Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) schools, students, and the community as a whole are paying a high price for chronic absence. Across the district[1] more than 1 in 10 enrolled students, 5020 young people, were chronically absent in the 2010-2011 school year. These rates vary — and in some cases are much higher — across particular populations, neighborhoods, and schools. As a result, schools are missing out on millions of dollars of funding each year, student learning is likely compromised, and broader social costs are accruing. These findings suggest four types of next steps: (1) organize to use data effectively, (2) identify attendance barriers, (3) build partnerships to eliminate attendance barriers, and (4) promote attendance. These steps comprise a broad framework for action; detailed plans must emerge from a combination of local stakeholder insights and lessons-learned from other schools and communities engaged in addressing chronic absence.[2]

(1) Organize to Use Data Effectively

School sites and the district office currently collect the data needed to identify chronically absent students. However, these data are not tracked, analyzed and disseminated in ways that facilitate action on the part of district and school leaders and other community stakeholders.

Important adjustments include:

- Track attendance in ways that enable analysis and reporting of chronic absence over time for the district, schools, and individuals;
- Track chronic absence rates for individual students and schools and share that multiple times per year with school leaders;
- Present regularly analyses of chronic absence in ways that facilitate engagement of potential community supports for students and families;
- Allocate adequate staff time at the district and school sites to analyze and act upon chronic absence data;
- Provide professional development to school leaders on approaches to analyzing and employing their student data to address chronic absence; and
- Implement accountability mechanisms that require timely attention to attendance problems.

(2) Identify Attendance Barriers

The analyses presented in this set of briefs suggest that the nature of key barriers (and combinations of barriers) to attendance may vary across individual students, grade-levels, populations and places. Additional quantitative and spatial data analyses are needed to identify these barriers. It is equally important for schools and community partners to engage young people, parents and other caretakers, and "front line" youth workers in identifying attendance barriers.

These steps comprise a broad framework for action. Detailed plans must emerge from a combination of local stakeholder insights and lessons-learned from other schools and communities engaged in addressing chronic absence.

Key steps include:

- Build a systemic approach to engaging chronically absent students and their caretakers in identifying attendance barriers, designed to account for factors that may impede their engagement with schools;
- Build a systematic approach to assessing patterns of attendance barriers across populations and places.

(3) Build Partnerships to Eliminate Attendance Barriers

Schools are central to eliminating attendance barriers: they have access to students and caretakers, access to student data, staff-members with great insight into student experience, and the ability to implement policies and practices that either facilitate or impede attendance. However, schools are unlikely to have the capacity — in terms of financial resources, knowledge and networks, and authority — to address all attendance barriers alone.

Some solutions must be found beyond school walls, for example in regional transportation planning, faith-based organizations and ethnic networks with key relationships and cultural capacity, housing, health and social welfare agencies, and initiatives led by youth, community-based organizations, and/or businesses.[3] Building, and building upon existing, school-family-community-regional partnerships in a focused manner to address attendance barriers will likely be a key component of a successful strategy to eliminate chronic absence.

(4) Promote Attendance

Beyond identifying and eliminating attendance barriers, schools and their community partners must also focus on encouraging school attendance. Next steps should include:

- Early outreach to students and families with "unsatisfactory" attendance aimed, and
- School and community practices that foster a culture of attendance and engagement.[4]

Fortunately SCUSD, Sacramento and the Capital Region are rich in resources. All Sacramentans bear the costs of chronic absence, and therefore all have a stake in identifying and eliminating barriers to school attendance.

Endnotes:

[1] For the purpose of this calculation we excluded attendance data for students in Grade 13 (students taking an additional year to complete high school) and with School code = "Home/Hospital;" we were unable to include data for students attending John Morse Therapeutic Center and Yav Pem Suab Academy.

[2] For example, AttendanceWorks (www.attendanceworks.org) is a state and national initiative focused on addressing chronic absence.

[3] For example, by adopting a community schools approach, Grand Rapids, MI has employed community partnerships to provide outreach and case management for students with poor attendance; in response chronic absence has decreased and student achievement has increased (http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/grand-rapids/). Check and Connect sites make use of paid, trained mentors to work with students and their families when students show signs of disengagement from school (http://checkandconnect.org).

[4] For example, in New York City school-wide incentives, use of data and mentoring for students at risk of chronic absence have increased attendance and reduced chronic absence in pilot elementary and middle schools (http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/new-york-city/).