

## INTRODUCTION

Only students who attend school can reap the benefits of classroom learning. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of school, regardless of whether the absence is excused, unexcused, or due to suspension. Chronic absenteeism is worrisome because missing 10% of school has been identified as a tipping point associated with poor academic performance, as well other negative outcomes for children, youth, families, and communities including: compromised connections to peers, teachers, and schools; poor health; high school non-completion; unemployment, and incarceration. When used as an early warning system, chronic absence is an opportunity to identify students and families in need of additional support, as well as systemic attendance barriers that should be addressed.

Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) schools, students, and local communities are paying a high price for chronic absence. District-wide, chronic absence is a substantial challenge, as nearly 11 in 100 students are chronically absent. In 2010-11, SCUSD lost over four million dollars due to above-average absenteeism, and 73% of the cost was associated with approximately 10% of students<sup>i</sup>. District trends from 2010-2014 revealed that chronic absence is associated with millions of dollars of lost funding each year, compromised student learning, and broader social costs.

In response, SCUSD staff and UC Davis researchers partnered in 2016-17 with 12 schools that have high chronic absence rates to explore and address chronic absenteeism through a Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative (CALC) (with support from The California Endowment's South Sacramento Building Healthy Communities collaborative). This report provides an overview of district and CALC school level chronic absence rates during the 2016-17 year<sup>ii</sup>.

This report offers chronic absence rates provided by SCUSD to UC Davis in April 2017, June 2017, and again in August 2017. All students enrolled during the report period were included in the report (i.e., if students were enrolled on 01/26/17 they are reflected in the report for the period 09/01/16-01/27/17). Chronic absence rates were calculated as  $(\# \text{ full days absent} / \# \text{ days enrolled}) * 100\%$ , per current state reporting guidelines. *Chronic absence rates presented here are not comparable to those reported by this project in previous years. Past reports reflected partial day absences as well in order to reflect a more accurate level of absenteeism, particularly at secondary schools where students miss individual class periods.*

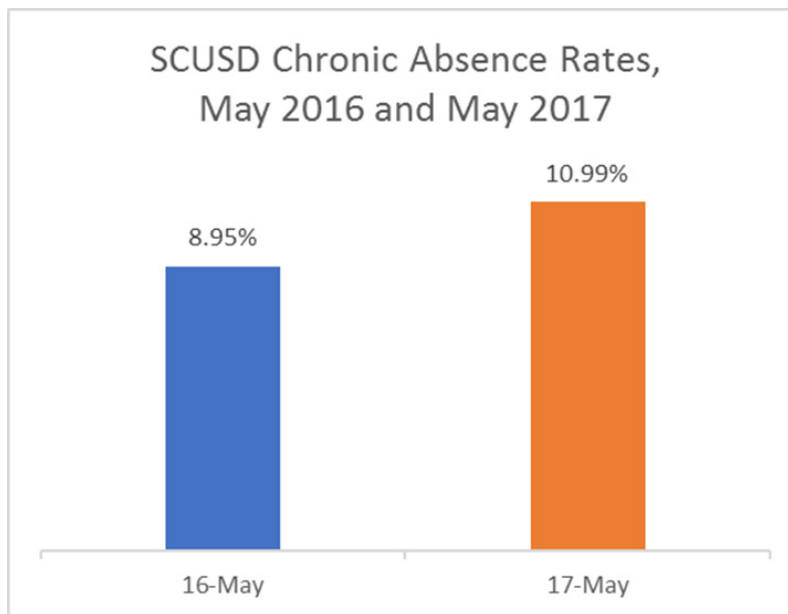
### 5.1 SCUSD districtwide chronic absence rates increased from May 2016 to May 2017.

We compared SCUSD's rates of chronic absenteeism from May 2016 to May 2017. There is a 2% increase in chronic absenteeism across the district from the 2015-2016 academic year to the 2016-2017 academic year. While we cannot provide causal explanations for this increase, district and school site challenges that may contribute to high rates of chronic absenteeism are described in detail in the third and fourth briefs of our 2016-17 Brief Series: *Emerging Practices: Possibilities and Challenges in School Responses to Chronic Absence* and *SCUSD Emerging District Practices to Promote Attendance and Reduce Chronic Absence*.

<sup>i</sup>Erbstein, Nancy (2013). *Chronic Absence in the Sacramento City Unified School District Brief Series: The Cost of Chronic Absence in SCUSD*. Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Regional Change.

<sup>ii</sup>Data trend reports per individual CALC school sites were not possible this year, due to data access issues as of August 2017.

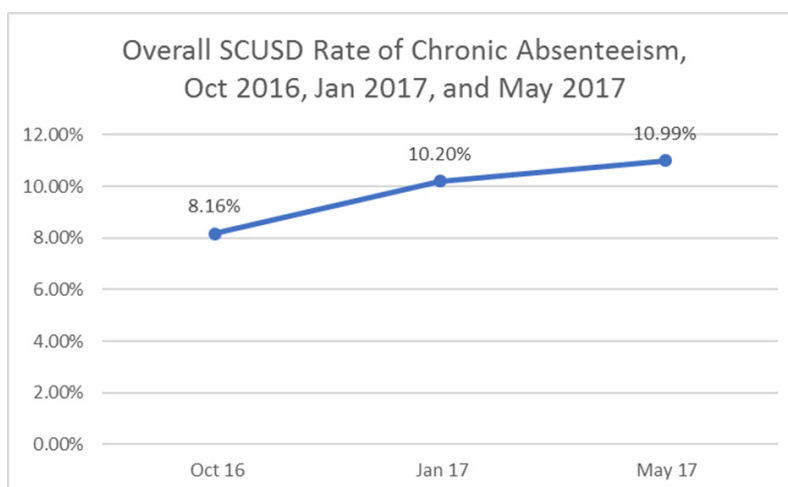
**Figure 5.1** SCUSD Chronic Absence Rates, May 2016 and May 2017



**5.2 Overall SCUSD rates of absenteeism in 2016-2017 suggest seasonal and political impacts on attendance.**

We calculated the 2016-2017 overall district rates of chronic absenteeism across three time points: October 2016, January 2017, and May 2017. We have seen in past years that it is typical for chronic absence rates to increase over time as the school year progresses (Erbstein and Olagundoye 2016). As shown in Figure 5.2, a marked increase in chronic absenteeism across the district occurred between October and January, perhaps due in part to early, heavy rains and the winter break in December—a time of year when families take extended vacations, often before schools let out for break. Several CALC sites shared that this is particularly the case with Latino families, and to a lesser but still prevalent extent, Filipino families, who often travel to their home countries for extended vacations during the winter holidays, or are seasonal migrant farmworkers who return home during the winter season. January is also the peak of cold and flu season, when absences due to illness are most common. This year’s especially rainy winter might have also been a factor in the increase in absenteeism. Additionally, numerous site staff indicated that the current political climate and threat of deportation led some families to keep their children home from school.

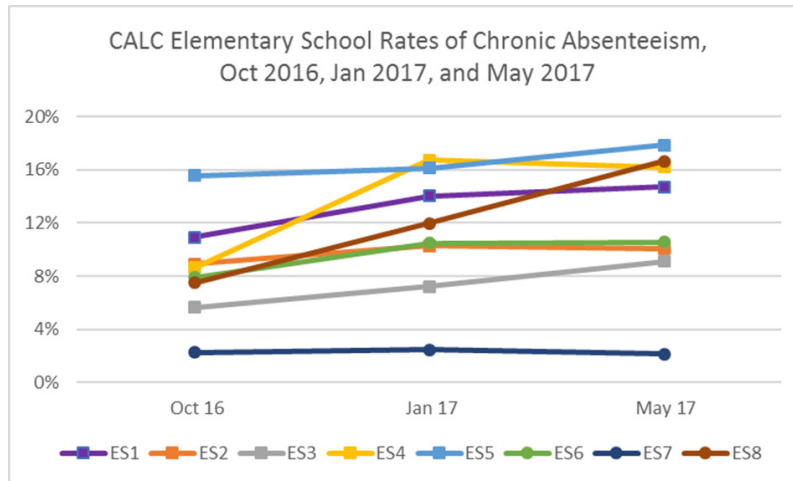
**Figure 5.2** Overall SCUSD Rate of Chronic Absenteeism, Oct 2016, Jan 2017, and May 2017



### 5.3.1 CALC Elementary School rates of increase in absenteeism slowed down, and sometimes decreased, between January and May 2017 for nearly two-thirds of elementary school CALC sites.

Figure 5.3.1 compares the rates of chronic absenteeism throughout the 2016-2017 year among CALC elementary school sites. The analysis shows promising patterns at multiple schools. First, chronic absenteeism decreased between January and May 2017 at four out of eight elementary school CALC sites (ES2, ES4, ES6, ES7). An additional CALC site (ES1) experienced a slowdown in the rate at which chronic absenteeism increased between January and May 2017, in comparison with October to January.

**Figure 5.3.1** CALC Elementary School Rates of Chronic Absenteeism, Oct 2016, Jan 2017, and May 2017

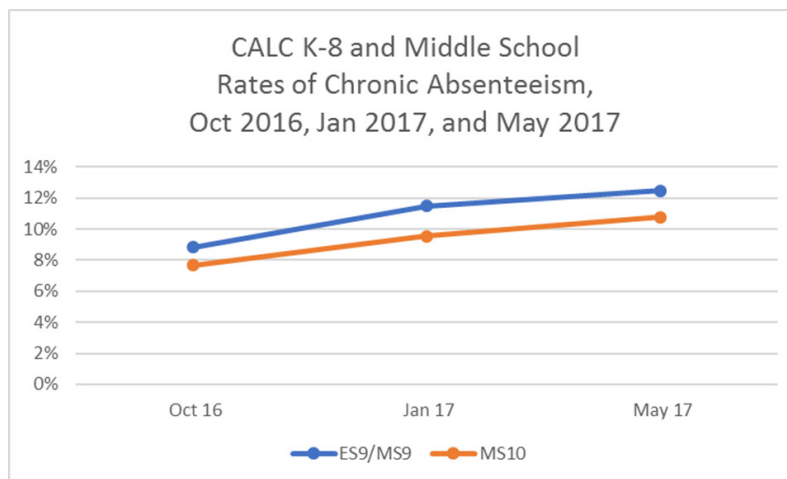


This pattern might be associated with the refinement (winter 2017) and implementation (spring 2017) of each school site’s protocols on attendance promotion and monitoring. However, we are unable to confirm this in light of available data. Among the three sites that did not demonstrate either of these patterns (ES3, ES5, ES8), two described mid-year staff changes and/or lack of developed systems as challenges to supporting overall chronic absence intervention efforts (although definitive causal explanations are not possible in light of available data).

### 5.3.2 K-8 and Middle School rates of increase in chronic absenteeism slowed slightly between January and May 2017 for the CALC K-8 and Middle School sites.

Both the CALC K-8 and middle school sites experienced decreased rates in the growth of chronic absenteeism between January and May 2017, in comparison with the period from October to January.

**Figure 5.3.2** CALC K-8 and Middle School Rates of Chronic Absenteeism, Oct 2016, Jan 2017, and May 2017

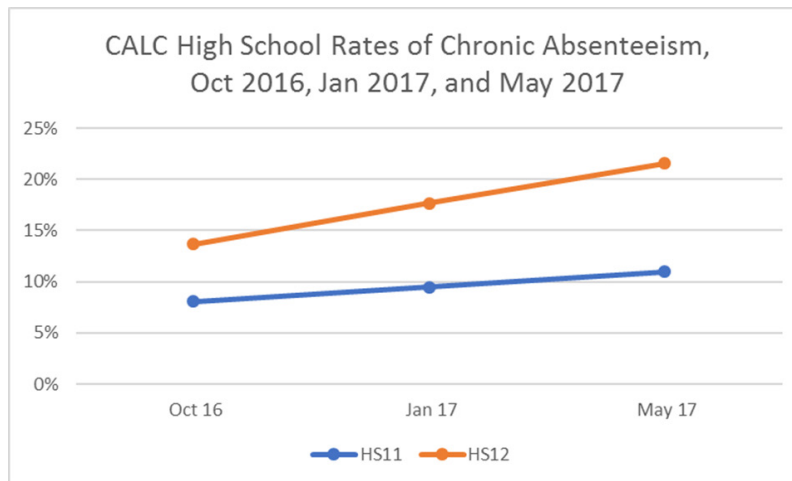


Interventions employed include new approaches to chronic absenteeism such as: culturally responsive mentoring and leadership groups; utilizing a Parent Volunteer Intern of Pacific Islander descent to help engage Pacific Islander families; having nurse interns serve as student mentors and points of connection; and surveying chronically absent students to learn more about their attendance barriers. All of these factors create a more engaged connection to school and allow students to better align with available resources. Both of these CALC sites employed Coordination of Services Team (COST), which helps to identify and monitor chronically absent students to match services with their needs. However, we are unable to confirm an association between interventions and attendance patterns in light of available data.

### 5.3.3 The rates at which chronic absence increased varied across CALC high schools.

Figure 5.3.3 illustrates two patterns: at HS12 the rate at which chronic absenteeism increased was similar from January through May in comparison to the fall, while at HS11 the rate of increase slowed slightly during the spring. This promising pattern for HS11 might be associated with the site’s new approach to adopting the COST process for identifying and monitoring chronically absent students to better align services with their needs, although data are not available to analyze this association.

**Figure 5.3.3** CALC High School Rates of Chronic Absenteeism, Oct 2016, Jan 2017, and May 2017

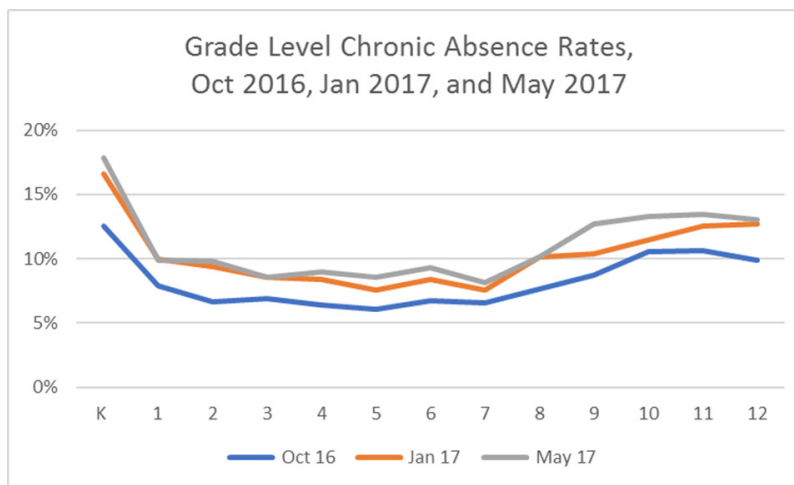


*It is important to note that these chronic absence rates reflect full day absences only. The exclusion of partial-day absences from chronic absence calculations, per state guidelines, results in a conservative estimate of chronic absenteeism, particularly at high schools where students are most likely to miss classroom periods.*

### 5.4 Chronic absence rates varied similarly by grade throughout the year.

Figure 5.4 illustrates that chronic absence rates varied similarly by grade throughout the 2016-2017 school year, with Kindergarten, grade ten, and grade eleven experiencing the highest rates in October, January, and May.

**Figure 5.4** Grade Level Chronic Absence Rates, Oct 2016, Jan 2017, and May 2017

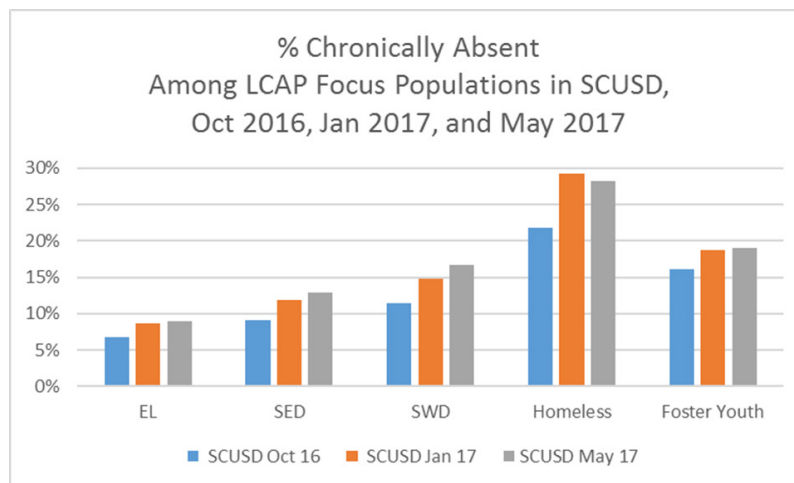


While chronic absence rates increased across all grades between October and January, rates increased especially sharply in grades nine and ten between January and May.

### 5.5 Chronic absence rates varied across Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) focus populations

Figure 5.5 depicts chronic absence rates districtwide across three time points (October 2016, January 2017, and May 2017) for the following LCAP focus populations: English Learners (EL), Socio-Economically Disadvantaged students (SED), and Students With Disabilities (SWD), homeless students, and students in foster care. All focus populations experienced increasing rates of chronic absenteeism as the year progressed, with homeless students chronically absent at nearly twice the rate of others.

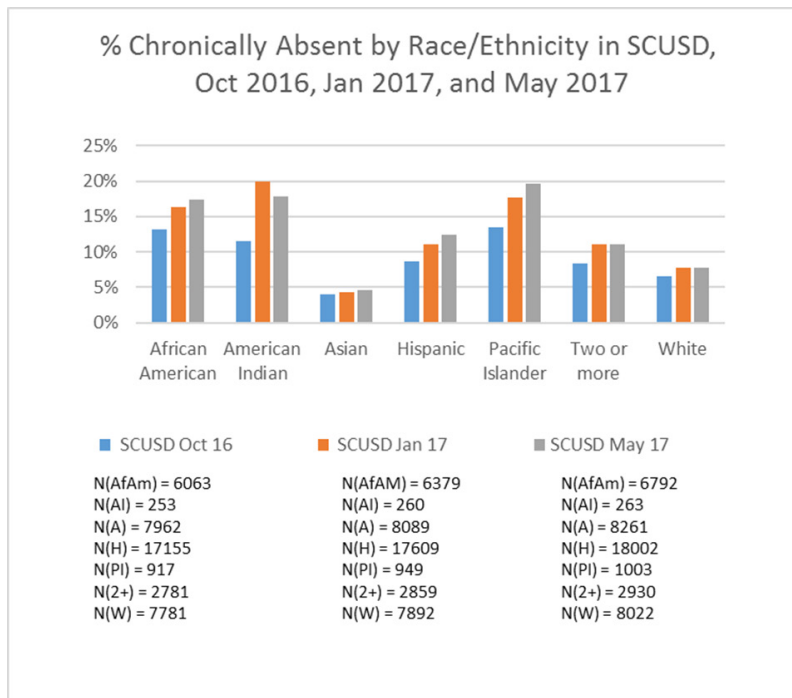
**Figure 5.5** Percentage of Students Chronically Absent Among LCAP Focus Populations in SCUSD: Oct 2016, Jan 2017, May 2017



### 5.6 Chronic absence varied by race/ethnicity districtwide, with Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and African American populations experiencing the highest rates of chronic absenteeism.

Although Pacific Islander and American Indian total student populations in 2017 are relatively small in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups (N (Pacific Islanders) = 1003, and N (American Indian/Alaskan Native) = 263), they are chronically absent at high rates.

**Figure 5.6 % Chronically Absent by Race/Ethnicity in SCUSD, Oct 2016, Jan 2017, and May 2017**

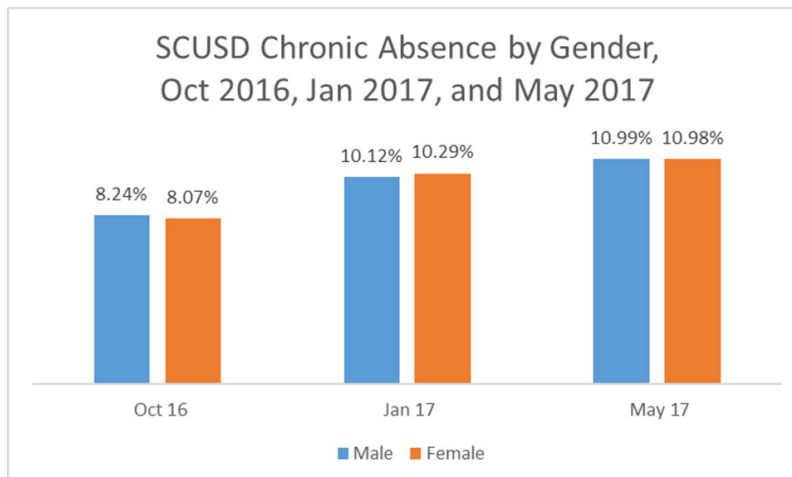


African Americans are the fourth largest racial/ethnic group in the district (N (Black/African American) = 6792) and are also chronically absent at a comparatively high rate.

**5.7 District chronic absence rates did not vary widely by gender.**

Overall district chronic absence rates were similar among students designated male and female. Chronic absence rates by gender within individual school sites might have greater variation due to more localized population trends.

**Figure 5.7 SCUSD Chronic Absence by Gender, Oct 2016, Jan 2017, and May 2017**



## CONCLUSION

Chronic absenteeism is a continuing problem within Sacramento City Unified School District. High rates of absenteeism in Kindergarten and high school in 2016-2017 reflect a consistent pattern from year to year (Erbstein and Shwartz Olagundoye 2016). Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, and homeless students are chronically absent at comparatively high rates. Many CALC sites are making strides toward addressing chronic absenteeism. However, the persistent nature of this challenge suggests the need for sustained and focused attention, action and assessment by the district, community partners, and school sites to support and encourage every child to attend school every day.

# UC DAVIS

## CENTER FOR REGIONAL CHANGE

Nancy Erbstein, Ph.D.  
nerbstein@ucdavis.edu



Jacqueline Rodriguez, LCSW  
jacqueline-rodriguez@scusd.edu

