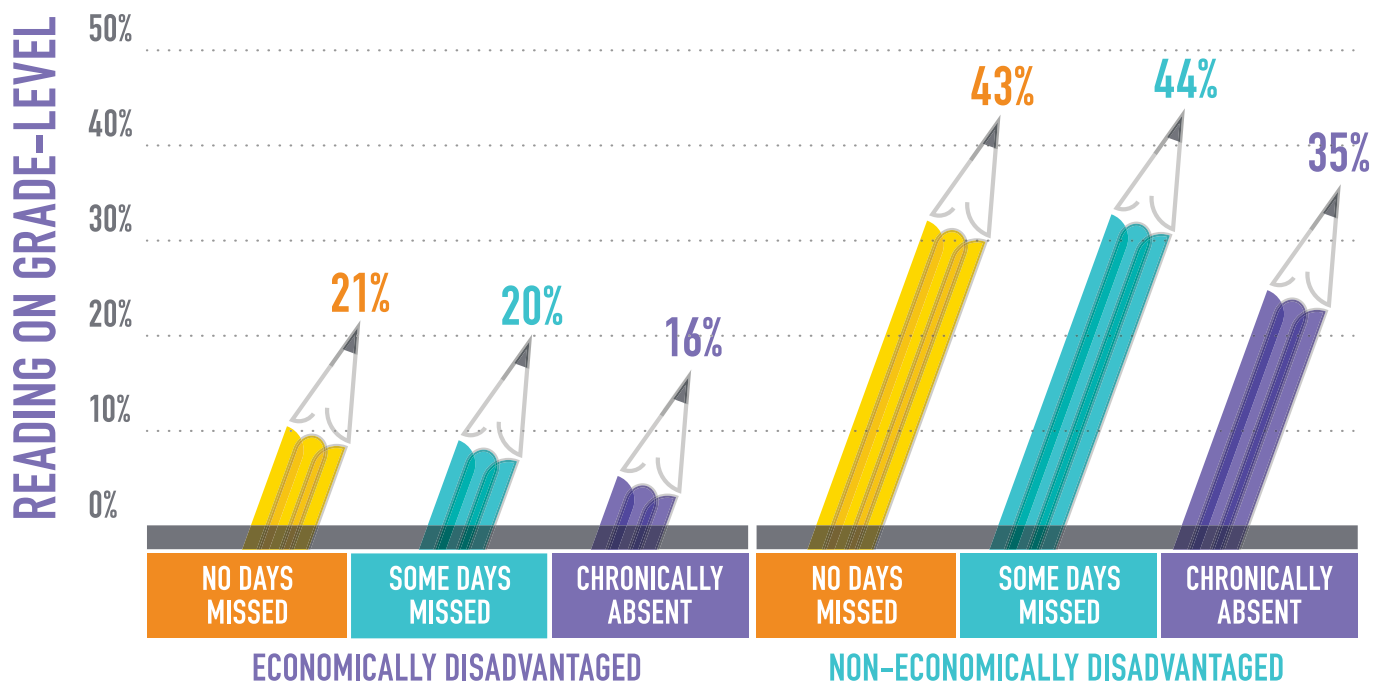


This chart uses data for Arkansas third graders in 2014-2015.

AACF's analysis of 2015 PARCC reading scores found that across all attendance categories (no days missed, some days missed, and chronically absent), economically disadvantaged third graders were significantly less likely to score proficient or above than their non-economically disadvantaged peers. Even among non-economically disadvantaged students, those who were chronically absent were less likely to be reading on grade level.



Even Higher-Income Students are More Likely to Have Lower Reading Scores When They're Chronically Absent



This chart uses data for Arkansas third graders in 2014-2015.

Make Every Day Count

Case Study: Parson Hills Elementary School

Parson Hills Elementary School

Parson Hills Elementary School in Springdale has always embraced a “whole child” approach to educating its students. Teachers recognize that they need to help students and families address basic needs and emotional issues. The school offers community resources ranging from free dental care to a food pantry and a clothes closet.

Over the past few years, the school’s staff members have found that reducing chronic absenteeism is key to serving the whole child. Chronic absence is not only a warning sign that a student might fall behind in schoolwork; it is also an indicator of possible problems at home. “I find that with some of the more chronic cases, a lot of our parents live in survival mode,” said Eduardo Nava Jr., counselor at Parson Hills.

The implementation of a comprehensive strategy to reduce chronic absence has led to a drop in Parson Hills’ chronic absence rate from 14.9 percent of students in 2012-2013 to 5 percent in 2014-2015.

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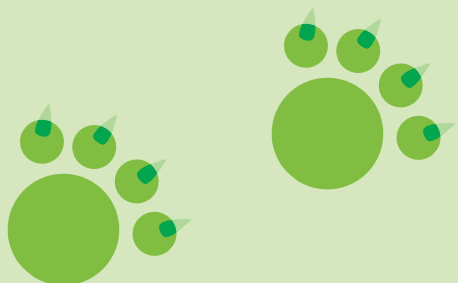
Universal Approaches

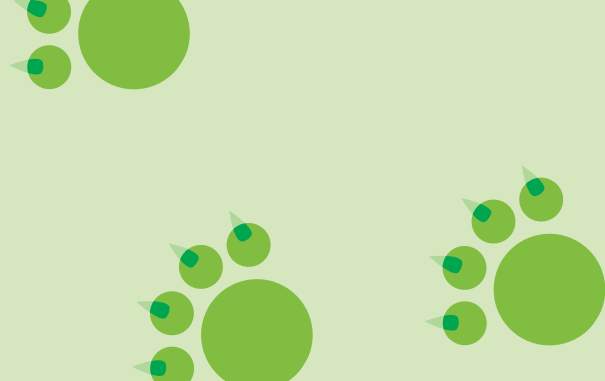
Parson Hills’ approach begins with an emphasis on rewarding good attendance. A bulletin board near the office shows attendance rates by class. Every class with perfect attendance for the day receives a “Panther paw”. The class with the most “Panther paws” at the end of the month is rewarded with ice cream and/or kids’ meal certificates, and other prizes. The class with the best attendance for the school quarter wins a party of its choice. Pizza, ice cream, and movie parties are among the most popular choices.

Regular character assemblies emphasize attendance and other school themes. Parent events and festivities also include an attendance component.

Parson Hills has a very diverse population. Over half (54 percent) of its students are Latino, and 26 percent come from the Marshall Islands. Parson Hills addresses attendance issues specific to these ethnic groups. For instance, Marshallese families often take children out of school for a week-long religious retreat or a two-week funeral celebration, Nava said. The school is working with churches on scheduling some events when school is not in session.

Nava also tries to understand the issues on a family-by-family basis. The cause of absenteeism, he said, can be as simple as a mother who works the late shift and falls asleep before taking her children to school. Or it can reflect a complex web of problems driven by a parent’s unaddressed mental health issues.





Family Outreach

Nava pulls a list of students with too many absences biweekly and shares the list with teachers. The Response to Intervention (RTI) team also meets twice a month to talk about attendance, academic concerns, and other issues affecting the whole child.

Teachers make the first calls to parents, since the school has found that parents are more likely to listen to teachers' advice and are less likely to feel intimidated by the call. If attendance doesn't improve, Nava and then the principal make calls, which become increasingly serious. A community liaison reaches out to the Marshallese families. If the school can't reach families, Nava and others will visit their homes. "Parents will say, 'Well I called in.' There is still a misunderstanding about the importance of attendance for kindergartners," Nava says.

Some teachers also mentor about 30 students with poor attendance. Supporting these efforts are AmeriCorps workers, who tutor the children and help with home visits. The school nurse has access to social service funding, which she can use for any student identified as needing help. This can include glasses, prescription medicine, and dental care. Parson Hills offers some mental health services through outside organizations such as Ozark Guidance and Youth Bridge.

In the most severe cases, the school will file a Families In Need of Services (FINS) petition to ensure children are provided access to the services they need to be successful in school and life. Nava has found that many families actually make progress after this more severe intervention.

Nava is an advocate both in and out of school, often helping families receive counseling rather than having them face charges. Nava says he tells families, "You realize we [the school] will have to report you. We can't have all these attendance issues. The principal will make the final decision as to when we will have to report you. But I will go with you. However, if we do go to court, I will be there too as a witness."

Key Strategies:

- Raise school and community awareness
- Build authentic relationships with parents and families
- Pay attention to early warning signs
- Make data-driven decisions
- Implement parent and family outreach, including phone calls and home visits

What Strategies Move the Needle?

Small Changes, Big Impact

Over the past few years, the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading has partnered with Attendance Works to support and train school leaders in several districts to reduce chronic absence as part of the Make Every Day Count initiative. Through the implementation of local strategies to reduce chronic absence, three partner schools are now providing shining examples of what works to reduce chronic absence. These schools, from different regions of the state and with diverse student populations, are Marvell-Elaine Elementary and Monitor and Parson Hills in the Springdale School District.

The strategies and best practices used by these schools have been organized into a tiered intervention system (see the pyramid on page 15) and can be incorporated with other systems such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) to help ensure that the most vulnerable students are in school and ready to learn every day. Tier 1 strategies are targeted to all students; Tier 2 can be used for students missing 10 to 19 percent of the school year; and Tier 3 can be used for students who miss 20 percent or more of the school year.

Partner Schools by the Numbers

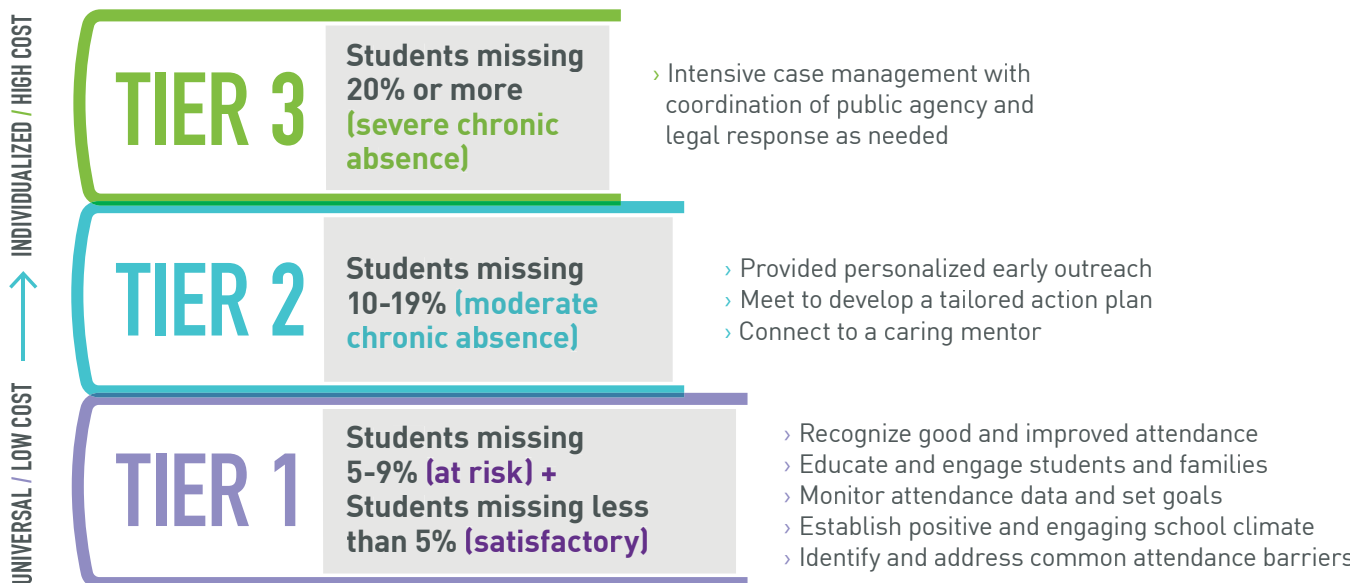
| Marvell-Elaine Elementary | | Monitor Elementary | | Parson Hills Elementary | |
|---------------------------|------------|----------------------------|------------|----------------------------|------------|
| Total Students: | 169 | Total Students: | 798 | Total Students: | 552 |
| Percent Black: | 80% | Percent Black: | 3% | Percent Black: | 3% |
| Percent Hispanic: | 4% | Percent Hispanic: | 39% | Percent Hispanic: | 53% |
| Percent White: | 14% | Percent Marshallese: | 22% | Percent Marshallese: | 30% |
| | | Percent White: | 33% | Percent White: | 13% |
| Percent Low-Income: | 98% | Percent Low-Income: | 81% | Percent Low-Income: | 93% |
| Region: Delta | | Region: Northwest Arkansas | | Region: Northwest Arkansas | |

Note: This chart uses data for 2014-2015.

Pages 16-17 provide examples of Tier interventions, reflecting strategies used by Monitor, Parson Hills, and Marvell-Elaine to reduce their chronic absence rates. The purpose of a tiered approach is to focus almost all

resources on preventive and proactive strategies in Tiers 1 and 2. As a result, very few students should need Tier 3 strategies that involve intense case management and sometimes the courts.

Tiered Intervention Strategy for Reducing Chronic Absence



Source: Attendance Works

TIER 1 STRATEGIES



RECOGNIZE GOOD and IMPROVED ATTENDANCE

At Parson Hills, when a class has perfect attendance, it receives “Panther paws,” which lead to prizes and parties.

Monitor holds an “AttenDance” each quarter for students with perfect attendance.

At Marvell-Elaine, students with good attendance can participate in field trips.

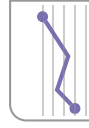


EDUCATE and ENGAGE STUDENTS and PARENTS

Marvell-Elaine has used banners, posters, and billboards to communicate about the importance of attendance.

At the beginning of the school year, Monitor gives clear, simple handouts to parents, in their native language, showing how many days add up to chronic absence.

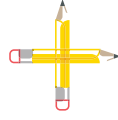
Marvell offers a six-week summer camp to keep students engaged and learning.



MONITOR ATTENDANCE DATA and SET GOALS

Monitor’s leadership team reviews attendance data for patterns and trends monthly.

Teachers in Marvell-Elaine understand the value of tracking attendance and regularly analyze their classroom data.



ESTABLISH POSITIVE and ENGAGING SCHOOL CLIMATE

Parents are welcomed in the front office at Monitor by staff who speak their language, whether it is English, Marshallese, or Spanish.

Every morning, the principal at Marvell-Elaine greets students at the door and invites them in for a day of learning, fun, and the support of caring adults.



IDENTIFY and ADDRESS COMMON BARRIERS to GETTING to SCHOOL

Parson Hills set up a “walking school bus” from a nearby apartment complex, where children were missing a lot of school.

At Monitor, the counselor helps parents develop transportation back-up plans when a child misses the bus and sometimes picks up children herself.

TIER 2 STRATEGIES



PROVIDE PERSONALIZED EARLY OUTREACH

Teachers at Monitor call the family after a student misses three days of school.

If a phone number is not working, the counselor makes a home visit. The focus of the calls and visits is to express concern and discover possible challenges, rather than chide parents. The counselor coordinates with the school nurse when a student is sick.

At Parson Hills, staff review attendance data biweekly and identify students at-risk of chronic absence. Teachers make the first calls to parents. If attendance does not improve, the counselor and then the principal make calls. If a parent cannot be reached on the phone, staff conduct home visits.



MEET to DEVELOP TAILORED ACTION PLAN

At Marvell-Elaine, families have a variety of challenges, including students who have witnessed trauma or are relied on as caregivers for sick family members. A behavior counselor can intervene when a student acts out in class or can refer the family to mental health services.

The counselor at Parson Hills tries to understand the causes of absenteeism on a family-by-family basis. The problem can be as simple as a mother who works the graveyard shift and falls asleep before taking her children to school. Or it can reflect a complex web of problems driven by a parent's depression or substance abuse.



CONNECT to a CARING MENTOR

Parson Hills uses data from the previous school year to identify children most at risk of chronic absence with mentors – teachers and other adults in the schools – who eat lunch with them and check in with them regularly.

At Monitor, the counselor hosts attendance circles with students to learn more about what they like and do not like about school and what could help them arrive at school on time every day.

What Can I Do?

Monitor Early & Often

State Policy

School leaders know from experience what AACF's analysis suggests: showing up for class is critical to achievement. Students cannot benefit from investments in high-quality instruction and more engaging curricula unless they are in the classroom. We also know that all students need to be able to make the transition in third grade from learning to read to reading to learn. Our state must emphasize the importance of regular school attendance in order to ensure that every child meets this critical benchmark by third grade.



At the state level, agency and legislative policymakers must enact the following recommendations to reduce chronic absence:

- **Define chronic absence and set maximum allowable absences:** The state should define chronic absence and recommend that it be 10 percent of the school year, for any reason (excused or unexcused).
- **Inform parents about schools' absence rates:** The state should include chronic absence rates on school and district annual report cards.
- **Develop monitoring tool for K-3 attendance and chronic absence:** The state should include chronic absence in data systems used daily by teachers and administrators to inform early warning systems.
- **Include chronic absence as an accountability measure under ESSA:** As the state develops its plan to implement the new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Arkansas Department of Education should include chronic absence as a key indicator for assessing school and student success.

School Strategies

AR-GLR's Make Every Day Count initiative has developed a toolkit for principals, "Leading Attendance in Arkansas: How Principals Can Help Students Succeed by Reducing Chronic Absence" to leverage the evidence-based strategies of Attendance Works and the lessons learned from schools in Arkansas that have successfully reduced chronic absence. The AR-GLR principal's attendance toolkit includes the following strategies to reduce chronic absence:


- **Cultivate a school-wide culture of attendance:** All schools should have a welcoming and engaging environment that includes a strong emphasis on the importance of going to school every day. Principals can model this approach and engage staff in consistently sending the message that attendance matters.
- **Use data to determine need for additional support:** While a strong school-wide culture of attendance is an essential ingredient of academic success in all schools, it may not always be sufficient. Some students, especially those who are chronically absent, may need a higher level of intervention. The good news is chronic absence can be turned around if data is used to identify and connect students — as early as possible — to positive, engaging supports that motivate them to attend school and address challenging barriers.
- **Take a team approach and develop staff capacity:** While principals are critical to reducing chronic absence, sustaining improvement depends upon the support and buy-in of the school as a whole.
- **Leverage all available resources to improve attendance:** For chronically absent students who need a level of intervention beyond what the school can provide, school leaders should tap into resources offered by the school district and community partners.
- **Advocate for additional resources and improved policies:** Trusted school leaders can recommend changes in policy and allocation of resources to reduce chronic absence. From the school board to the legislature, there are policy and budget levers at every level. The AR-GLR principal's attendance toolkit includes a draft local attendance policy that makes it easier for schools to implement positive, proactive strategies for reducing chronic absence.



Endnotes

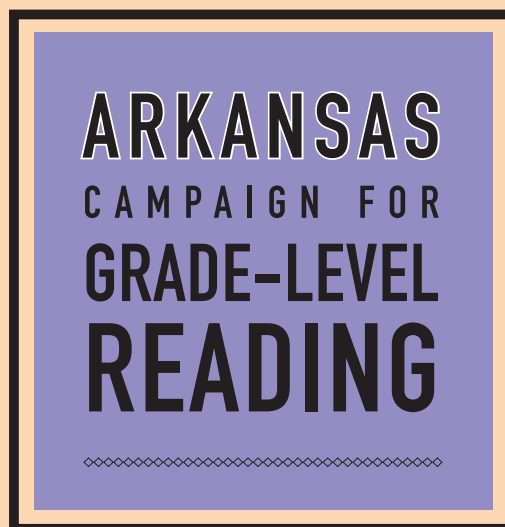
- 1 ADE did not provide data identifiable by district, so this analysis cannot note particular trends in total student population, geography, etc.
- 2 “Economically disadvantaged” is defined as students who qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches (FRL), including those students who are in schools using the direct certification program (all students in those schools are noted as qualifying for free and reduced lunch).
- 3 Students in 1st and 2nd grades did not take the PARCC assessment in 2014-2015.

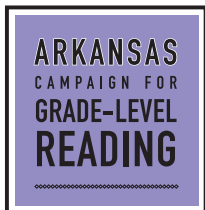




Our state's chronically absent elementary school students could fill up every seat in Little Rock Central High School's football stadium.

We must change this!





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