The Every Student Succeeds Act puts more pressure on schools to ensure their students show up every day. But when it comes to addressing chronic absenteeism, some educators and policy makers say they are building the plane in the air, relying on a growing body of research about everything from student health and motivation to mentoring to family poverty to find ways to move the needle.

A new brief from FutureEd, a think tank at Georgetown University, explores existing strategies state and local decision makers my consider. Working with University of Illinois researcher Patricia A. Graczyk, the report's authors explored the research behind 22 different approaches to determine how well they meet ESSA's requirements for evidence-based school improvement.

What Is Chronic Absenteeism? And What Does ESSA Say About It?

More than 7 million students—about one of every six students enrolled in the country's public schools—missed at least 15 days of school in the 2015-16 school year, the most recent federal data show. Such high rates of missed school days—whether or not they are excused absences—can affect students' engagement in the classroom and likelihood of graduating, researchers have found.

So 36 states and the District of Columbia opted to include varying measures of chronic absenteeism in the accountability systems they created to comply with ESSA, the federal education law that replaced the No Child Left Behind Act. Those accountability systems also take into account traditional factors, like graduation rates and test scores, to determine if a school is successful.

And, even in states that didn't include chronic absenteeism in their ESSA plans, the law requires schools to include such data on their school report cards that provide parents and the public with information about a school's performance. That may ratchet up pressure to make sure students show up and to determine how to intervene when they don't.

Proponents of chronic absenteeism in school accountability favor it because it is a broad measure that touches on all areas of school policy and practice—from discipline to student health to classroom management.

"Ultimately, the best strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism are steps that improve the educational experience of all students," says the FutureEd report, which was written in cooperation with Attendance Works, an organization that promotes school attendance. "Instruction that is relevant to students' lives encourages attendance and promotes academic achievement. A welcoming school climate can bring more students to school on a regular basis, and it can mitigate the trauma in many students' lives. Stronger bonds between students and teachers are associated not just with good attendance but with student success."

But some teachers and educational leaders have approached the new mandates with caution, worrying that many factors that affect students' attendance are beyond their control and that schools often lack the resources to tackle sticky issues like a lack of transportation or a mental health crises.

Strategies to Ensure Students Show Up

The report includes three levels of interventions.

- **Tier 1 interventions** are more general approaches that address the needs of the student body as a whole, like "nudges" and other
reminders of the importance of coming to school, universal free breakfast programs, and building connections with students by meeting them at the doors of school buildings and classrooms.

- **Tier 2 interventions** are more specifically targeted toward the needs of students who struggle with attendance. They include focused mentoring programs, and school-based interventions for students with asthma.

- **Tier 3 interventions** require buy-in from other sectors. They include programs like truancy courts, interagency housing efforts, and case-management programs that include information sharing between schools and social services providers that interact with high-needs students.

The report also includes resources like model school policies, links to external resources, and guides for sharing information.

Whatever strategies schools and districts use to confront absenteeism, most have an underlying data strategy that involves tracking a range of indicators to determine which students are most at risk to allow for early intervention and monitoring the success of these efforts, the report says.

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