

# The Attendance Imperative: Reducing Absences, Spurring Achievement

*California has the chance to develop an early warning system that could help close the achievement gap, reduce the high school dropout rate and address local budget challenges. Crucial to the system is attendance data—information that is already collected and stored but seldom used in ways that can improve student achievement. California is one of five states that does not include attendance data in its longitudinal student data system. A new state law could change that, but it relies on necessary funds and on local districts sharing their data with the state. Several districts have already started tracking chronic absence, a broader measure than truancy because it includes excused absences.*

## What we know:

- ✓ **Chronic absence can reach high levels in urban and rural districts.**  
An Oakland analysis found that nearly one in seven students missed 10 percent of the 2009-2010 school year. In rural Del Norte, the figure was one in six the same year.
- ✓ **Chronic absence starts early.**  
In Oakland, 17 percent of kindergarten students were chronically absent. In Los Angeles, which tracks students missing 9 percent of school days, the kindergarten absentee rate (22.6 percent) was essentially the same as the 9<sup>th</sup> grade absentee rate (22.7 percent) in 2009-2010.
- ✓ **Chronic absence disproportionately affects poor and minority students.**  
Nationally, low-income children are four times more likely to be chronically absent than their peers. Oakland's African American elementary students are three times more likely than white students and twice as likely as Latinos to miss 10 percent of school days. In LAUSD, one in four black and one in five Native American students misses too much school. Absences are slightly worse for Latino versus white students.

## What California Can Do

Chronic absence, defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year, afflicts California districts large and small, rural and urban. It affects kindergartners as well as high school students. And it pulls down student achievement. The good news is that chronic absence can be turned around when schools and communities work together. Attendance often improves quickly when schools: track absences carefully; take comprehensive approaches involving students, families and community agencies; examine the barriers that keep children from coming to school; and offer safe, inviting and academically engaging campuses for students to learn.

Excessive absences reflect more than simply skipping school. School attendance drops when families lack the financial resources to meet their basic needs for shelter, food, clothing and transportation. Health problems such as asthma and poor dental care, can keep kids from attending regularly. Safety concerns, including neighborhood violence and schoolyard bullying, also keep students home. And a school climate that doesn't engage students in learning or convey the importance of attendance can contribute.

California must do more to track this early warning sign, starting in the early grades, and to encourage school districts to intervene so they can change the trajectory for students and schools at risk. The state's efforts to improve troubled schools will do little good if students don't show up for class.

## State Policy Opportunities

The California Department of Education (CDE) is in a unique position to ensure this overlooked but critically important indicator is addressed in policy and practice. A first key step is to champion SB 1357, which was signed into law in September 2010. The law defines chronic absence as missing 10 percent of school for any reason. It requires CDE to update the database to accept attendance information, contingent upon federal funds. And it encourages districts to submit their data in return for reports on chronic absence. It makes sense for CALPADS to collect the data because:

- ✓ District information systems frequently roll over attendance data each summer and do not make longitudinal information accessible.
- ✓ Chronically absent students are often highly mobile. The state can help provide a fuller history and develop support strategies for vulnerable children.
- ✓ States can provide dropout early warning systems based on attendance far cheaper and more equitably than districts.
- ✓ States can hold districts and schools accountable for high levels of chronic absence.

## Local Policy Opportunities

In the meantime, local school districts do not need to wait to take action. The San Francisco School Board, for instance, approved a resolution in 2010 that directed the superintendent to track elementary absences and work with the lowest performing schools to improve attendances. The California School Boards Association has developed a sample policy for chronic absence and truancy. As districts, such as Oakland and Del Norte, have revealed, a helpful first step is analyzing data to identify which schools and students are affected by chronic absence. Oakland's effort includes maps showing the census tracts most affected by chronic absence. Districts can also use the School Attendance Review Board process to begin reporting on attendance data.

Nonprofit groups can also make a difference: When The Children's Initiative began tracking attendance in its San Diego County report card, the nonprofit prompted a dialogue among educators, parents and students about why absentee rates were so high. It has also helped several school districts find ways to improve school attendance.

### ✓ **Chronic absence can drag down student achievement.**

Research shows that for poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten translates into lower 5<sup>th</sup> grade achievement. By 6<sup>th</sup> grade, it begins to predict high school dropout rates for all students. By 9<sup>th</sup> grade, missing 20 percent of school can be a better predictor of dropout than 8<sup>th</sup>-grade test scores.

### ✓ **Chronic absence can erode school readiness gains.**

A new analysis by Applied Survey Research and Attendance Works demonstrates that the effect of school readiness skills (shown in past studies to increase through preschool participation) can fade by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

### ✓ **Chronic absence is costing school districts state funding.**

If the 5,421 Oakland students who were chronically absent in the 2009-10 school year had each attended six more days, OUSD would have received more than \$1.1 million in additional state ADA aid.

## Going Forward

- ✓ CDE and the State Superintendent should set a high priority on addressing chronic absence starting in the early grades as a strategy to reduce dropout rates and narrow the achievement gap.
- ✓ Local and state policymakers should pursue better practice and policy to ensure that chronic absence is addressed early and often in a child's school career.
- ✓ All stakeholders should work to implement SB1357 so that attendance data is added to CALPADS.

For materials and PowerPoint presentations from the policy forum go to

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/policy-advocacy/state/california/>

To view the California School Board Association brief and sample policy on chronic absence go to

<http://www.csba.org/EducationIssues/EducationIssues/~/.link.aspx? id=1453FFA807D64B2EBE30A75E71762A09& z=z>

***Attendance Works** is a national and state initiative based in San Francisco that aims to ensure every district and community in every state not only tracks chronic absence data for individual students but also intervenes to help those children and schools. Attendance Works would like to express its deep appreciation to the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for investing in our development and launch as a national initiative. In addition, we thank The California Endowment and San Francisco Foundation for supporting our campaign in California.*

***Chronic Absence and Attendance Partnership** works to improve the outcomes of students at risk of poor academic performance and dropping out of school. CAAP seeks to raise awareness, promote the collection and use of data on attendance, support the development of early warning systems and increase the use of chronic absence data to help schools and community agencies (including health service, family resource centers, afterschool, and early childhood programs, etc.) coordinate their resources to improve outcomes for students and their families.*

***CAAP members include:** Attendance Works, Bay Area Council; California Family Resource Association; California School Health Centers Association; California State PTA; The Children's Initiative; Children Now; Fight Crime: Invest in Kids – California; League of Women Voters of California; Partnership for Children and Youth; PICO California; Public Advocates; and The Education Trust – West.*



The Chronic Absence and  
Attendance Partnership