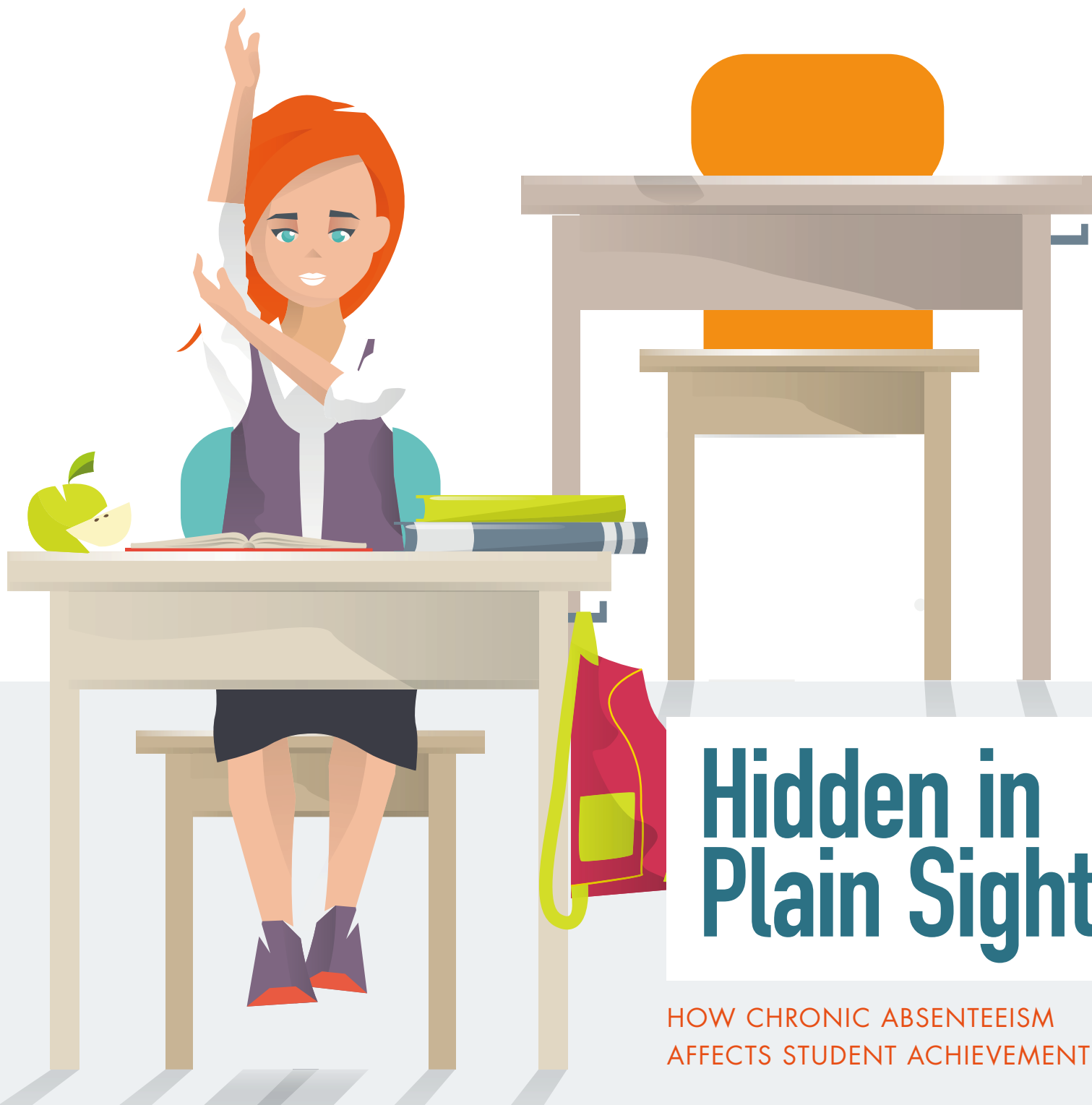


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Hidden in Plain Sight

HOW CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AFFECTS STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



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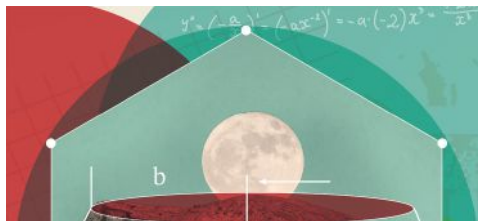
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Hidden in Plain Sight

HOW CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AFFECTS STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

In 2006, Hedy Chang received a call that would change the direction of her career. Ralph Smith, senior vice president at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, was mining for reasons that about 67 percent of children nationwide, and 80 percent of those from low-income families, were not reading at the expected level by the end of third grade. He wondered how much student attendance contributed to the issue. Chang set out on a quest for data addressing chronic absences in schools — and found there was none.

BY KIMBERLY SELLERY



With support from the Casey Foundation, Chang assembled a team to conduct an analysis of local data from nine communities throughout the U.S. on student attendance patterns, to review relevant literature and to gather information about promising practices and programs, resulting in one of the nation's first research-based reports on chronic absenteeism. This work, and a partnership with Smith's new Campaign for Grade-level Reading, led to the creation of Attendance Works, a national and state initiative that promotes awareness of the important role that school attendance plays in achieving academic success.

"Over time, we figured out that chronic absenteeism was a completely overlooked issue that was, in fact, having an association with poor academic performance, especially with the lowest-income students. It effected about one out of 10 kids," said Chang. "No one ever realized it was an issue; it was completely hidden in plain sight. Once I crunched the numbers for some districts that had 30 percent of their kids chronically absent, I realized this isn't just a little issue, this is a huge issue."

Thanks in part to the research and focus of these two organizations, a positive shift is happening in many California schools where the focus on average daily attendance is giving way to a focus on chronic absences. Focusing solely on ADA data often masks an underlying problem with chronic absenteeism. For example, in a school with 200 students that has a 95 percent ADA, 30 percent of the students could be missing a month of school over the course of the school year. That is 60 students.

A Hidden Epidemic

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days — or just two absences a month when spread over the school year. Such absenteeism is a top indicator of how well a child will perform academically while they are in school. A National Center for Children in Poverty analysis of chronically absent kindergarten students revealed lower subsequent academic performance in first grade than their peers, with reading scores for Latino children the most affected. Among low-income children who often lack the resources to make up for time missed, chronic kindergarten absences translated into lower achievement in fifth grade.

"Chronic absences are one of the earliest signs that a student is not meeting their full potential, and is an early warning sign of potential drop-outs," said CSBA CEO & Executive Director Vernon M. Billy. "By collecting and

A positive shift is happening in many California schools where the focus on average daily attendance is giving way to a focus on chronic absences. Chronic absences take into account each day a student has missed, including excused absences. Missing 10 percent or more of school in a year will cause a child to fall behind, even if the absences are understandable.

acting on data related to absences, schools can help to ensure that students are meeting that goal of graduating ready for career and college. Students can only learn if they show up."

Several state-specific studies have reinforced that chronic absenteeism is one of the earliest indicators for academic failure and dropping out of school. Students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to achieve reading proficiency by third grade. By the sixth grade, chronic absenteeism becomes one of the primary indicators that a student will drop out of high school. By ninth grade, missing 20 percent of school can be a better predictor of whether a student will drop out than eighth grade test scores.

The first national data on chronic absenteeism was released by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights in 2016. The report found that more than 6.8 million students

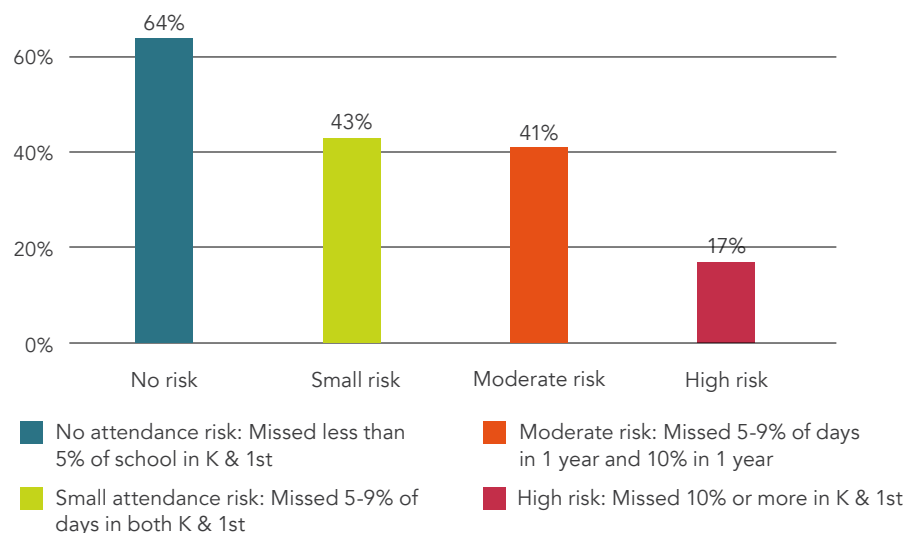
in the nation, or 14 percent of all students, habitually missed school during the 2013–14 school year. This attention, along with the inclusion of chronic absenteeism rates as a reporting requirement in the Every Student Succeeds Act and the chronic absenteeism indicator on the California School Dashboard, has helped bring the issue into the spotlight.

Tracking Chronic Absenteeism

With new attention directed toward attendance gaps, the types of absences incurred by a student have also come under scrutiny. Chronic absences take into account each day a student has missed, including excused absences. Studies show that missing 10 percent or more school days in a year will cause a child to fall behind, even if the absences are understandable. Chang recommends tracking

Students Chronically Absent in Kindergarten and 1st Grade are Much Less Likely to Read Proficiently in 3rd Grade

Percent Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on 3rd Grade ELA Based on Attendance in Kindergarten and in 1st Grade



Source: Applied Survey Research & Attendance Works (April 2011)

all types of absences in order to help identify where problems lie and how best to intervene.

“The types of absences give you clues to your intervention strategies,” explained Chang, while recommending tracking all types of absences in order to help identify problems and solutions. “If a student has all excused absences, you might want to examine if there are health issues going on. If a school has a lot of kids with high rates of suspension, you may have an unhealthy school climate and need to look at that system.”

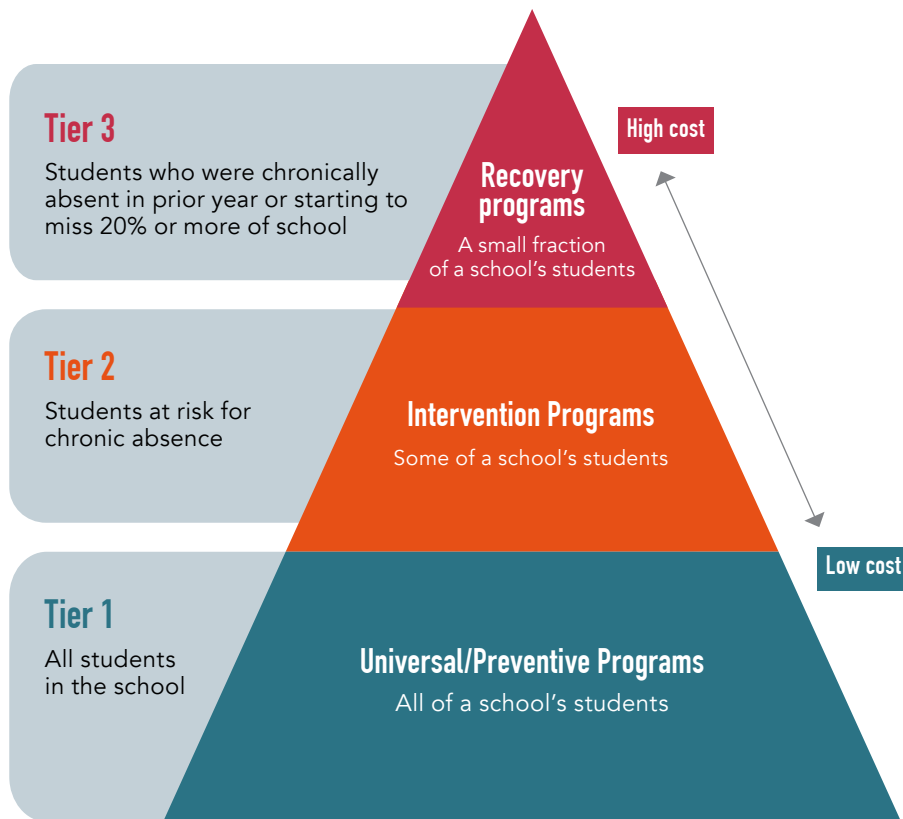
Similarly, examining attendance by subgroup can unpack specific challenges and highlight what works. For instance, Chang says chronic absence rates are often higher in students in special education programs. This could be attributed to a number of factors, including issues with proper placement. In turn, she found that schools with a more inclusive curriculum and multiple supports in place helped ensure special education students made it to school.

“You can use data to identify challenging areas, but also to identify areas that might have some effective practices in place that will help with a particular population that traditionally is disproportionately affected by chronic absenteeism,” said Chang.

Tiered Systems of Support

Improving attendance requires a multi-tiered approach and begins with creating a positive, welcoming and engaging school climate that focuses on attendance. Tier 1 is the foundation and includes universal strategies that support attendance for every student.

Increased Attendance Involves a 3-Tiered Approach that Fits with Most Reform Efforts



Graphic courtesy of Attendance Works



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These strategies center on educating students and their families about the importance of attendance for boosting student achievement. The tiered approach also creates a system that recognizes improved attendance, monitors absences and sets attendance goals.

The Lawndale Elementary School District has been applying the tiered system to improve attendance for more than five years, and has seen great success. Chronic absence rates for K–5 students in Lawndale ESD decreased from 9 percent in the 2009–10 school year to 4 percent in the 2015–16 school year. Director of Student Support Services Jorge Arroyo credits the change to a significant culture shift in thinking about attendance.

“You need to have an attendance-growing culture at your school, and it starts with training front office staff on how to respond to absences. If a parent calls to tell you their child is absent and the staff member tells them to just bring a note when they return — well, what the parent heard is that it is OK to be absent, all I need to do is take a note,” said Arroyo. “You have to train staff to say the right things like, ‘We are going to miss your child, I know the teacher was looking forward to having them in the class.’”

Arroyo found that many attendance problems resulted from a lack of information provided to parents in the district. Each school in the district now begins the year with a focus on attendance messaging. Parents are informed about the importance of regular attendance and how it affects student achievement, and are made aware of the state’s attendance laws. Notices are sent home with children and passed out at back-to-school night, and events are held at different schools to amplify the messaging.

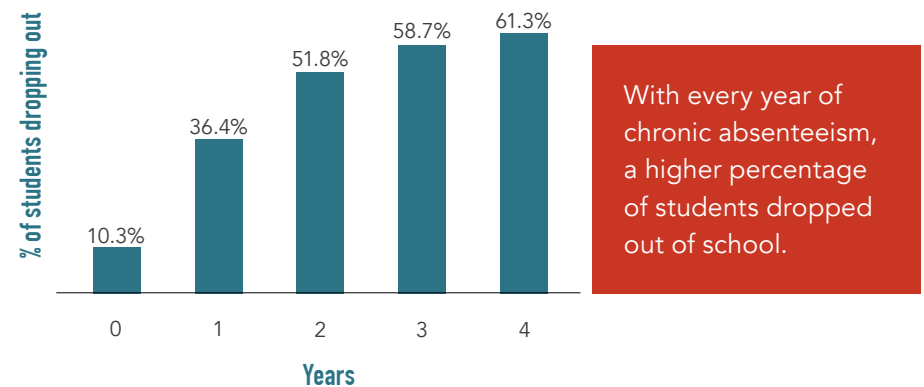
“We educate the parents by educating the students,” said Arroyo. “All of our school sites have a monthly positive attendance event that involves a fun reward for kids in the class with the highest ADA, for example. The kids get excited about that ... and can influence their parents to make a better decision.”

Identification and Targeted Intervention

Each of Lawndale’s schools has an attendance review team in place. The teams meet regularly to review attendance data and identify children that need further intervention. Once a student is identified as habitually missing school, the team sets up a parent meeting to understand the root cause and explain the connection between absences and achievement. If the absences are related to specific issues, like health or transportation,

The effects of chronic absence on dropout rates are cumulative

Proportion of students dropping out by number of years the student was chronically absent from 8th–12th grades



Source: <http://www.utahdataalliance.org/downloads/ChronicAbsenteeismResearchBrief.pdf>

Improving attendance requires a multi-tiered approach and begins with creating a positive, welcoming and engaging school climate that focuses on attendance. Tier 1 is the foundation and includes universal strategies that support attendance for every student.

the attendance team works with the student and parents, sometimes pulling in help from a partnering community organization with expertise, which can help provide services related to the causal issue.

Partnering with community organizations and using community resources has also helped the Sacramento City Unified School District tackle its chronic absentee issues. In 2012, SCUSD began working with Nancy Erbsstein, assistant research faculty member in the University of California, Davis’s Department of Human Ecology and affiliated faculty member of the UC Davis Center for Regional Change. The partnership provided SCUSD with the additional capacity for data collection and analysis necessary to reduce chronic absences in the district.

“One important finding is that chronic absenteeism is a silent issue. It’s not anybody’s pet program, it’s not ‘glamorous’ and that presents a real challenge,” said Erbsstein. “But it’s an important foundational issue for schools; at the end of the day, none of the reforms or curricula are going to have an impact if kids aren’t in school. I think it’s a really important step that the system itself [through the California School Dashboard] is going to be addressing chronic absenteeism — hopefully it will come to be considered under

everybody’s purview. It not only involves school staff and leadership, but also needs to involve the school communities and local governance to eliminate chronic absence issues, especially since we know we need to be engaging cultural and institutional factors — big picture factors that contribute to family instability like housing and transit and the like.”

With the partnership, SCUSD improved their attendance policies and practices, accessed relevant research, built internal capacity and began to reduce chronic absence rates at the schools involved in the Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative. Their work, supported by The California Endowment and Sierra Health Foundation, has generated a series of briefs aimed at quantifying and analyzing the problem, and pilot programs to reduce chronic absenteeism in the SCUSD district and elsewhere.

“One of the big things we have done is building systems within the school sites and developing attendance teams that look at the data,” said Victoria Flores, director of student support and health services for SCUSD. “The teams consist of the attendance clerk and a parent advisor, especially if they have the language and cultural background of a student

Continued on page 30

experiencing attendance issues, working with groups like City Year and anybody who is on that campus who can support that work.”

As part of this effort, Sacramento schools developed strategies to address excessive excused and unexcused absences and then reached out to the entire cohort of chronically absent students. Two schools in the Learning Collaborative, an elementary and a K-8 school, experienced improved attendance for more than 80 percent of chronically absent students, and a third elementary school improved attendance for nearly 30 percent of chronically absent students.

Teachers and school leadership are essential to the Tier 1 and Tier 2 focus on creating a welcoming school environment for students and taking action when a student is absent. Tier 3 centers on the most vulnerable students who face serious hurdles to getting to school and may be involved in foster care or the juvenile justice system. To reach them, Tier 3 offers individual interventions and support for students and families from a district’s student support division, public agencies and the courts.

At Lawndale ESD, Tier 3 involves the Student Attendance Review Board, or SARB, composed of district representatives, local law enforcement and representatives from community health and social service organizations. While some SARBs are used for punitive purposes, Arroyo shifted the Lawndale review board toward one of support and getting to the root issues — an initiative that has enabled chronically absent students to turn their attendance around. In one case, the review board met with a single father whose children were tardy to school more often than not. Behind the closed doors of the meeting, it was revealed that the father was under house arrest, and his ankle monitor was turned off from 8:30–9 a.m. to allow him to get to work. However, school started at 8:30 a.m. The SARB wrote a letter to the judge explaining the situation, and the man’s ankle bracelet was turned off earlier to allow time for him to drop his children off at school.

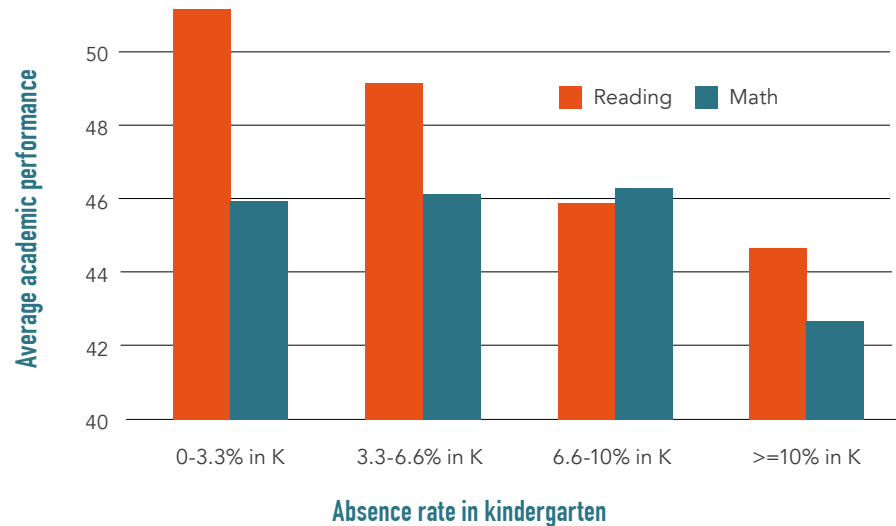
“The majority of our kids that are chronically absent signal an unmet need, and by addressing attendance and having an attendance-growing culture, you can address those needs,” said Arroyo.

Supporting Your District’s Attendance Efforts

While the work to tackle individual cases of chronic absenteeism happens at schools, school district leaders are in an especially good position

The Long-Term Impact of Chronic Kindergarten Absence is Most Troubling for Poor Children

5th grade math and reading performance by K attendance for children living in poverty. Academic performance was lower even if attendance had improved in 3rd grade.



Source: ECLS-K data analyzed by National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP)
Note: Average academic performance reflects results of direct cognitive assessments conducted for ECLS-K.

“One important finding is that chronic absenteeism is a silent issue. It’s not anybody’s pet program, it’s not ‘glamorous,’ and that presents a real challenge. But it’s an important foundational issue for schools; at the end of the day, none of the reforms or curricula are going to have an impact if kids aren’t in school.”

— Nancy Erbstein, assistant research faculty member, University of California, Davis

to adopt a chronic absence policy and regularly monitor attendance data. Chang advises school boards to ask for chronic absence data on a quarterly basis, both by school site and specific student group. The board should review the data and ask schools for their plan to address the issue.

“The board can make sure all schools will be provided with attendance messaging toolkits,” explained Chang. “Schools with a certain percentage of absences will get partnered with a community agency that can help with a mentoring program, or make sure those that have high levels of absences have better access to the district’s school-based health services.”

Erbstein, of the Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative, concurs that asking for data and

awareness can advance advocacy. She added, “School boards can make sure there is access to school-based health and counseling services that can be used to address attendance barriers. School boards can also help by cultivating partnerships with community agencies to help ensure that the systems — health, transportation, social services, law enforcement/courts, employment, planning and community-based organizations — are aligning their activities to support school attendance.”

School boards can also address chronic absenteeism in their district’s Local Control and Accountability Plans. Boards are encouraged to assess funding, staffing and other resources

Continued on page 34

used to track attendance and implement prevention and intervention strategies. District and county office of education staff too can develop systems to track patterns of chronic absence to high rates at individual campuses and among student subgroups. Chronic absentee data was collected for the first time as a performance indicator in California, beginning with the 2016–17 school year. This data will be available this fall, and will be fully incorporated into the California School Dashboard — including a color-ranking — in fall 2018.

“Fortunately here in Lawndale, I have a superintendent and board that believe in the data, and believe we can work together to address chronic absenteeism,” said Arroyo. “I think the support of district leadership is crucial. Lawndale now designates funds with the LCAP for attendance improvement measures. Success breeds success, and I think the board has seen the progress we have made without any budget, so now they have given more funding to these programs.” **CS**

Kimberly Sellery (ksellery@csba.org) is managing editor for *California Schools*.

Resources to Help Improve Attendance

CSBA Resources
www.csba.org/ChronicAbsence

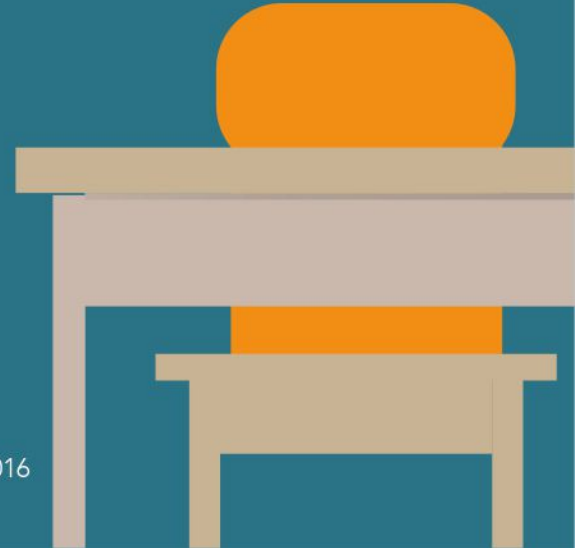
These resources include a sample policy on chronic absenteeism and truancy, a policy brief and a fact sheet.

Attendance Works
www.attendanceworks.org

Chronic Absence
Learning Collaborative
goo.gl/trNUor

The Campaign for
Grade-Level Reading
<http://gradelevelreading.net>

Report: In School +
On Track 2016
<https://oag.ca.gov/truancy/2016>



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