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Every Day Counts: Driving Student Attendance through Strong Use of Data



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Ensuring students attend school every day and actively engage in their learning is foundational to their lifelong success. Unfortunately, too many students across the United States are chronically absent — meaning they miss 10% or more of the school year.¹ The national chronic absenteeism rate reached about 31% in the 2021–2022 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there have been improvements in the subsequent school years, with some school systems demonstrating significant progress based on proven strategies, chronic absenteeism remains a persistent challenge for too many schools. Students who are chronically absent are much less likely to read at grade level and to graduate high school. They also miss out on opportunities to socialize and build strong, trusting relationships with adults and their peers.

To tackle chronic absenteeism, State and district leaders and agencies, community-based organizations, educators, and families are working collectively to understand why students are missing school and what additional resources, supports, and strategies are needed to increase their attendance and engagement. In addition to communicating broadly the importance of being in school, including with messaging such as that provided in the Ad Council's [attendance awareness campaign](#), schools must also be equipped with data on why students are missing school, including health, safety, housing, and transportation barriers that stand in the way of everyday student attendance.

The role of student data cannot be understated in these efforts. Quality, timely student data, such as when a student is approaching being chronically absent, trend data, and intervention and support tracking data, are critical in state and local efforts to end chronic absenteeism. Several states and school districts are stepping up and taking action to ensure that their school districts have the data they need to address this issue effectively. The

following describes how two of these states — Indiana and Rhode Island — support their districts to meet the needs of students and families in ways that increase student attendance, well-being, and overall success.

Indiana

The Indiana Department of Education (IDE) has embarked on a multiyear effort to make education data, and specifically student attendance data, more standardized, transparent, interoperable, and actionable across all 351 school districts. IDE's efforts across the state — from small pilots to full-scale operation — have put students, parents, and educators at the center of their work, ensuring that the attendance data being collected and shared can be used to improve educational outcomes for students.

Like many state departments of education, IDE historically collected “negative attendance” from schools at the end of each year, only recording the average number of days missed by all the students at each school. This process was highly manual, error prone, and was viewed as a burdensome compliance activity by many schools with little use. The aggregated data that was collected did not empower parents, educators, schools, districts, or state policy makers to take real-time actions to improve student attendance.

To tackle this challenge, the IDE's leadership began in 2018 to explore ways to modernize how they collect, analyze, and share student attendance data across the state. IDE decided to pilot “positive attendance” for the 2019–2020 school year, allowing schools to provide one attendance record for every student every day, instead of providing just one attendance record averaged across all students each year. Positive attendance would enable educators, parents, and schools to monitor attendance in real-time, spot patterns, and target interventions to improve individual student's attendance.

To allow for this much more granular and frequent collection of data, Indiana adopted the EdFi Data Standard, an open-source data standard developed to allow education technology systems to securely exchange data from many different sources. The EdFi Data Standard allowed attendance data to be shared by schools without the manual work of the old data collection processes, making daily collection possible. Importantly, this standards-based approach allowed school districts to keep their existing Student Information System (SIS), saving them the cost and time of switching to entirely new systems.

Following the success of the voluntary pilot with school districts across Indiana for the 2019–2020 school year, IDE moved to have all school districts provide daily positive attendance records for the 2021–2022 school year. The vast majority of schools were able to connect their data seamlessly using the EdFi Data Standard and IDE worked with other school districts to provide flexibility in how they shared their data. During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, this statewide attendance data proved critically important. The Governor and senior state leadership relied on daily and weekly statewide student attendance reports to respond to trends of chronic absenteeism and monitor the real-time impact of policy decisions.

Today, Indiana's attendance data is helping drive the state's response to chronic absenteeism with greater precision and insight. The state has even taken the bold step of publishing a [public attendance insights dashboard](#), which includes local data on excused and unexcused absences broken down by school, grade level, and demographic information, like race and family income.

How the system works

- **Attendance Dashboard:** Indiana's [attendance insights dashboard](#) provides different views and levels of granularity for different user groups. For example, educators can see the attendance of individual students in their class, while members of the public can view aggregated data at the school-level. According to the Department's chief information officer, "The focus on this has been to try and get to as granular a picture as possible" while ensuring data privacy and security. Each user should be able to use the data to take concrete actions to improve student attendance. This dashboard was built by an in-house technical team at IDE using PowerBI. Underlying the PowerBI dashboard is a Data Exchange that ingests over 200 million records each month sent from schools and validates the data quality using hundreds of business rules. This validation system ensures that there are not any major errors in the data being shared every day through the dashboards. The state's in-house data team understands that there are many reasons why students might miss many days and that the data is a tool to help those who know their students best decide how to respond.
- **Lessons Learned:** Over six years, the team took a thoughtful and transparent approach to piloting and rolling out the new EdFi Data Standard to school districts across the state. By piloting first with a subset of schools, the Department was able to iterate on their approach, work out challenges, and smooth over processes before requiring all schools to utilize the new data standards. The data collected through the new standard also started small and then grew over time to include more types and more granular data, allowing schools to acclimate to the new approach. The state team worked directly with school's SIS vendors, taking on the work of onboarding and certifying them so that schools could be confident that their vendors could manage the integration. The state team also took the long view and tried to provide transparency to schools about the long-term roadmap.

- **A tool that works for everyone:** For such a sizeable, multiyear modernization to succeed, IDE needed to ensure that everyone would benefit, from students and parents to teachers and superintendents. The Indiana team focused on building a system that would not create an additional reporting burden for educators and schools, and ideally a system with which they would want to interact. Today, educators simply need to enter their classroom attendance as they do the roll call, and the school's system shares the data with the state's system seamlessly in the background. For Indiana's 351 school districts, each with its own SIS, the ability to integrate with the EdFi Data Standard without needing to purchase and migrate to a brand-new system made the transition much smoother. Most importantly, the new data insights, trends, and visualizations shared back with parents, educators, schools, districts, and the public are all tremendously valuable, incentivizing consistent input of data each day. New tools like an "early warning system", that spot worrying trends in a student's attendance and notifies their educators and parents, allows action to be taken before a student becomes chronically absent.

Over six years of modernization, IDE has integrated a patchwork of hundreds of school district systems into one positive attendance data standard that allows for real-time insights into student attendance. This data helped the state manage their response to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency and continues to be critical to their efforts to address chronic absenteeism. For the 2023–2024 school year Indiana's chronic absenteeism rate decreased to 17.8% and the state's efforts to make sure students are in school will continue, powered by actionable attendance data.

Rhode Island

The Rhode Island Department of Education's (RIDE's) response to chronic absenteeism predates the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many states, Rhode Island's education leaders struggled for years to address the root causes that can make absenteeism intractable because reliable, timely data to support their efforts was unavailable. According to the RIDE team, their previous inability to track attendance in real time hindered a full understanding of the issue and effective solutions. Building Rhode Island's infrastructure to collect, analyze, and use attendance data first began during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. At the time, the State's public health officials needed support in tracking the virus' spread and enlisted school leaders in that effort. The risks H1N1 posed to students and families increased the urgency to collect timely, reliable attendance data. By the time that pandemic ended, the State had established precedent that it could request and receive high-quality daily attendance data from every school in the state.

This early success led RIDE to build upon their data system and seek grant funding through the Obama Administration's Race to the Top competitive grant program, which articulated an explicit priority to build "data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction."

Using the data to reduce chronic absenteeism evolved over time. When Rhode Island's then Governor Gina Raimondo encouraged State employees to dedicate a portion of their time to innovating and experimenting with new solutions to the State's challenges as part of the Rhode Island Office of Innovation's Government Innovation League RIDE team members developed a "nudge" tool that used the data to proactively intervene if a student was currently or was at risk to become chronically absent. When the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund was established through the Coronavirus Aid Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, and

then as states across the nation mobilized to promote full in-person learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rhode Island worked to launch a statewide campaign that placed focus on decreasing chronic absenteeism and increasing public accountability with the goal of improving student outcomes. RIDE also worked with schools to better sync district data collection processes and absenteeism definitions to promote uniformity in response efforts. While no one could have predicted the full impact of COVID-19 on schools, Rhode Island's ability to collect daily attendance data and use it to quickly to inform stakeholders and identify and respond to negative trends made it a leader among states.

How the system works

Rhode Island knows that in order to grow their economy and future workforce, skilled workers and prepared students are necessary. With its various data tools, the State has produced data that show there is an approximate 20 percentage point achievement gap in State assessments scores across all grade levels among students who are chronically absent and their peers who are not. Promoting every day attendance is a key part of the State's goals to improve academic achievement. Rhode Island's Learn365RI initiative, launched by Governor Dan McKee in 2023, identifies three key metrics for improving education, one of which is decreasing chronic absenteeism. Rhode Island's data system is designed to support this all-hands-on-deck *Attendance Matters RI* initiative. The key components include:

- **Attendance Dashboards:** Among many distinct attendance dashboards, Rhode Island first created a public, real-time data platform that shows attendance data for every school in the State every single day. To create the public Attendance Leader Board, RIDE worked with data leads at every school district who submit attendance data on a daily basis. A team

within RIDE built the system in-house, rather than contract with an outside vendor, to best suit the agency's needs, including the ability of being able to use student IDs to connect attendance data to other student information available to State government such as assessment and discipline data. In accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and without sharing any personally identifiable information (PII), the Attendance Leader Board displays the number of students on track to be chronically absent daily and allows comparisons to the previous years. Other RIDE dashboards available for the public include: a Community Dashboard that uses students' home addresses to present chronic absenteeism on maps based on census tracts and block groups; a Historical Absence Dashboard that allows users to track chronic absenteeism rates by year, local education agency, school, grade span, gender, free and reduced lunch status, race, and whether or not the student is differently-abled and/or a multilingual learner; and, an Achievement and Chronic Absenteeism Dashboard which shows math and ELA performance on RICAS, the state's assessment for K-8 students, and SAT assessments by levels of chronic absenteeism.

- **Lessons Learned:** The importance of everyday attendance is not siloed to education. The Governor is a champion of improving everyday attendance and looking at real-time attendance data. RIDE and the Governor's Office partnered with the Department of Health, the Department of Commerce, Mayors and Town Managers, business leaders, and other stakeholders to drive home the importance of everyday attendance and its importance to Rhode Island's workforce and future. Stakeholders have taken the challenge and have supported the statewide effort in many ways including securing school sponsorships, writing op-eds, producing Public Service Announcements, and integrating attendance messaging into their everyday work.

- **Supportive Culture:** The data collected are not used to punish parents, families, schools and students, nor is it used to fully determine a teacher, school, or district's approach to chronic absenteeism. The data are used as **one tool among many** to understand underlying issues impacting absenteeism and to help direct additional resources and supports where they are most needed, including ESSER and state funds that can be used to engage students. Rhode Island's approach underscores a collective impact strategy. For example, the State recently launched a mental health support initiative that will provide services to students at no cost to districts statewide. Efforts to launch this partnership to offer these services considered data showing elementary students needed this type of support and were missing school due to mental health challenges.

Chronic absenteeism during the 2023–2024 school year declined approximately 4.2 percentage points, bringing the statewide chronic absenteeism rate from 28.9% in school year 2022–2023 to 24.7%. Since the 2021–2022 school year, Rhode Island has decreased chronic absenteeism by nearly 10 percentage points.

Planning for Action

While Indiana and Rhode Island took different approaches to their systems, there are a number of lessons learned about effective actions states can take:

1. State leadership is key to raising public awareness, setting ambitious goals, marshaling resources, and creating a system of shared accountability. For example:
 - *Governors' Offices* can set shared outcomes across agencies that ensure teams supporting education, health, human services, transportation,

housing and others are working towards a common set of outcomes related to improved education and socioeconomic outcomes for children and their families.

- *Chief State School Officers* can leverage state support systems and accountability and improvement structures to ensure that school districts center improving whole child, whole family outcomes, such as chronic absenteeism, child health and more, as part of school accountability and improvement measures.
- *Philanthropy* can partner with state leaders to identify where philanthropic funds can complement or extend the impact of public dollars to provide flexible, responsive resources for place-based organizations or to act as community connectors to help make it easier for students and families to access publicly-funded resources and programs.

2. Collective action across stakeholder groups and sectors is needed to support effective and targeted interventions and strategies to meet student and family needs. For example:

- *State leaders*, including Governors and state superintendents, can utilize Children's Cabinets or interagency working groups focused on the whole child to identify how agencies that are not traditionally engaged in education, such as housing, transportation, agriculture or others, can work with state departments of education and local school districts to support the holistic needs of children.
- *Local leaders* can convene local agencies and organizations that work most directly with students and families to ensure that municipal operations, ranging from access to housing services to bus route timing and more, are coordinated with schools to meet the needs of the whole

child. School districts can partner with place-based community organizations who can act as trusted messengers to engage directly with students and families and support them to navigate and access resources.

- *Philanthropy* can facilitate, convene and fund collective action efforts that work across siloed sectors in a specific community. Philanthropy can play a unique role to bring together public and private entities to co-develop targeted interventions.

3. All states can work collaboratively with local school district leaders to build usable, real-time data systems that enable educators and staff to take action in addressing student attendance and engagement. For example:

- *State agencies* can design attendance data systems so schools can share their daily attendance data with the state system in effective and streamlined ways that still meet privacy requirements. State systems can use this data to provide schools, districts, and parents with real-time analysis of attendance patterns and trends and early identification of students in need of more support or attendance solutions. State agencies should actively engage with districts in their development of the state attendance data system to ensure its practicality and utility.
- *State agencies* can develop cross-agency data systems, and can ensure that data collected and housed at the state can be made available to other agencies and partners at the local level to develop local data systems, and that data is regularly updated and made accessible to ensure that local data systems provide real-time information.
- *School districts and nonprofit intermediaries* can partner to leverage public data (from state agencies or school districts) to implement local data systems that provide information to schools, educators, government leaders and families to access resources to serve the whole child.

- *Philanthropy* can provide pilot funding to launch local and statewide data systems that can be scaled and sustained over time using public dollars.

Footnotes

1. [Chronic Absenteeism](#) | [U.S. Department of Education](#)



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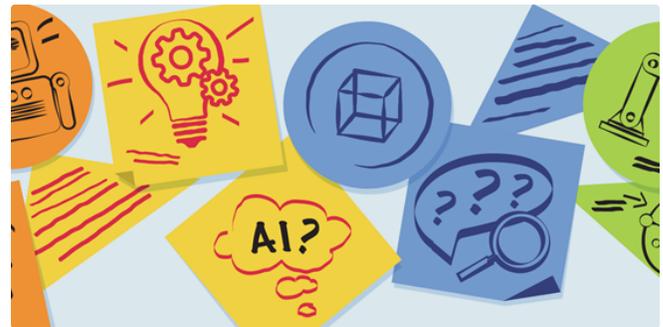
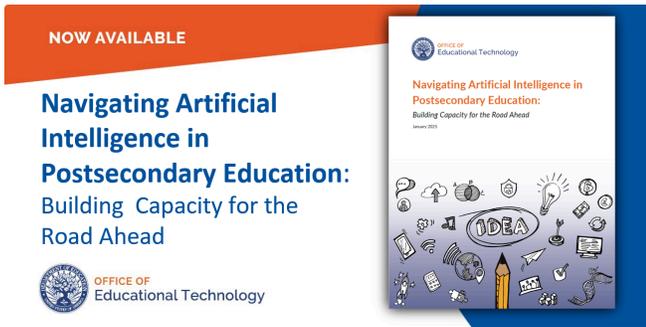
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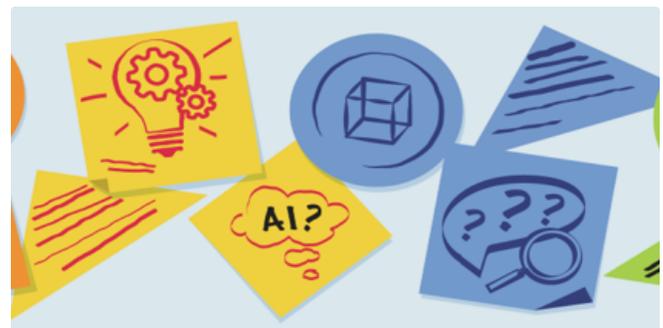
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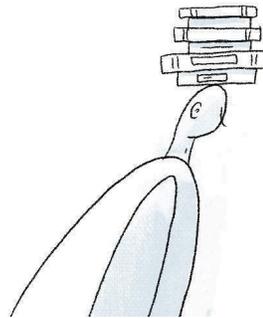


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