

For Immediate Release

The Campaign for
**GRADE-LEVEL
READING**
3RD GRADE READING
SUCCESS MATTERS

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State School Chiefs to Lead Advisory Panel on Chronic Absenteeism in Early Grades

Sept. 30, 2013 - Building on the momentum from September's Attendance Awareness Month, five chief state school officers will lead a panel advising communities and states on the best policies and strategies for reducing chronic absence in the early grades.

The Advisory Committee on Ending Chronic Absence also will bring together local educators, health professionals and parent advocates to develop a set of common-sense proposals that can enable schools and communities to act in concert with parents to improve attendance.

The five state school chiefs who have signed on as co-chairs are:

- Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal
- California Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson
- Maryland State Superintendent Lillian Lowery
- New Mexico Secretary of Education Hanna Skandera
- Rhode Island Education Commissioner Deborah Gist

Established by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, the committee will address a challenge that is undermining student achievement from the early grades through high school: chronic absenteeism. Every year, as many as 7.5 million students nationwide miss 10 percent of the school year, or nearly a month of lost instructional time. These absences - excused and unexcused - exacerbate achievement gaps, leave students unable to read well by the end of third grade and contribute to high dropout rates.

"Too often we overlook the absences in the early grades, because these children aren't truant, their absences are excused," said Ralph Smith, managing director of the GLR Campaign and senior vice president at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "But they're missing valuable instructional time nonetheless. Too many absences can leave them struggling to read well."

The GLR Campaign is working with 134 communities hailing from 35 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to improve early attendance as part of a broader effort to increase the number of children from low-income families who master reading by the time they finish third grade. While attendance is typically the concern of local school districts, state policymakers are increasingly using chronic absence as an indicator and an accountability measure, according to [The Attendance Imperative](#), a policy brief released this month by Attendance Works.

Co-Chairs of the Advisory Committee on Ending Chronic Absence

Deborah Gist: Rhode Island

Deborah Gist became the Rhode Island Commissioner of Education in 2009 after serving as the first State Superintendent of Education for the District of Columbia. She is vice chair of Chiefs for Change. Under her leadership, Rhode Island has won both a Race to the Top (RttT) and RttT Early Learning Challenge grant. She helped institute annual evaluations for all teachers and principals, a new accountability system and a revised state funding formula. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) includes chronic absenteeism information for the state, each district and each public school as part of [InfoWorks](#), a public data resource on the RIDE website.

John Huppenthal: Arizona

John Huppenthal was elected Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction in 2010 after 18 years in the state legislature. Under his leadership, the Arizona Department of Education has promoted school choice, developed a school rating system, begun implementing more rigorous standards and advocated for better use of student-level data. The department is also a founding partner in the formation of Read On Arizona, a statewide early literacy collaborative. Huppenthal is administering a federal RttT grant and is leading implementation this year of a retention policy that holds back third-grade students who have not mastered reading. Reading teachers across the state are receiving intensive training to ensure students reach that milestone.

Lillian Lowery: Maryland

Lillian Lowery became Maryland State Superintendent of Schools in 2012 after a three-year stint as Delaware's Secretary of Education, where she helped Delaware become one of the first states to be awarded a federal RttT grant. In Maryland, Lowery manages RttT and Early Learning Challenge grants, as well as an effective school readiness program that has increased the proportion of Maryland kindergartners arriving at school ready to learn from 49 to 82 percent in the past decade. The state requires schools to submit chronic absence data, defined as missing 20 days of school a year, and makes the data available on its website.

Hanna Skandera: New Mexico

Hanna Skandera became New Mexico Secretary of Education in 2011 after serving as Florida's deputy Commissioner of Education for then-Gov. Jeb Bush. She is chair of Chiefs for Change. Working with Gov. Susana Martinez, Skandera leads the nationally recognized New Mexico Reads to Lead program, which provides reading coaches, professional development and other support to advance reading in kindergarten through third grade. The state has also invested significantly in early childhood development and has an RttT Early Learning Challenge grant. Secretary Skandera is also implementing an early dropout warning system to inform parents and giving schools credit in New Mexico's A-F school grading system for reducing truancy.

Tom Torlakson: California

Tom Torlakson was elected California Superintendent of Public Instruction in 2010 after serving in the state legislature for 14 years. Under his leadership, the California Department of Education now encourages districts to monitor chronic absence through its handbook on attendance policy and practice and the awards for model School Attendance Review Boards. In May 2013, Torlakson co-hosted a forum encouraging state agencies to work together to reduce chronic absence, especially in low-income communities. The state's new Local Control Funding Formula for schools requires that chronic absence is carefully monitored by districts as part of developing plans and reporting on student engagement and school climate.