



**UPSTREAM**  
PUBLIC HEALTH

# The Connection Between Missing School and Health: A Review of Chronic Absenteeism and Student Health in Oregon

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## Executive Summary

### Chronic Absenteeism Is Undermining Oregon's Education Investments

**More than one in five K-12 Oregon students misses about a month or more of school each school year<sup>1-3</sup>.** Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days in a school year for any reason, includes all absences – excused and unexcused. The number of students missing a month or more of school days increases to nearly one in three for children experiencing economic hardship, children of color, and children in special education<sup>1</sup>. In the 2009-10 school year, low-income students were nearly twice as likely to be absent from school in the primary grades, and 50% more likely to be absent in high school<sup>4</sup>. Oregon cannot meet its ambitious graduation goals, or eliminate the achievement gap, without addressing chronic absenteeism.

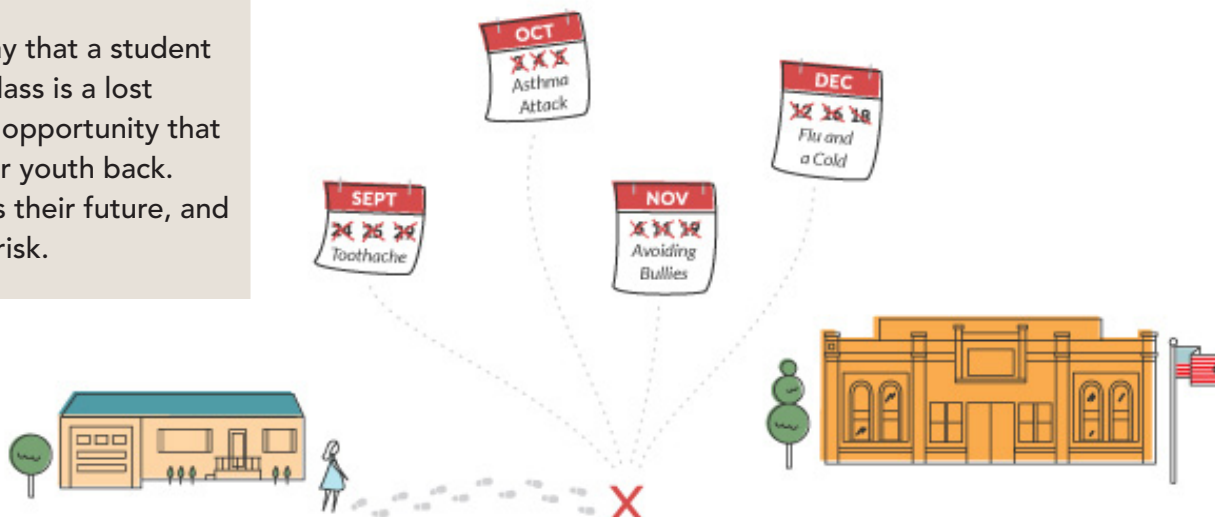
### Chronic Absenteeism Predicts Low Achievement and Eventual Dropout

Missed days means missed learning, leading to lower test scores and a reduced likelihood of graduating from high school. In a recent study, Oregon kindergarteners or first graders with high absenteeism rates were not likely to catch up to their peers' test scores by 5th grade<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, chronically absent 6th graders were more likely to be behind their peers by 10th grade in general achievement, math, and reading<sup>4</sup>. Early childhood is crucial for learning; when 24% of Oregon Kindergarteners are chronically absent and early absenteeism is a predictor of future absenteeism in later grades, we have a problem<sup>4</sup>. The less school attended, the more likely a student is to be among the 33% of Oregon students who drop out<sup>5,6</sup>.

### Chronic Absenteeism is a Public Health Issue

Chronic absenteeism is often caused by community, family, and child health factors and chronic absenteeism can contribute to a lifetime of health problems. Many health conditions such as hunger, respiratory illness, depression, fear of bullying, and dental pain are barriers to children attending school. Additionally, the less education an adult has, the more likely they are to smoke, be overweight, have diabetes, and die prematurely of certain chronic conditions<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, chronic absenteeism, which leads to lower educational success, is a predictor of worse lifetime health.

Every day that a student misses class is a lost learning opportunity that holds our youth back. This puts their future, and ours, at risk.



## Chronic Absenteeism Can Be Addressed Through Integrated Actions

Chronic absenteeism is a complex issue that requires coordinated solutions, but it can be addressed. Oregon's children need everyone's efforts – collectively – to support their health and success. Parents and schools cannot do this alone. All organizations need to work together to ensure students are regularly attending school.

Happily, many Oregon institutions have begun taking recommended steps to address chronic absenteeism. Oregon is one of the few states in the country that reports chronic absenteeism in school and district report cards<sup>5</sup>. This is a critical starting point for intervention efforts.

We applaud the many existing efforts to address chronic absenteeism, and we hope to learn from them as they continue. We recommend the following strategies to advance the effort to eliminate or minimize chronic absenteeism:

- 1. Ensure chronic absence data is publicly reported and regularly available to build awareness and support among parents, students, school administrators, educators, and community leaders** - Upstream recommends everyone use a standard definition for collecting chronic absence data and that it be easily available so that community stakeholders can identify when there are challenges and can partner with local schools, districts, and families to think creatively to address them.
- 2. Use chronic absence numbers as one factor in allocating and coordinating health and social service resource delivery** - Because health conditions figure prominently in student absenteeism, and the education system cannot address all reasons children miss school with only one strategy, we recommend that chronic absenteeism data factor into decisions about coordinating public health and social service delivery with schools.
- 3. Develop community-wide, cross-sector, and interagency collaboration related to schools to prevent and address chronic absence** - A holistic approach must be emphasized in increasing attendance among Oregon students; emphasizing that families, school districts, schools, community organizations, public agencies, social service organizations, and public health professionals can all play a role in supporting our children to be engaged and present in school.
- 4. Revisit policies to support student attendance** - Institutional policies, supports, and systems can help develop a culture around regular student attendance. Upstream recommends examining these to support students attending school and avoid unintended disincentives or barriers.
- 5. Identify challenges facing children of color and develop community-driven strategies to provide social supports** - In many cases, racial and culturally specific programs and strategies will be necessary to understand and address inter-cultural barriers that prevent children from succeeding.
- 6. Implement pilot strategies and evaluate what works best for different communities** - Successful strategies to address absenteeism involve preventing student absence behavior, creating more supportive community and school environments, and connecting children to needed services.

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