UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

October 7, 2015

Dear Colleague:

A growing and compelling body of research demonstrates that chronic absence from school—typically defined as missing at least 10 percent of school days in a year for any reason, excused or unexcused[1]—is a primary cause of low academic achievement and a powerful predictor of which students will eventually drop out of school.[2] With an estimated five to seven and a half million students chronically absent each year,[3] chronic absenteeism is a national problem that seriously undermines our collective efforts to improve education and life outcomes among our youth.

Today, we, the leaders of the U.S. Departments of Education (ED), Health and Human Services (HHS), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Justice (DOJ), announce our long-term commitment to building capacity across the Federal government to support States and local communities in the work of addressing and eliminating chronic absenteeism. We also call upon States and local education, health, housing, and justice agencies and organizations, in partnership with community stakeholders, to join forces and commit to creating or enhancing coordinated, cross-sector systems for identifying and supporting students who are, or are at risk of becoming, chronically absent, with the goal of reducing chronic absenteeism by at least 10 percent each year, beginning in the 2015-16 school year.

In order to support communities in addressing and eliminating barriers to students' daily attendance at, and meaningful engagement with, school—particularly for students who are low-income, of color, homeless, highly mobile, juvenile justice-involved, and/or who are students with disabilities—we are pleased to announce the release of *Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism*, which is available at http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/index.html. This Toolkit will provide community stakeholders with information and resources to help ensure that all young people are in school every day and benefitting from coordinated systems of support. Further, to achieve our ambitious but attainable goal of reducing chronic absenteeism by at least 10 percent per year, we ask that leaders of State and local education, health, housing, and justice systems work immediately and collaboratively to take the following action steps:

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[1] Therriault, S., Heppen, J., O'Cummings, M., Fryer, L., & Johnson, A. (2010). *Early Warning System Implementation Guide: For Use with the National High School Center's Early Warning System Tool v2.0.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, National High School Center. Retrieved from http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED521686.

[2] Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. Available at http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf.

[3] Ibid.

Action Step 1: Generate and act on absenteeism data. Prioritize the development of early warning prevention and intervention systems that identify students who are, or are at risk of becoming, chronically absent before they miss enough school that it is nearly impossible for them to catch up. Data from such systems should be shared—in a manner consistent with applicable State law and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)—between school districts and other key public and private organizations to ensure coordinated systems of support for students who are chronically absent.[4]

Action Step 2: Create and deploy positive messages and measures. Focus on developing positive messages for youth and families as well as implementing supportive engagement strategies. For instance, these strategies may include mentoring, counseling, and creating safe and supportive school climates through approaches such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports[5] to improve students' attendance at, connection to, and success in school. Punitive messages and measures are often ineffective and can lead to disproportionate suspensions and expulsions from school and inappropriate referrals of students and families to law enforcement.[6]

Action Step 3: Focus communities on addressing chronic absenteeism. Launch local initiatives to raise public awareness about the causes and effects of chronic absenteeism, including awareness among families and youth. Prioritize training within communities and across sectors to conduct root-cause analyses of local absenteeism trends. Implement research and evidence-based strategies and programs—such as *Check & Connect*[7]—that effectively engage and support students who are, or are at risk of becoming, chronically absent.

Action Step 4: Ensure responsibility across sectors. Regularly communicate that chronic absenteeism is a problem that affects the whole community, not just those students who are chronically absent and their families. Drive and evaluate cross-sector performance, at least in part, based on that principle. Education, health, housing, and justice system leaders should work together to ensure shared accountability within and across sectors to successfully address the local, underlying causes of chronic absenteeism.

As a nation, we must acknowledge that frequent absences from school can be devastating to a child's future. For example, children who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and

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[4] For information on data-sharing consistent with FERPA, please refer to guidance provided by ED's Family Policy Compliance Office at http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/doc/ferpa-and-community-based-orgs.pdf.
[5] For more information on implementing positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), please visit ED's PBIS Technical Assistance Center at www.pbis.org.
[6] Morgan, E., Salomon, N., Plotkin, M., Cohen, R. (2014). *The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System.* New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center. Available at http://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/school-discipline-consensus-report/.
[7] For more information on research findings of *Check & Connect* implementation, please see http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/interventionreport.aspx?sid=78.

first grade are much less likely to read at grade level by the third grade.[8] Students who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school.[9] By high school, irregular attendance is a better predictor of school dropout than test scores. A study of public school students in Utah found that a student who is chronically absent in even a single school year between the eighth and twelfth grades is over seven times more likely to drop out of school than a student who is not chronically absent.[10] Students who are homeless and those who reside in public housing are also particularly at risk of being chronically absent from school.[11]

Research further demonstrates that completing high school is not only a strong predictor of adult success but also of adult physical and mental health outcomes and involvement with the criminal justice system. Students who do not graduate from high school have worse health and greater health risks as adults than their peers who graduate.[12] They also have more frequent, negative contact with law enforcement,[13] contributing to a cycle of poverty, poor health, homelessness, and incarceration. These data strongly suggest that the long-term consequence of chronic absenteeism is a population that is less educated, less healthy, underemployed, less financially stable, and more disenfranchised.

We recognize that attendance tracking systems in many school districts across the country are not required or designed to measure chronic absenteeism among local youth. In fact, efforts to improve average daily attendance often mask the extent of a school's chronic absenteeism problem and fail to address its underlying causes.[14] Adding to the challenge, educators, families, and youth are not sufficiently aware of the frequency and negative impact of chronic absence from school.[15] In many school districts and communities, the focus is on "unexcused" absences or truancy at the middle and high school level, even though research shows that chronic

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[8] Ehrlich, S., Gwynne, J. A., Pareja, A. S., and Allensworth, E. M. (2013). *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Reform. Available at https://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/preschool-attendance-chicago-public-schools-relationships-learning-outcomes-and-reasons.

[9] Hernandez, D. (2011). *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation.* Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, p. 6. Available at www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf.

[10] Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah. (2012). *Research Brief: Chronic Absenteeism.* Available at http://www.utahdataalliance.org/downloads/ChronicAbsenteeismResearchBrief.pdf.

[11] Nauer, K. et al. (2014). *A Better Picture of Poverty: What Chronic Absenteeism and Risk Load Reveal About NYC's Lowest-Income Elementary Schools.* New York: Center for New York City Affairs, The Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy. Available at www.centernyc.org/betterpictureofpoverty/.

[12] Cutler, D. M., Lleras-Muney, A. (2006). *Education and Health: Evaluating Theories and Evidence.* National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper No. 12352. Retrieved at www.econ.ucla.edu/alleras/research/books/Education_and_Health_July_2006.pdf.

[13] Page, A., Petteruti, A., Walsh, N., Ziedenberg, J. (2007). *Education and Public Safety.* Washington, DC: Justice Policy Center. Retrieved at www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/07-08_rep_educationandpublicsafety_ps-ac.pdf.

[14] Bruner, C., Discher, A., Chang, H. (2011). *Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight.* Attendance Works and Child & Family Policy Center. Available at http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ChronicAbsence.pdf.

[15] Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012), p. 6.

absence in the early grades is also a major problem, whether excused or unexcused.[16] Common interventions are often punitive in nature and blame is frequently placed on students and their families. Ultimately, such responses have the deleterious, if unintended, effect of making school less, not more, engaging for students and families, and these practices undermine efforts to assist our most struggling schools and students.[17]

In spring 2016, ED will release the 2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), including the first-ever school-level data on all students across the nation who missed at least 15 days of school for any reason, which translates into approximately 8.5 percent of a typical school year. We anticipate that the CRDC will shed new light on the scope of the chronic absenteeism problem, including where it is most prevalent and whom it most affects, and further catalyze efforts to engage students who are, or are at risk of becoming, chronically absent.

However, we can and must do more now to address the negative and disparate outcomes experienced by students who are chronically absent. By acting early and effectively in a coordinated, cross-sector manner—from the Federal government to every school and community in the country—we can dramatically improve the academic and life outcomes of millions of young people who have been disengaged from a daily, supportive school experience. The health and well-being of our nation demands that we do no less.

Sincerely,

Loretta Lynch
Attorney General of the United States

Sylvia Burwell
Secretary of Health and Human Services

Julián Castro
Secretary of Housing and Urban Development

Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education

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[1] Therriault, S., Heppen, J., O'Cummings, M., Fryer, L., & Johnson, A. (2010). *Early Warning System Implementation Guide: For Use with the National High School Center's Early Warning System Tool v2.0.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, National High School Center. Retrieved from http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED521686.

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[16] Applied Survey Research. (2011). *Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Associations with Student Characteristics, School Readiness, and Third Grade Outcomes.* Report prepared for Attendance Works. Available at http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ASR-Mini-Report-Attendance-Readiness-and-Third-Grade-Outcomes-7-8-11.pdf.
[17] Black, A. T., Seder, R. C., & Kekahio, W. (2014). *Review of research on student nonenrollment and chronic absenteeism: A report for the Pacific Region* (REL 2015–054). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.

[2] Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. Available at http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf.

[3] Ibid.

[4] For information on data-sharing consistent with FERPA, please refer to guidance provided by ED's Family Policy Compliance Office at http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/doc/ferpa-and-community-based-orgs.pdf.

[5] For more information on implementing positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), please visit ED's PBIS Technical Assistance Center at www.pbis.org.

[6] Morgan, E., Salomon, N., Plotkin, M., Cohen, R. (2014). *The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System.* New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center. Available at http://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/school-discipline-consensus-report/.

[7] For more information on research findings of *Check & Connect* implementation, please see http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/interventionreport.aspx?sid=78.

[8] Ehrlich, S., Gwynne, J. A., Pareja, A. S., and Allensworth, E. M. (2013). *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Reform. Available at https://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/preschool-attendance-chicago-public-schools-relationships-learning-outcomes-and-reasons.

[9] Hernandez, D. (2011). *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation.* Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, p. 6. Available at www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf.

[10] Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah. (2012). *Research Brief: Chronic Absenteeism.* Available at http://www.utahdataalliance.org/downloads/ChronicAbsenteeismResearchBrief.pdf.

[11] Nauer, K. et al. (2014). *A Better Picture of Poverty: What Chronic Absenteeism and Risk Load Reveal About NYC's Lowest-Income Elementary Schools.* New York: Center for New York City Affairs, The Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy. Available at www.centernyc.org/betterpictureofpoverty/.

[12] Cutler, D. M., Lleras-Muney, A. (2006). *Education and Health: Evaluating Theories and Evidence.* National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper No. 12352. Retrieved at www.econ.ucla.edu/alleras/research/books/Education_and_Health_July_2006.pdf.

[13] Page, A., Petteruti, A., Walsh, N., Ziedenberg, J. (2007). *Education and Public Safety.* Washington, DC: Justice Policy Center. Retrieved at www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/07-08_rep_educationandpublicsafety_ps-ac.pdf.

[14] Bruner, C., Discher, A., Chang, H. (2011). *Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight.* Attendance Works and Child & Family Policy Center. Available at http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ChronicAbsence.pdf.

[15] Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012), p. 6.

[16] Applied Survey Research. (2011). *Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Associations with Student Characteristics, School Readiness, and Third Grade Outcomes.* Report prepared for Attendance Works. Available at http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ASR-Mini-Report-Attendance-Readiness-and-Third-Grade-Outcomes-7-8-11.pdf.

[17] Black, A. T., Seder, R. C., & Kekahio, W. (2014). *Review of research on student nonenrollment and chronic absenteeism: A report for the Pacific Region* (REL 2015–054). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.