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Counting the Future: Chronic Absenteeism Impacts Student Success
Report reveals 60% of chronically absent MS 3rd graders not reading proficiently

STARKVILLE – Chronic absenteeism among Mississippi public school students in the lower elementary grades can be linked to student achievement according to a report issued by Mississippi KIDS COUNT, located at Mississippi State University’s Social Science Research Center. *Counting the Future: Early Attendance Charts a Path for Future Success in Mississippi Schools* marks the first time student-level data has been used to compare achievement levels of Mississippi public school students in K-3 based on their patterns of attendance. Researchers analyzed test score data provided by the Mississippi Department of Education from 3rd grade students who took the Mississippi Curriculum Test, Second Edition (MCT2) English language arts assessment in the spring of 2014. Over half (53 percent) of those who were never chronically absent during their K-3 years scored proficient. In comparison, 40 percent of their peers who were chronically absent during the same time period were proficient with 60 percent falling below the proficient level.

“This report confirms what we know – attendance matters. Chronic absences from school negatively impact student learning, which contributes to the achievement gap,” said Dr. Carey Wright, state superintendent of education. “Parents play an invaluable role by ensuring their young children attend school daily and stressing the importance of education to their middle and high school children. Schools should also track their absentee data to identify students who may be in need of additional support.”

The student-level findings follow a March 2015 Mississippi KIDS COUNT report (<http://kidscount.ssrc.msstate.edu/>) that examined chronic absenteeism at the school district level in Mississippi. Defined as missing 10 percent or more of the academic year (180 days) for any reason, chronic absenteeism is often masked by a school district’s Average Daily Attendance (ADA). Even among Mississippi school districts with an ADA of 95 percent or greater, over half have chronic absenteeism rates greater than 10 percent and several as high as 13 percent. Fifteen percent of Mississippi K-12 public school students were chronically absent during the 2013-2014 school year, the latest data available.

The report also revealed that attendance patterns exhibited early in the school year can often predict behaviors later in the same year. Using data from MDE, researchers found that Mississippi students who missed two to four days of school in September were five times more likely to be chronically absent for the year than those who had missed less than two days. Students who missed less than two days in September had the lowest rate of

chronic absenteeism for the year (7 percent) compared to those who missed either two to four days (38.8 percent) or more than four days (77.1 percent).

“These findings provide an unprecedented opportunity for parents, schools and communities to improve school attendance for Mississippi’s children,” said Dr. Linda Southward, director of Mississippi KIDS COUNT. “The research is clear – the earlier that absences are identified and addressed with systemic changes, the more successful the students will become. The need to monitor and track not only absences, but the reason(s) for them is critical in determining appropriate interventions that can be tailored to each child’s needs.”

The report contains action plans for schools, parents, and communities in addressing the chronic absenteeism problem. The plans include creating school attendance awareness campaigns, cultivating community involvement, encouraging schools to pay attention to August/September attendance and prior year’s attendance patterns. Schools also should understand and use multiple metrics, not just average daily attendance, to gauge attendance statistics. Those metrics can include the use of student-level data to determine school absence statistics and developing a statewide system to capture reasons why students are missing school.

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The Mississippi KIDS COUNT *Counting the Future* report will be available February 3rd at 12:01 am CST at www.kidscount.ssrc.msstate.edu. Additional information is available in the KIDS COUNT Data Center which also contains the most recent national, state, and local data on hundreds of indicators on child well-being. Mississippi KIDS COUNT is part of the national KIDS COUNT network of state-based organizations supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.