

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 17, 2024

3:33 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Löki Tobin, Chair  
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair  
Senator Jesse Bjorkman  
Senator Jesse Kiehl  
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

HEDY CHANG, Executive Director  
Attendance Works  
San Francisco, California

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Delivered the presentation Addressing Chronic Absenteeism: An Essential Ingredient of Pandemic Recovery.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:33:10 PM](#)

**CHAIR LÖKI TOBIN** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:33 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Gray-Jackson, Stevens, Kiehl, Bjorkman and Chair Tobin.

**PRESENTATION:**  
**ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM:**

AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT OF PANDEMIC RECOVERY

[3:34:17 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN announced the consideration of the presentation Addressing Chronic Absenteeism: An Essential Ingredient of Pandemic Recovery.

[3:35:20 PM](#)

HEDY CHANG, Executive Director, Attendance Works, San Francisco, California, moved to slide 2 and stated that the organization Attendance Works was founded approximately ten years ago. She stated that her first publication on the key issue of chronic absenteeism was in 2008. The organization then shifted its focus from why attendance matters for student success to what works to improve attendance. The organization works with districts nationwide to demonstrate that reducing absenteeism is possible. The organization has an attendance awareness campaign to make it easier for people to access free resources and tools. About 400,000 people visit the website annually. The organization also works to advance policy changes.

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 3 and defined chronic absence as missing so much school that a student is academically at risk. Most states define chronic absence as missing more than ten percent of school. It is important to intervene and address issues early when students are put at risk due to absences. Chronic absenteeism differs from truancy. Truancy is only unexcused absences for average daily attendance. She defined average daily attendance (ADA) as the number of students attending school on any given day. Truancy and ADA can mask high levels of chronic absence.

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 4 and stated chronic absence is deeply connected to reading proficiency. She stated that prolonged chronic absence during PreK - 2nd grade significantly reduces reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade. Most students will be on track to be proficient in reading if they attend school regularly.

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CHAIR TOBIN referred to slide 3 and asked for an explanation of the difference between an excused and unexcused absence.

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MS. CHANG replied that the difference between excused and unexcused absences can be arbitrary. Often, the difference is documentation from parents and whether the district considers the reason unexcused. For example, illness is typically considered an excused absence, but without a doctor or parent note, the school may still enter it as unexcused. Often localities decide what constitutes an excused absence.

CHAIR TOBIN asked if any research indicates more absences among some groups of students than others.

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MS. CHANG replied absolutely. The state of California collects and publishes data on how many absences are excused versus unexcused. Attendance Works, and others analyzed the data and found that whether an absence is marked excused or unexcused is related to income. Students from lower-income families tend to have absences that are unexcused. There is also disproportionality by race. Native American, African American, Latino, and Pacific Islanders are more likely to have absences considered unexcused. She stated this was true even after considering income. Studies also found that hoping to improve attendance by labeling absences unexcused for punitive action did not improve attendance. Some evidence indicates that accurate labeling leads to improved attendance. The key to improving attendance is knowing the actual reasons kids miss school.

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SENATOR STEVENS asked if it is correct that there is no change in absenteeism when districts and parents take action.

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MS. CHANG replied no, to improve attendance an understanding of why students are missing school is needed. In this way the action taken by districts and parents is related to the reasons for the absences. California sends mandated notices of truancy to parents. Studies found that notices that focused on punitive wording were 40 percent less effective at reducing absenteeism. Punitive action that does not address the underlying reason for missing school is unlikely to make a difference in student attendance.

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 5 and said absenteeism affects 3rd-grade reading, which impacts achievement levels in middle school and increases the likelihood of dropping out of high school.

[3:45:08 PM](#)

MS. CHANG moved to slide 6 and said attendance affects more than achievement:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**Showing Up Matters for R.E.A.L.**

It is an opportunity to:

**Build Routines**

Daily attendance routines can reduce stress and create a sense of safety and security especially after chaotic transitions.

**Increase Engagement**

Being in school helps build relationships with peers and school staff that nurture engagement.

**Provide Access to resources**

Schools provide access to meals, health and mental health services, tutoring, mentoring, techn extra-curriculars (sports, clubs, music etc), afterschool and summer programs.

**Support Learning**

Showing up to school regularly helps students become proficient in reading and math and graduate from high school.

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 7 and spoke to data indicators for ADA, Truancy and Chronic Absence:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**What's the Difference between ADA, Truancy & Chronic Absence?**

**Average Daily Attendance (ADA)**

- School level measure (not student level)
- Notice aggregate attendance at certain points in time (e.g., half-days, holidays, bad weather)
- Masks individual student chronic absences

**Truancy**

- Counts ONLY unexcused absences

- Emphasizes individual compliance with school rules
- Uses legal, typically more blaming and punitive solutions

### **Chronic Absence**

- Counts ALL absences (excused, unexcused & suspensions)
- Emphasizes impact of missed days
- Uses preventative, problem-solving, trauma-sensitive strategies
- Cultivates family & student engagement

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 8 that contains a graph of chronic absence data for Alaska and the U.S. from 2018 - 2023:

[Original punctuation provided.]

- The number of chronically absent students grew to 14,660,261 nationwide. In Alaska, it grew from 35,957 to 59,504.
- Increases are occurring in tandem with significant drops in achievement (NAEP scores).
- Available 2022 -23 data from states indicate rates remained high.

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 9 and said that at 52 percent, chronic absence is high among PreK and Kindergarten students in Alaska. The percentage gets a little better for 2nd and 3rd-grade students, is best when students are in 4th and 5th grade, and increase thereafter to 49 percent for high school Seniors. The Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) provided the information.

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CHAIR TOBIN said since Ms. Chang's research noted a correlation between the decrease in (NAEP) scores and an increase in absenteeism, she would find a comparison of chronic absenteeism and NAEP scores interesting.

MS. CHANG suggested reaching out to DEED for the comparison. She added that there is a national study that shows about 25 percent

of the decline in NAEP scores is related to increases in absences.

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 10 and stated that students missing school at high rates has a ripple effect on individual students, work groups, teachers, and the school.

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 11 and said nationwide, most schools (65 percent versus 28 percent pre-pandemic) are now challenged by high (20-30 percent) and extreme (30 percent or more) rates of chronic absence. In Alaska, nearly 86 percent of schools face chronic absence. These numbers point to the importance of Alaska addressing the issue of absenteeism to improve the educational conditions for all students.

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 12 and stated that reducing chronic absence requires addressing the underlying causes of absenteeism, which are typically not solved through punitive action. Reasons for missing school were divided into four groups:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**Barriers**

- Chronic and acute illness
- Family responsibilities or home situation
- Trauma
- Poor transportation
- Housing and food insecurity
- Lack of access to needed services (including health)
- System involvement
- Lack of access to technology
- Community violence

**Aversion**

- Struggling academically and/or behaviorally
- Unwelcoming school climate
- Social and peer challenges
- Anxiety
- Biased disciplinary and suspension practices
- Undiagnosed disability and/or lack of disability accommodations
- Caregivers had negative educational experiences

**Disengagements**

- Lack of challenging, culturally responsive instruction
- Bored
- No meaningful relationships to adults in the school (especially given staff shortages)
- Lack of enrichment opportunities
- Lack of academic and behavioral support
- Failure to earn credits
- Need to work conflicts with being in high school

**Misconceptions**

- Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused
- Missing 2 days per month doesn't affect learning
- Lose track and underestimate TOTAL absences
- Assume students must stay home for any symptom of illness
- Attendance only matters in the older grades
- Suspensions don't count as absence

MS. CHANG noted that students were encouraged to stay home during the pandemic. Now, students stay home even when they're feeling ill due to anxiety, which only exacerbates the problem.

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SENATOR KIEHL stated that most reasons seem to be a symptom of poverty or economic struggle. He asked if researchers could tease out the effect of poverty from other causes and determine the strength of the correlation.

[3:57:12 PM](#)

MS. CHANG replied that there is a strong correlation. However, there is an increase in chronic absences in non-high-needs students. Issues such as anxiety are not limited to kids who experience poverty. States should consider poverty when determining where to allocate resources since issues like access to transportation, housing, food, and health care can compound the difficulty of dealing with health concerns. This entails partnering with other organizations and agencies to help meet students' basic needs. She gave an example of how breakfast in the classroom addressed student nutrition while improving attendance by building connections between students and teachers.

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SENATOR KIEHL asked if there is a difference in student resiliency regarding educational outcomes and the student's ability to overcome absenteeism.

MS. CHANG replied that most high-poverty schools saw an increase in absenteeism post-pandemic when compared to pre-pandemic attendance. The fabric of a community is not always about money. Students can grow up poor and still do well in school with strong family and community connections. The correlation between being poor, absenteeism, and doing well in school is not absolute. She opined that families and communities need to build support to strengthen students. She provided an example of an unsafe community creating walking school buses to help students who walked to school arrive safely. The solution didn't require money; it required community.

[4:02:29 PM](#)

CHAIR TOBIN shared an anecdotal story of trauma experienced by students in a rural community due to a polar bear attack. Attending school was viewed as unsafe. Alaska has unique challenges regarding barriers to attendance.

[4:02:56 PM](#)

MS. CHANG moved to slide 13 and agreed, stating that high levels of chronic absence reflect an erosion of positive learning conditions. Relationships are essential to building positive conditions for learning in the following areas:

- Physical and Emotional Health and Safety
- Adult and Student Well-being and Emotional Competence
- Academic Challenge and Engagement
- Belonging, Connection and Supports

MS. CHANG stated that if parents do not feel schools are a safe place for students, they will not send them regularly. Belonging, connection, and support help children want to attend school.

[4:05:24 PM](#)

MS. CHANG moved to slide 14 and said reducing chronic absence requires investing in multi-tiered support systems that begin with prevention. She described the various tiers:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Students missing	Tier 3
20 percent or more	Intensive Intervention

Students missing 10 to 19 percent	Tier 2 Early Intervention
All students and families	Tier 1 Universal Prevention
All students and families	Foundational Supports That Promote Positive Conditions for Learning

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 15 and said key ingredients of systemic change to reduce absenteeism include actionable data, positive engagement, strategic partnerships, adequate resources, shared accountability, and capacity building.

[4:07:22 PM](#)

MS. CHANG moved to slide 16, Policy Recommendations:

1. Ensure consistent, accurate and comparable data at the school, district, and state level.
2. Created shared accountability and alignment of community resources through public reporting of data
3. Advance tiered systems of support that begin with prevention
4. Promote creation of district and school teams to address attendance
5. Support technical assistance, guidance and resources that build district capacity to produce real-time data dashboards, adopt effective strategies for improving attendance as part of school improvement efforts, and use data for outreach and continuous improvement

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MS. CHANG moved to slide 17 and said Attendance Works partnered with Georgetown and created the Attendance Playbook, Smart Strategies for Reducing Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic. Suggestions include:

[Original punctuation provided.]

**TIER I Interventions**

- Nudging Parents and Students
- Home Visits
- Positive Messaging
- Incentives

- Healthy School Buildings
- School-based Health Services
- Telehealth • School Buses and Public Transit
- A Safer Walk to School • Breakfast for All
- Laundry at School • Relevant—and Culturally Relevant—Curriculum
- Threshold Greetings
- Rethinking Recess • Restorative Discipline Practices

**TIER II Interventions**

- Early Warning Systems
- Mentors • Youth Engagement
  - Addressing Asthma
- Targeted Transportation
- Students with Disabilities
- School Refusal
- Immigration Enforcement

**TIER III Interventions**

- Truancy Courts
- Interagency Case Management
- Housing Challenges

Attendance Playbook:

<https://www.future-ed.org/attendance-playbook/>

Implementation Guide:

<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/attendance-playbook/>

[4:09:15 PM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if parents are less involved in ensuring student attendance than 20 years ago.

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MS. CHANG replied that she is not sure if it is an issue of involvement but worries that families have less appreciation for the importance of students attending school every day because of the pandemic. She opined that it was difficult for teachers to shift to online learning during the pandemic. Consequently, parents appreciated schooling less because they viewed student learning during a crisis as typical. Parents need to understand how important school is to their child's success. Research from Learning Heros shows that ninety percent of parents think their children are doing above average in school. A deeper dive into the misconception showed that the grades students receive are not an accurate reflection of how well students actually

perform. Parents need tools and information so they can best support their children.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON stated she appreciated the comment that students whose families are not financially well off can still do well in school. Being poor doesn't mean students do poorly in school.

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MS. CHANG responded that families understand the importance of school but are often embarrassed by barriers, such as adequate housing or health care. Consequently, parents and students do not inform school staff. Parents need to feel comfortable telling school staff about what barriers they are facing. The ability to form a partnership with parents would allow schools to become a first line of defense for them to access resources; it is not about wanting to succeed so much as struggling to succeed. Research in Illinois showed that schools with higher levels of effective family engagement had lower increases in chronic absence during the pandemic.

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SENATOR STEVENS asked if a 4-day school week improves attendance.

[4:14:56 PM](#)

MS. CHANG replied that it is essential to identify what is causing students to miss school and determine a solution that addresses the cause. She stated she needs clarification on what a 4-day school week addresses. She encourages schools to look at data and start small. She worries that missing one day means a student has missed one-quarter of their learning for the week. Furthermore, whether it would improve transportation is uncertain.

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SENATOR STEVENS said her response was thought-provoking.

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CHAIR TOBIN said Anchorage is seeing an intersection between attendance and the science of high school student brain development. Next year, the Anchorage school district will have a later start time for high schools. She expressed concern for students of limited income and communities of need not arriving at school due to missed transportation opportunities. She asked

how researchers analyze conflicting policy decisions that are based on science.

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MS. CHANG acknowledged the dilemma between the need for sleep and transportation. At the high school level, she suggested taking attendance by class period and collecting a year's worth of data before and after implementing the change. This would enable the district to make a comparison. Also, the school district should take proactive measures to address transportation and other potential barriers. For example, the school could investigate carpooling apps.

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CHAIR TOBIN thanked Ms. Chang for her expertise in helping to improve student achievement in Alaska.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Tobin adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 4:22 p.m.