



STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Guidance for Reporting Student Absences and Calculating Chronic Absenteeism



May 2020

This document includes information on reporting attendance for the period of State-mandated closure of schools to students per Executive Orders 104 and 107 (Murphy) (2020).

Guidance for Reporting Student Absences and Calculating Chronic Absenteeism

In order for students to learn and achieve their fullest potential, it is critical that they are in school and engaged in the learning process. Research shows that student absences impact a child's ability to succeed in school. In addition, research shows that chronic absenteeism from school is a primary cause of low academic achievement and a powerful predictor of a student's risk of dropping out of school.¹

With the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, the latest reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* on December 10, 2015, the New Jersey Department of Education has identified chronic absenteeism as its indicator of school quality and student success for accountability ([see approved ESSA State Plan](#)). Chronic absenteeism is factored into the summative rating used to identify schools in need of comprehensive and targeted support and improvement. Additionally, school-level chronic absenteeism is included in each district's annual School Performance Reports for kindergarten through grade 12, per *ESSA* Sec.1111.

Note: The New Jersey Department of Education received a [waiver](#) from the United States Department of Education (USDOE) and is not required to report chronic absenteeism data for the purposes of accountability reporting to the United States Department of Education for the 2019-2020 school year. Under the waiver, 2019-20 School Performance Reports will not include chronic absenteeism, among other elements impacted by COVID-19. Additionally, USDOE waived the requirements that NJDOE annually meaningfully differentiate all public schools and the requirements to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support and improvement based on data from the 2019-20 school year.

This guidance clarifies policies and expectations for reporting student membership and attendance data in NJ SMART and the methodology for measuring chronic absenteeism. **Districts should review their locally developed attendance data collection system or work with their Student Information System (SIS) vendors to make sure they are in compliance with attendance reporting requirements as outlined in this guidance.**

Additional information is included in this guidance to address the period of the school year covered by Governor Murphy's executive order due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With more accurate data on student attendance, schools and districts can use this information to better identify the root causes of chronic absence and implement improvement strategies to address these issues. A list of various research-based strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism is available on the [NJDOE website](#).

In a March 13, 2020 [NJDOE Memo](#), Guidance Regarding Requirements for Public Health-Related School Closure, NJDOE indicated to districts that "[a]ny day on which all students impacted by a public health-related closure have access to home instruction services provided consistent with the guidance in this

¹ Balfanz, R. and Byrnes, V. (2012). *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

memo will count as a day on which the board of education has provided public school facilities toward its compliance with the 180-day requirement in accordance with *N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-9*.”

Definitions

“**Chronic Absenteeism**” is defined in New Jersey’s *ESSA* State Plan as the percentage of a school’s students who are not present for 10 percent or more of the days that they were “in membership” at a school.

“**Cumulative Days in Membership**” is an element in NJ SMART defined as the number of *school days in session* in which a student is enrolled/registered during the annual reporting period from July 1 through June 30. The count will commence the first day the student is expected to start, even if he or she does not actually attend that day.

- ❖ **School Day in Session** is a day on which the school is open and students are under the guidance and direction of a teacher(s); and the day must be 4 hours or more to be considered a full day (or at least 2½ hours for kindergarten) (*N.J.A.C. 6A:32-8.3(a)* and (b)).
 - The number of possible days in session for a student on *home instruction* is the same as for other students in the program in which the student is enrolled (*N.J.A.C. 6A:32-8.1(f)*).
 - Schools must be in session a minimum of 180 days.
 - The number of school days in session does not include summer school.
 - The extended school year is included in the calculation up to June 30 and only when it is **required** for all students.

- ❖ **Five allowable reasons for absence:** A school may have a *day in session* that would not be counted as a *day in membership* for a particular student for the following reasons (*New Jersey School Register*, Ch.3):
 - [Religious observance](#) (*N.J.A.C. 6A:32-8.3(h)*);
 - A college visit (up to 3 days per school year, only for students in grades 11 and 12);
 - “Take Our Children to Work Day” (pursuant to the [memo](#) issued by the Commissioner to all districts on April 25, 2017) or other rule issued by the Commissioner;
 - Participation in observance of Veterans Day (*N.J.S.A. 18A: 36-13.2*) or district board of election membership activities (*N.J.S.A. 18A: 36-33*); or
 - The closure of a busing district that prevents a student from having transportation to the receiving school.

“**Cumulative Days Present**” is an element in NJ SMART defined as the number of school days a student is present (not absent) when the school is in session during the annual reporting period (July 1 through June 30) and the student is recorded under the guidance and direction of a teacher in the teaching process (*N.J.A.C. 6A:32-8.3*). Whether a student absence is due to illness, disciplinary action, or other reason, the student may not be considered present at school unless home instruction is received. (For further clarification, see sections below on whether students can be recorded as present during school-sponsored programs and suspensions.) A student with an “excused” absence per district board of education policy can NEVER be considered as present.

- ❖ **Time present – Full Day:** For a school in session during morning and afternoon, the student must be *present for at least one hour in the morning and at least one hour in the afternoon* to be considered as present for a full day; for a school in session during either morning or afternoon, the student must be present at least two hours to be recorded as present for the full day (*N.J.A.C. 6A:32-8.3(k)*), for example, twilight programs. For a half day preschool or kindergarten session, the student must be present for at least one hour to be considered present for a full day.
 - NOTE: In 2019, USDOE has defined absence for State reporting on chronic absenteeism as the following: students should be considered absent when they are not physically on school grounds or not participating in instruction or instruction-related activities at an approved off-grounds location for at least half the school day. NJDOE will be reviewing the state’s administrative code and making changes as necessary. Districts will be informed of any changes and the impact on reporting for chronic absenteeism.

- ❖ **Time present – Half Day:** A student must be present at least one hour during any morning, afternoon, or evening session to be recorded as present one-half day (*New Jersey School Register, Ch.3*).

- ❖ **Home instruction:** A student receiving home instruction is considered present and in membership under the following circumstances:
 - A student with *a temporary or chronic health condition* receives home instruction by a certified teacher for the number of days and length of time sufficient to continue the student’s academic progress. A student with a disability must receive home instruction consistent with the student’s individualized education program (*N.J.A.C. 6A:16-10.1*). As relayed in the NJDOE’s March 5, March 13, and May 5 broadcast memos regarding school district public-health related school closure plans, the NJDOE cites this regulation regarding home instruction for students with a temporary or chronic health condition as a guidepost for districts in developing remote instruction plan.
 - A general education student, *for reasons other than a temporary or chronic health condition*, receives 10 or more hours of home instruction per week by a certified teacher on at least three separate days and no fewer than 10 hours per week additional guided-learning experiences (*N.J.A.C. 6A:16-10.2*).
 - A student, *when placed on home instruction through an IEP*, receives 10 or more hours of instruction per week on at least three separate days by an appropriately certified teacher or teachers (*N.J.A.C. 6A:14-4.8*).
 - NOTE: When instruction is provided for less than the minimum number of hours and/or days required per week, the student must not be recorded as present for more than four days when school was in session for a full five-day week. School districts are able to develop their own policy for determining the exact number of days to record the student present based on these circumstances.

- ❖ **School-sponsored education programs:** A student participating in a school-sponsored educational program under the guidance and direction of a teacher, pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:32-8.3*, even if not located in the school, is considered present and in membership (e.g., field trip, structured learning experience, community-based instruction).

- ❖ **In-school suspensions:** A student temporarily removed from his or her regular classroom to in-school suspension is considered present and in membership, provided the student is afforded the opportunity to continue to:

- Appropriately participate in the general curriculum; and
 - For students with disabilities, receive the services specified on the child’s IEP, and participate with nondisabled children to the extent they would have in their current placement.
- ❖ **Out-of-school suspensions:** A student on out-of-school suspension is considered in membership and not present unless he or she receives home instruction as [defined above](#). Students receiving short-term suspension must be provided with academic instruction that addresses the New Jersey Student Learning Standards within five days of the suspension (*N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.2(a)5*). Students receiving long-term suspension must be provided with educational services (academic instruction and support services) within five days of the suspension (*N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.3(a)9*).
- ❖ **Extended non-illness absences:** School districts should develop a policy that determines when to record a student who is not in school for an extended period of time for reasons other than illness (e.g., travel with family) as a dropout. A student may be considered a transfer during the extended leave when the student is re-enrolled in and attending another school (in the U.S. or abroad).
- It is recommended that “each school should have a policy that a student must attend a specified number of days out of the 180 required days in order to be considered for promotion to the next grade or for graduation” ([New Jersey School Register](#), Section 2.7.3).
 - NOTE: Schools should consider the potential implications of dis-enrolling a student for the purposes of reporting student attendance data with regard to its potential impact on other accountability measures and any possible financial consequences.

How to Submit Data for Students with Partial Attendance in a District?

In NJ SMART’s end of year (EOY) SID Management submission, attendance fields should be reported for all students that attended school in a district during the 2018-19 school year – from July 1 to June 30 – whether the student is enrolled with the district at the end of the school year (active student) or whether the student has transferred, dropped-out or is otherwise not a member of the district at the end of the school year (inactive student).

Procedurally, in the EOY SID submission, whenever a district records an exit date for a student in NJ SMART, the district must also indicate an exit withdrawal code along with reporting the student’s attendance data fields (CumulativeDaysInMembership and CumulativeDaysPresent) for the period coinciding with the exit date. For example, if a student is enrolled in District A from September to November before transferring to District B for the rest of the school year, District A must report this student in the SID Management submission even though the student is no longer active in the district. District A would submit the student record in the EOY SID Management submission along with the attendance data fields corresponding to their time in the district from September to November. Similarly, District B would report this student’s record in SID Management along with their attendance data fields corresponding to their time in the district from December to June.

How is Chronic Absenteeism Measured in New Jersey?

Student-level absentee rate: Each student's absentee rate is calculated based on the fields of *Cumulative Days Present* and *Cumulative Days in Membership* collected in NJ SMART. *Cumulative Days Present* (P) is subtracted from the *Cumulative Days in Membership* (M), and this number is divided by the *Cumulative Days in Membership* (M).

$$\frac{M - P}{M}$$

If the student-level absentee rate is equal to or greater than 10%, the student is chronically absent.

School-level chronic absenteeism: The school-level chronic absenteeism rate is calculated by dividing the number of chronically absent students during the school year by the total number of students enrolled in the school.

What is Important to Know When Implementing this Guidance?

In School Year 2019-20, the following changes will be made:

- ❖ **COVID19 UPDATE** – As relayed in the March 13, 2020 [NJDOE Memo](#), Guidance Regarding Requirements for Public Health-Related School Closure, “[a]ny day on which all students impacted by a public health-related closure have access to home instruction services provided consistent with the guidance in this memo will count as a day on which the board of education has provided public school facilities toward its compliance with the 180-day requirement in accordance with *N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-9*.”
- ❖ **On April 14, 2020, Public Law 2020, Chapter 27 was enacted.** This new law allows districts to apply one or more days of virtual or remote instruction provided to students to meet the 180-day requirement so long as the district virtual or remote instruction program meets criteria established by the Commissioner of Education.

Since these “virtual” days or home instruction service days during any COVID19 school closure period will count as a days in membership for students, students need to be marked as present or absent during such days. All students can be recorded as present for applicable days unless the district knowingly determines a student was not participating in any such instruction in which case they must be recorded as absent.

- ❖ Attendance data for active and inactive students will be collected in SID Management (see [How is Attendance Reported for Students with Partial Attendance in a District?](#)) While the inclusion of attendance data for inactive students is required under ESSA, reporting this data has been a challenge to date. NJDOE encourages all districts to work with their SIS vendors to ensure that attendance data is being submitted for ALL students who touch a district during the current school year, even if a student is not a member of the district by the end of the school year.

- ❖ **COVID19 UPDATE** – While chronic absenteeism rates are normally used for ESSA accountability and the School Performance Reports, New Jersey received a [Federal waiver](#) that permits the State to not report chronic absenteeism data in 2019-20. The USDOE also waived requirements that NJDOE annually meaningfully differentiate all public schools and the requirements to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support and improvement based on data from the 2019-20 school year.

While chronic absenteeism rates will not be reported in 2019-20, attendance data must still be submitted under the guidelines of this document to NJ SMART SID Management.

- ❖ Districts must submit attendance data fields in the end-of-year SID Management submission that includes attendance through the school’s last day in session. Districts may not consider their attendance fields as final and the SID Management submission as “complete” if student attendance through the last school day is not part of the submission. (For example, if a school is open for 180 days and the last day of school is on June 22, the attendance data fields cannot be considered as complete until attendance for June 22 is logged and part of that EOY SID Management submission.)
- ❖ Districts must verify that data related to **attendance** and **student subgroup information** fields in the final NJ SMART SID Management submission are accurate as these are the source variables used for all chronic absenteeism calculations. (Please note: NJQSAC, Operations Indicator 1, verifies that school districts certify and provide complete data to NJ SMART on schedule and with a low error rate.)
- ❖ To account for attendance data during statewide school closures in the future, NJDOE is preparing to add additional measures in NJ SMART SID Management system. Districts should prepare to work with their SIS vendor to ensure that they can differentiate student attendance between days when students are in school during normal operations versus days when students are engaged in virtual or distance learning due to state shutdowns. More information will follow regarding these changes when the SID Management Handbook is updated in the coming months for the 2020-21 school year.

School-level chronic absenteeism rates will be calculated using student records as submitted to SID Management by **June 30, 2020**. **Districts will not have an opportunity to change their data after their final SID Management submission.** Questions regarding management of student records may be directed to NJSMART@pcgus.com.

How Does this Work in Practice?

Example 1: David is in 11th grade and his school has 181 days in session during the school year. He was absent 3 days due to college visits and 2 days due to illness; arrived to school 30 minutes late in the morning 2 times; and left an hour early for a soccer game on 5 occasions. Notes: The days that he was tardy or left school early would not be factored into the equation, as he attended school for at least one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon on those days; and his college visits would not be considered *days in membership* because he is in grade 11.

$$\text{David's absentee rate: } \frac{178 - 176}{178} = 1\%$$

David has 178 cumulative *days in membership* (181 school days in session minus 3 days for his college visits) and 176 *cumulative days present* (181 school days in session minus 5 days absent, including 2 days sick and 3 days college visit). **He would not be considered chronically absent.**

- ❖ What if, *in addition to the days missed above*, David's family takes him on a two-week vacation during the school year?

$$\text{David's absentee rate: } \frac{178 - 166}{178} = 7\%$$

David's *cumulative days present* are now 166 (181 school days in session minus 15 days absent, including 2 days sick, 3 days college visit and 10 vacation days). **He would not be considered chronically absent.**

- ❖ What if, *in addition to the days missed above*, David skips school for 4 days and the next month receives a 2-day out-of-school suspension for repeatedly using a cell phone in class against school policy? Note, when suspended, David was *not* present in school or able to participate in the general curriculum for that day.

$$\text{David's absentee rate: } \frac{178 - 160}{178} = 10\%$$

David's *cumulative days present* are now 160 (181 school days in session – 21 days absent, including 2 days sick, 3 days college visit, 10 vacation days, 4 days skipped, and 2 days suspended). **David would be considered chronically absent with a rate of 10%.**

Example 2: Sarah is in 12th grade and her school has 181 days in session during the school year. Sarah is the nighttime assistant manager at a fast-food restaurant to help support her family and the restaurant scheduled her to cover a day shift 11 times.

$$\text{Sarah's absentee rate: } \frac{181 - 170}{181} = 6\%$$

Sarah would not be considered chronically absent.

What if, *in addition to the days missed above*, Sarah is absent for two weeks due to illness, but receives home instruction during the *second* week, by a certified teacher, sufficient to continue academic progress based upon her ability to participate? Note: Sarah is considered absent for only 5 of those 10 days since she received home instruction in accordance with N.J.A.C 6A:16-10.1 during one of the two weeks.

$$\text{Sarah's absentee rate: } \frac{181 - 165}{181} = 9\%$$

Sarah would not be considered chronically absent.

What About Truancy?

Truancy is defined as 10 or more cumulative unexcused absences (*N.J.A.C. 6A:16-1.3*). All school districts are required to have a policy and procedure that include a definition of unexcused absences that count toward truancy; thus, how “excused” and “unexcused” absences are defined for purposes of expectations and consequences regarding truancy, student conduct, promotion, retention and award of credit is a local decision (*N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.6(a)3*). The NJ SMART *Cumulative Days Towards Truancy* field is not considered in the calculation of chronic absenteeism.

General Considerations Regarding Chronic Absenteeism

What school is responsible for the student’s attendance?

The school a student attends is always responsible for properly documenting a student’s daily attendance and following this guidance. It is the accountable school district’s responsibility to submit the final student attendance data from the attending school into the *days in membership* and *days present* fields in NJ SMART. In about 95% of cases, a student’s accountable school and attending school are identical, but there are rare instances where the accountable school may not be the attending school. For example, a student attending an approved private school for students with disabilities will have his or her attendance reported by the public school he or she would otherwise attend. Districts should pay careful attention to entering the proper CDS (county, district, school) codes for a student’s resident, receiving and attending school in NJ SMART so that the student is assigned the proper accountable school.

Are school’s accountable for a student’s attendance if the student exits the school in a short time?

The New Jersey ESSA State Plan indicates that a student must have attended a school at least 45 days for that student’s attendance data to be factored into the chronic absenteeism calculations. Hence, students with fewer than 45 days in membership at a school are not included as part of any accountability calculations nor are they factored into any attendance items in the New Jersey School Performance Report. NJDOE is required to report attendance data through ED Facts reporting which does include students with 10 or more days in membership. Please note however that all students who have been in membership with the district for any amount of time during the current school year should have their attendance reported in NJ SMART, regardless of how many days the student was in membership or actually attended.

Are preschool students included in the calculations for chronic absenteeism?

This guidance should be followed in the recording of attendance for all preschool students enrolled in New Jersey public schools. However, preschool students are **not** included in the calculation of school and district accountability scores for chronic absenteeism. Preschool chronic absenteeism rates will be displayed in the school performance reports but they will not factor into any accountability measure.

If a district excuses an absence for a reason that is not one of the five allowable reasons defined above, does that absence count in the calculation of the school’s chronic absenteeism rate?

A student who is absent for a full day with an excused absence pursuant to the school district’s definition of “excused” (see [What about Truancy?](#)) must be recorded as having a day in membership

and day absent for that day. An “excused” absence that is not one of the five allowable reasons above, does count as an absence in the determination of whether the student was chronically absent for the year.

Can schools continue to record “excused” absences for local purposes?

It is important to note that schools can determine how “excused” and “unexcused” absences are defined for the purposes of expectations and consequences regarding truancy, student conduct, promotion, retention, and the award of course credit, pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.6*. School districts can take any and all action authorized by their policies and procedures when categorizing these absences.

However, a school must report student attendance to the NJDOE in accordance with the guidelines in this document. For State reporting purposes, a student can only be recorded as present or absent. Therefore, a student with an “excused” absence per local decision must be marked absent when reported to NJDOE. The only exception is that a school may have a day in session that would not be counted as a day in membership for a particular student based on the five allowable reasons defined above.

If a student registered with my school at the beginning of the year but never attended, will that impact the school’s chronic absenteeism rate?

No. As of the 10th consecutive day of non-attendance, assuming district/school investigations have been performed (pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.6*) and the results are conclusive, the appropriate withdrawal code can be recorded in the New Jersey School Register. As per NJ SMART rules, the School Exit date is to be recorded as: "The year, month, and day of the first day after the date of a student's last attendance in a school." For students who were enrolled at the beginning of a school year but never attended the school during the year, the exit date is the first day of the school year, regardless of the actual date the district determines the student is no longer in the district. Consequently, the days the student was not at school before being dropped should not be considered *days in membership* and students who were enrolled but **never** attended should be recorded as having 0 days in membership and 0 days present.

If a school is advised by a family that a student is going to be taking a lengthy time off for vacation, should the school dis-enroll the student and then re-enroll her when she returns?

Schools should review “[extended non-illness absences](#)” above. Given that one student’s absence should not significantly impact your chronic absence rate, schools should consider the possible implications of dis-enrolling a student for the purposes of reporting student attendance data with regard to its potential impact on other accountability measures as well as any possible financial consequences.

How should attendance be reported for shared-time vocational students?

Shared-time students are those who attend two different schools in one day for a half day each. For example, students who spend a half school day in an academic high school and a half day in a county vocational school are enrolled in the high school and also in the appropriate county vocational school. For shared-time students, each day is counted as a ½ *day in membership* for each school. Shared-time

students are either counted each day as *½ day present* or *½ day absent* at each school. (A shared-time student must attend at least one hour to be counted present.) Therefore, if a school has 180 days in session for the school year, a shared-time student would have *90 days in membership* at his or her academic high school and *90 days in membership* at the county vocational school. The academic high school is responsible for submitting shared-time student attendance data to the SID submission based on half day attendance at the academic school. The vocational school must submit shared-time student attendance data separately in the CTE submission based on half day attendance at the vocational school.

Can a district have a policy that allows students to “make up” attendance time in various after-school or Saturday sessions?

While districts can create such policies, they can only be used for local district purposes and not for the purpose of reporting chronic absenteeism (or for reporting to the School Register). The only valid membership days for chronic absenteeism are the days in which the school is in session for all students and student attendance must be tracked on those days. So, while districts can create policies that permit students to make up attendance time for local purposes – ie, graduation, promotion, etc, these alternatives cannot change what is reported in NJ SMART (or the School Register) for student attendance on a valid school day in session.

Can a student’s schedule be modified? If a schedule is modified, how should attendance be reported?

The definitions for [days in membership](#), [day in session](#), and [days present](#) are provided on pages 2 to 4 of this document.

For students with disabilities, pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:14-4.1(c), the length of the school day and the academic year of programs must be at least as long as that established for nondisabled students. However, the IEP team may, in its discretion, **in rare cases**, alter the length of the school day based on the needs of the student. The IEP team may also make a decision, based on the individual needs of the student, that the student is unable to attend school and should receive special education and related services in a different setting or manner, such as through home instruction, all or part of the time. If the IEP team makes this decision, and the information is included in the student’s IEP, then for attendance purposes, the student should be marked as “present” in your SIS when he or she is educated in the educational placement(s) set forth in his or her IEP.

For general education students, apart from those circumstances described above, a student’s schedule may not be modified.

What Funds Can Be Used to Support Student Attendance Initiatives?

Under *ESSA*, when chronic absenteeism is identified and documented as an issue through a comprehensive needs assessment, funding for initiatives to improve student attendance may come from Title I, Part A and Title IV, Part A. Likewise, local education agencies (LEAs) may use Title II funds to provide training for school personnel to address issues related to school conditions for student learning, including chronic absenteeism. Additionally, if the attendance issue relates to English language learners, Title III funds may be used. (Schoolwide programs may use funds from any Title.) Additional information on the use of CARES funds to support student learning is available on the [NJDOE’s COVID website](#).

Resources for Implementing Guidance and Using Data to Improve Attendance

- ❖ Review [New Jersey School Register \(note Chapter 3, The Attendance Record\)](#)
- ❖ Review [N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7](#) and [N.J.A.C. 6A:32-8](#)
- ❖ Review [NJ SMART SID Management Student Handbook](#)
- ❖ Review [Supplemental Guidance: NJ SMART SID Management FAQs](#)
- ❖ Review a list of various resources to improve student attendance on the New Jersey Department of Education's [Attendance, Truancy & Chronic Absenteeism](#) website, including NJDOE's Strategies for Addressing Chronic Absenteeism
- ❖ Contact the Office of Student Support Services at attendance@doe.nj.gov
- ❖ Questions about NJ SMART can be directed to the NJ SMART Help Desk by calling (800) 254-0295 or e-mailing NJSMART@pcgus.com.
- ❖ Guidance regarding attendance during COVID-19 is available on the [Department's website](#).