

# FactSheet

September 2014

## Attendance Awareness Month

Joint Publication of CSBA and Attendance Works

Research confirms that students who miss too much school are more likely to fall behind academically and eventually drop out of high school.<sup>1</sup> In celebration and recognition of September as Attendance Awareness Month, this fact sheet highlights recent research on attendance, and clarifies the difference between chronic absence and other commonly used attendance measures such as truancy and average daily attendance. Attendance Awareness Month is a great opportunity for school boards to think critically about strategies for raising achievement by addressing poor attendance.

### How early can attendance problems start?

Problems with absenteeism start surprisingly early in a child's academic life, and absenteeism at a young age predicts future attendance problems.<sup>2</sup> Nationwide, one in ten kindergarten and first-grade students are likely to be chronically absent.<sup>3</sup>

Poor attendance habits can also be detected early in the first month of school and can predict a level of absenteeism that leaves a student struggling academically.<sup>4</sup>

### What is the long-term effect of poor attendance?

Chronic absenteeism at a young age has consequences throughout students' academic careers, as once they fall behind, it is difficult to catch up.<sup>5</sup> Students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade.<sup>6</sup> Students who do not read well by that critical juncture are more likely to struggle all the way through to graduation—that is, if they make it that far.<sup>7</sup>

By sixth grade, chronic absenteeism becomes one of the leading indicators that a student will drop out of high school.<sup>8</sup> A student who is chronically absent for

any year between eighth and twelfth grade is over seven times more likely to drop out.<sup>9</sup>

### What is chronic absence?

Broadly defined, chronic absence is: missing excessive amounts of school for any reason including excused and unexcused absences, as well as days missed to suspensions. In California, State Education Code 60901 defines a chronic absentee as a student who has missed 10% or more of school days for any reason over an academic year.

This 10% definition allows for easy comparisons across districts even if the length of the school year varies. It also promotes earlier identification of students to trigger intervention, since students can be detected as on track for chronic absence at any point during the school year even if a student only misses two to three days each month.

A school's chronic absence rate is the percentage of students who are chronically absent.

### Is chronic absence different from truancy?

Truancy and chronic absence are *not* the same. Truancy refers to unexcused absences and, under No Child Left Behind, is defined by each state. In California, truancy is defined as missing three days of school or being more than 30 minutes late to class without a valid excuse three times.

Truancy is a trigger for beginning legal procedures that could, if poor attendance persists, lead to legal action being taken to ensure a child and their family complies with state compulsory education laws. Once a child is detected as truant, state law requires a notice of truancy to be sent to a student's family. If the notice of truancy is issued three times, the school is required to hold a Student Attendance Review Team (SART) meeting to

work with the child and family to develop an attendance plan. If poor attendance persists, the student is considered a habitual truant and can be referred to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB), probation department, or district attorney mediation program for more intensive intervention.

While these truancy provisions are extremely important, they can easily overlook cases in which children are missing school days, but the absences are excused. Particularly when they are young, students can miss school due to excused absences or the combination of excused and unexcused absences. Both result in the loss of instructional time for the student and the loss of funding for the school district because the district's daily attendance (ADA) will be lower.

Somewhat paradoxically, an increase in truancy rates can sometimes reflect a positive development. If truancy rates increase it might be because teachers and school officials are more proactively monitoring attendance. Being more proactive about ensuring that absences are accounted for could result in better attendance in the long run. Therefore, truancy rates could rise before they decrease.

### Why consider both excused and unexcused absences?

There are often very legitimate reasons why students miss school. For example, staying home when sick is a best health practice that can prevent others from also getting sick. However, even if excused, absences mean that students are missing out on instruction time.

Especially in the early grades, chronic absence often has little to do with truancy or willfully skipping school. Instead, children stay home because of chronic illness, unreliable transportation, housing issues, or simply because their parents do not realize how quickly absences can add up—and affect school performance. After all, it only takes being absent 18 days to be chronically absent and this is only two days a month in a typical school year.

### How can a school have a chronic absence problem despite high average daily attendance?

Districts can have a high average daily attendance and still have a chronic absenteeism problem.<sup>10</sup> For example, in a school with 200 students and a 95% ADA, 60 students (or 30%) could miss an entire month of school over the course of the school year. Aggregate data do not reveal whether most students are missing a few

days or whether a small but still significant minority of students are experiencing excessive absences.

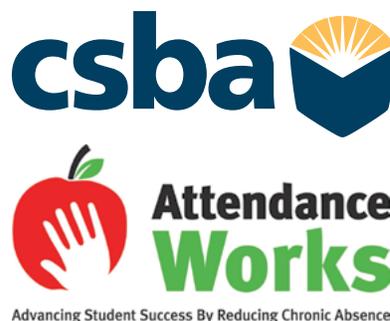
### Are districts accountable for addressing chronic absence?

With the passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in June 2013, school districts throughout California were for the first time required to monitor and address chronic absence. Chronic absence is a key LCFF accountability measure within the *pupil engagement* section of the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP).

### What should boards do?

Attendance Awareness Month and the start of a new school year is a time when boards can initiate or renew their focus on improving attendance and addressing chronic absenteeism within their long-term vision and goals, strategic plan, and other key planning documents. School boards can:

- » Adopt a resolution affirming their commitment to strong attendance (visit <http://bit.ly/1tncgY9> for a sample).
- » Ensure attendance data is used to calculate how many students are at risk due to chronic absence overall and by grade, school, and student population.
- » Call for data on which schools, grades and populations have the highest levels of chronic absence to be made publicly available.
- » Convene parents and community agencies to review data and partner with schools to identify and address barriers to attendance.
- » Ensure districts and schools describe their rates of chronic absence and strategies for increasing attendance in their school improvement plans as well as their Local Control and Accountability Plans.



## Endnotes

- 1 Allensworth, E. & Easton, J. (2007). *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public high schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in the freshman year*. University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 2 Balfanz, R., Herzon, L., & Mac Iver, D. J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223–235.
- 3 Romero, M. & Lee, Y. (2007). *A national portrait of chronic absenteeism in the early grades: Technical report*. National Center for Poverty. [www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_771.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_771.html).
- 4 Connolly, F. & Olson, L. (2012). *Early elementary performance and attendance in Baltimore city schools' pre-kindergarten and kindergarten*. Baltimore Education Research Consortium.
- 5 Ehrlich, S., Gwynne, J. A., Pareja, A. S., Allensworth, E. M. (2013). *Preschool attendance in Chicago public schools: relationships with learning outcomes and reasons for absences: Research summary*. The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Reform. <http://bit.ly/1nGtqge>
- 6 Chang, H. & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. National Center for Children in Poverty.
- 7 Hernandez, D. (2011). *Double jeopardy: How third grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. Annie E. Casey Foundation
- 8 Balfanz, R., et al. (2007). (See endnote 2)
- 9 Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah (2012). *Chronic absence in Utah public schools*.
- 10 Bruner, C., Discher, A., & Chang, H. (2011). *Chronic elementary absenteeism: A problem hidden in plain sight*. Child and Family Policy Center and Attendance Works.