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JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER *for Youth and Their Communities*

Truancy and Chronic Absence in Redwood City

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Background

When students are not in school, they miss the opportunity to grow academically, socially, and emotionally. These skills are critical for continued success in school, in the community, and onward into adulthood. Students with low attendance have been shown to be at heightened risk of high school dropout, as well as other potentially deleterious behavior (Allensworth & Easto, 2007; Balfanz, Durham, & Plank, 2008). For these reasons, the issues of truancy – when students have repeated, unexcused absences – and chronic absenteeism – when students repeatedly miss school for any reason – are receiving increased attention in communities, schools, and with parents. While truancy has been a public concern for many years, the issue of chronic absence has received increased attention in recent years. National and state level campaigns have brought awareness to the role of school attendance on student achievement and academic success. One of these initiatives, Attendance Works, has produced and contributed to numerous reports highlighting student attendance issues and chronic absence in particular (Attendance Works, 2012). The California State Superintendent of Public Instruction also has spoken out about the need to focus on student attendance and hosted a policy forum of experts on chronic absence (California Department of Education, 2011). Connected to these efforts, the California legislature formally defined the term "chronic absence" for the first time ever in 2010 through SB1357 (Steinberg).

At the request of the Redwood City 2020 Cabinet, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University conducted an analysis to study truancy and chronic absenteeism among Redwood City students. Through the Youth Data Archive (YDA) – a JGC initiative that links administrative data on individual youth across settings to collectively examine questions that agencies could not answer alone – we linked data from Redwood City School District (RCSD), Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD), and San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA). With these data, we examine the extent to which truancy and chronic absenteeism are present in the greater Redwood City area, and to explore the causes, consequences, and correlates of absenteeism that may be present in the community. The analysis focuses on two areas:

1. **The extent of the problem**: How many and what percent of students are chronically absent or truant? What are the demographic characteristics of these students? How has the arc of the problem changed over time?
2. **Ways in which this affects students**: What are the causes and consequences of absenteeism in the local area? What demographic characteristics and other factors are

correlated with students' absenteeism? What are longitudinal outcomes for students with absenteeism issues? What interventions exist to assist these students?

Key findings from this analysis include:

- Kindergarteners had the highest rates of chronic absence in the two school districts, which may point to the need for interventions targeted both at students entering school for the first time and their parents.
- Students who were chronically absent were more likely to repeat their chronically absent behavior in subsequent grades, underscoring the importance of early intervention.
- Missing school had a significant negative effect on California Standards Test (CST) percentiles in both math and English Language Arts (ELA) for students in grades 3 through 8; as well as on Grade Point Average (GPA) in high school students.
- For students in grades 3 through 12, middle and higher achieving students are at greatest risk of academic decline due to chronic absence.

What it Means to be Truant or Chronically Absent

A "truant" is a legal term defined in the California Education Code as any student who is required to attend school full-time and who has three unexcused absences during the school year, regardless of whether they miss a full day or a period of 30-minutes or more in a day (EC Section 48260 (a)). The Education Code also outlines a set of steps that schools and districts are required to implement once a student is identified as truant (EC Section 48264.5), including notification of a student's parents, sending the student to an after school study program, referring the student to a School Attendance Review Board (SARB), and placing the student under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. Penalties for truancy range from performing community service to paying a fine or having driving privileges revoked.

"Chronically absent" was codified by the California legislature in 2010 through SB1357 (Steinberg) as a student who is absent for any reason (excused or unexcused) for at least 10% of the school year, or approximately 18 days (EC Section 60901(c)). Chronic absence can be masked by high levels of Average Daily Attendance (ADA). For example, a school with 100 students may report 5 students absent on any given day, resulting in 95% ADA. This statistic does not reveal if the absences were many students missing school infrequently or if it was the same 5 students missing day after day. When chronic absenteeism occurs at the elementary level, it is considered to be "early chronic absenteeism." This distinction is important because young children generally miss school with their parents' consent, thus indicating a need to include parents in absenteeism solutions. Also, missing school during the early grades has been found to have a negative effect on students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes later in school (Chang & Romero, 2008); addressing absenteeism early may mitigate these outcomes.

Although there is a formalized process for tracking and responding to student truancy, chronic absenteeism is not typically measured or tracked and is therefore not well understood. The new provision in the Education Code, in addition to defining "chronically absent," provides for the inclusion of chronic absence rates in the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) so that schools may report these, though these figures have not yet become available. Because there is no formalized process for handling chronic absenteeism in California, or even a mandate to handle it, teachers and administrators must define for themselves their thresholds for intervention and determine if any preventative or support measures are warranted to address the issue.

Still, there are a number of programs designed to reduce early chronic absenteeism in place in schools and districts across the nation, which are discussed later in this brief.

How Many Students are Truant or Chronically Absent at RCSD and SUHSD?

For this analysis we included students currently attending RCSD and students currently enrolled in SUHSD who matriculated from RCSD to enable a longitudinal analysis. Approximately 30% of SUHSD students came from a RCSD school; when we refer to SUHSD we are referring to these students exclusively. Between the 2006-07 and 2010-11 school years, as many as 4,340 students were truant in both RCSD and SUHSD (Exhibit 1). The number of truant students has increased as the student population of the school districts has grown over time. At the elementary level, the truancy rate rose from 25% to 30% during the six-year period. In high school, the truancy rate remained fairly stable during the same time period, though at a much higher rate, fluctuating between 66% and 69%. Students were much more likely to be absent without a parent's consent in the upper grades where they were likely to be responsible for getting themselves to school.

Exhibit 1: Number and Percent of Students Truant

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
RCSD					
Number	1,838	1,687	2,052	2,527	2,601
Percent	25%	24%	27%	30%	30%
SUHSD					
Number	1,600	1,778	1,734	1,776	1,739
Percent	68%	69%	67%	68%	66%
Total Truant	**3,438**	**3,465**	**3,786**	**4,303**	**4,340**

Notes: Truancy includes students who have three unexcused absences of 30 minutes or more.

Between these same school years, the number of chronically absent students[1] fluctuated from 550 to 780 in RCSD and was stable at about 260 in SUHSD (Exhibit 2). Chronic absence rates were steady over the past six years at RCSD, fluctuating between 7% and 9%. At the high school level, chronic absence rates were similar (10%) during the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years (see Note in Exhibit 2). In the most recent school year, 950 students in both districts missed at least 18 full days for both excused and unexcused reasons. It is to be expected that chronic absence rates were significantly lower than truancy rates, as the threshold for being chronically absent is much higher than for truancy. Students must be absent 18 full days for any reason to be chronically absent compared to three, 30-minute, unexcused periods for truancy.

[1] To more closely approximate the state definition of chronically absent – missing 10% of the school year for any reason – our analysis includes only students who were enrolled in either district for at least 170 days.

Exhibit 2: Number and Percent of Students Chronically Absent

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
RCSD					
Number	604	564	558	782	683
Percent	8%	8%	7%	9%	8%
SUHSD*					
Number	--	--	--	255	267
Percent	--	--	--	10%	10%
Total CA	--	--	--	1,037	950

Notes: Includes both Unexcused and Excused absences.
*At the high school level, we are unable to separate all-day absences from partial-day absences for the 2006-07 through 2008-09 school years, therefore chronic absence rates cannot be calculated for these years.

The rest of this brief focuses on chronically absent students. The threshold for truancy is three unexcused absences during the year, which some may characterize as a low entry point. If we focus on truancy alone, we would not capture a large group of students who are missing a considerable amount of school. Highlighting chronic absence allows us to use a broader definition of absenteeism and to focus on students who are missing a month or more of school per year for any reason, which are the students most at risk of failure in a variety of realms.

Characteristics of Chronically Absent Students

Exhibit 3 on the following page shows the differences in the characteristics of RCSD students by absence category. For example, of the 4,442 students with between zero and five absences, 49% were female and 51% were male. Of the 683 students with 18 or more absences during the school year, 76% were Latino, 17% were White, and 7% were of other races. Compared to those with fewer absences, chronically absent students were more likely to have been English learners (57%), suspended (8%), to have made a school or district transition[2] (30%), and to have been tardy for three or more days (20%). It is important to note that days missed for suspension are included in absence totals, so this finding should be interpreted with caution. Also, according to state law, it is possible for students to be suspended for absenteeism, creating a potentially circular relationship between suspension and absence, but both districts in our analysis reported that they do not use this practice. Chronically absent students were less likely to have a parent who was a college graduate (14%) or to have attended preschool (43%, see Note in Exhibit 3).

In order to see whether distance from a student's home to school made a difference in whether they were chronically absent, we geographically-coded (geocoded) a student's home address and the address of their school to calculate their commute distance. Exhibit 3 shows that students' commute distances were similar across absence categories. Additionally, upon further investigation, we found that commute distance was correlated with students' demographic characteristics and appeared to be an indicator of neighborhood composition rather than students' geographic barriers to traveling.

[2] A student made a school transition if they were at a different school within the district in the previous year or if they were not in the district at all the previous year.

Exhibit 3. Characteristics of RCSD Students by Absence Category, 2010-2011

	All Students	0-5 Absences	6-11 Absences	12-17 Absences	18+ Absences
Gender					
Female	49%	49%	51%	48%	48%
Male	51%	51%	49%	52%	52%
Ethnicity					
Latino	71%	70%	70%	72%	76%
White	21%	21%	22%	20%	17%
Other	8%	9%	7%	8%	7%
Parent Education					
Did Not Complete HS	36%	37%	35%	33%	40%
High School Graduate	37%	34%	38%	46%	43%
College Graduate	24%	26%	25%	18%	14%
Special Education	13%	11%	13%	16%	17%
English Learner	49%	46%	49%	51%	57%
Free/Reduced Price Lunch	51%	52%	47%	50%	52%
Received Detention	6%	6%	6%	7%	7%
Was Suspended	4%	4%	4%	6%	8%
Attended Preschool*	50%	52%	49%	45%	43%
Made a School Transition	24%	22%	25%	27%	30%
Commutes 1+ miles	39%	38%	40%	40%	42%
Commutes 2+ miles	14%	13%	14%	16%	14%
3 or More Days Tardy	6%	3%	6%	11%	20%
Total Students	**8,683**	**4,442**	**2,615**	**943**	**683**
Percent of All Students		**51%**	**30%**	**11%**	**8%**

Notes: Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.

*The preschool figure is for grades 1-3 only (N=3,091; 1,578; 954; 323; 236). The preschool variable used in this table is not complete but was included at the request of partners. Using this variable, we found that about half of RCSD 1st through 3rd graders attended preschool. We know from other studies that about 90% of all RCSD students attended some preschool (Applied Survey Research, 2009). Therefore, this finding should be interpreted with caution, as students who, in our data, are listed as not having attended preschool, may actually have done so.

At the high school level, the differences between chronically absent students and all others appear to be much larger than the differences at the elementary level. Exhibit 4 shows the characteristics of SUHSD students by absence category. Comparing across absence categories, chronically absent students were more likely to have a parent who did not complete high school (39%), to be an English learner (42%), and to have been suspended (32%). Again, this finding regarding suspensions should be interpreted with caution, as outlined for Exhibit 3. Females also appeared more likely to have a high number of absences. Among students with 12 or more absences, females comprised about 56%, compared to students with fewer than 12 absences, where females comprised between 47% and 51%. As we found for elementary and middle school students, high school students' commute distance to school was similar across absence categories and appeared to be an indicator of neighborhood composition rather than students' geographic barriers to traveling. Some categories listed in Exhibit 3 for RCSD students were not available at the high school level.

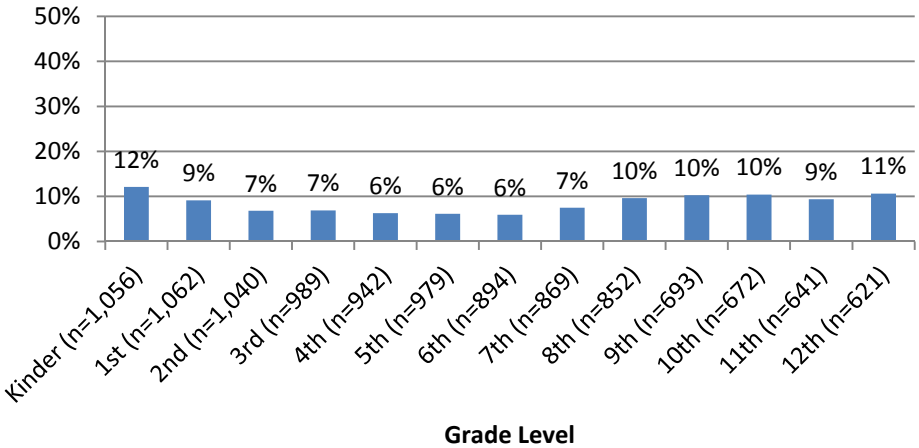
Exhibit 4. Characteristics of SUHSD Students by Absence Category, 2010-2011

	All Students	0-5 Absences	6-11 Absences	12-17 Absences	18+ Absences
Gender					
Female	50%	47%	51%	56%	55%
Male	50%	53%	49%	44%	45%
Ethnicity					
Latino	66%	61%	74%	70%	75%
White	25%	28%	18%	25%	17%
Other	7%	8%	7%	5%	7%
Parent Education					
Did Not Complete HS	28%	25%	32%	32%	39%
High School Graduate	35%	34%	36%	39%	35%
College Graduate	21%	25%	16%	12%	13%
Special Education	12%	10%	13%	16%	21%
English Learner	23%	18%	28%	29%	42%
Free/Reduced Price Lunch	55%	50%	61%	66%	61%
Was Suspended	14%	9%	18%	22%	32%
Made a School Transition	29%	26%	33%	31%	37%
Commutes 1+ miles	73%	74%	74%	67%	71%
Commutes 2+ miles	34%	36%	33%	32%	28%
Total Students	**2,627**	**1,676**	**489**	**195**	**267**
Percent of All Students		**64%**	**19%**	**7%**	**10%**

Notes: Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Chronic absence rates can differ substantially by grade level. During the 2010-11 school year, the highest rates of chronic absence were in the lowest and the highest grade levels. Kindergarteners had the highest rate of chronic absence, with 12% of students missing 18 or more days of school during the year. The grade levels with the next-highest rates were in high school, with 11% of twelfth graders exhibiting chronic absence. Fourth, fifth, and sixth graders had the lowest rates of chronic absence, with just 6% – half the rate of kindergarteners. High rates of chronic absence in kindergarten have also been seen in other locales and nationally (Chang & Romero, 2008; Romero & Lee, 2007).

Exhibit 5. Percent of Students Chronically Absent (18+ Days) by Grade Level, 2010-2011



Notes: Includes all day absences only. Includes Unexcused and Excused absences.

Chronically Absent Students in the Child Welfare and Public Assistance Systems

During the 2010-11 school year, students involved with the child welfare system comprised 16% of students who were enrolled in RCSD or had matriculated from RCSD to SUHSD. These students received a child welfare service (67 students), such as foster care, or received public assistance such as Medi-Cal, CalWORKS, or nutrition assistance from the federal or state government (1,732 students) – the latter commonly referred to as Food Stamps. For these services, both RCSD and SUHSD students are under the purview of the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA).

Students involved with HSA had higher rates of chronic absence, compared to students who were not involved. Eighteen percent of students in the child welfare system were chronically absent, in contrast to 8% of students who were not in the system. This is consistent with other research, given that children in foster care often experience multiple placements over time, emotional instability, and lack of proximity to their original school, among other complications (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002). Ten percent of students receiving public assistance were chronically absent, while 8% of students who were not receiving assistance exhibited the same attendance issues. Among the 683 elementary and middle school students who were chronically absent during the 2010-11 school year, 147 (22%) were involved with either the child welfare or public assistance systems. At the high school level, 37 (14%) of the 267 chronically absent students were involved. There are 25 students in all grade levels who were in both the child welfare or public assistance systems; these students appear in the figures for both programs.

Exhibit 6 on the following page shows the characteristics of students in RCSD and SUHSD who were also receiving public assistance by chronic absence status. Figures for students receiving a child welfare service are not included to preserve anonymity due to low numbers. Among students on public assistance, chronically absent students were more likely to have been suspended (14%), to commute to school more than one mile (56%) or two miles (23%), to have been tardy three or more times at the elementary level (24%), and to have more than five household members listed on their same case (31%) compared to students on public assistance who were not chronically absent. Again, this finding regarding suspensions should be interpreted with caution, as outlined for Exhibits 3 and 4. Chronically absent students receiving public assistance were less likely to have had their case sanctioned for school attendance issues than students who were not chronically absent. Other reasons for case sanctions depend on the type of assistance being received and include fraud, failure of a child to enroll in school, or voluntarily terminating employment, among others.

Persistence of Chronic Absence

To examine the persistence of chronic absence over time, we followed three cohorts of students across multiple school years. The first cohort was in kindergarten in 2006-07 and progressed to fourth grade by 2010-11, the second cohort was in fourth grade in 2006-07 and went on to eighth grade in 2010-11, and the last cohort began in 2008-09 as eighth graders and entered tenth grade in 2010-11. The eighth grade cohort was followed for three years instead of five because high school chronic absence rates are only available in the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years.

It appears that being chronically absent in one year may be an indicator of being chronically absent in subsequent years. Students who were chronically absent in the first year of the analysis were far more

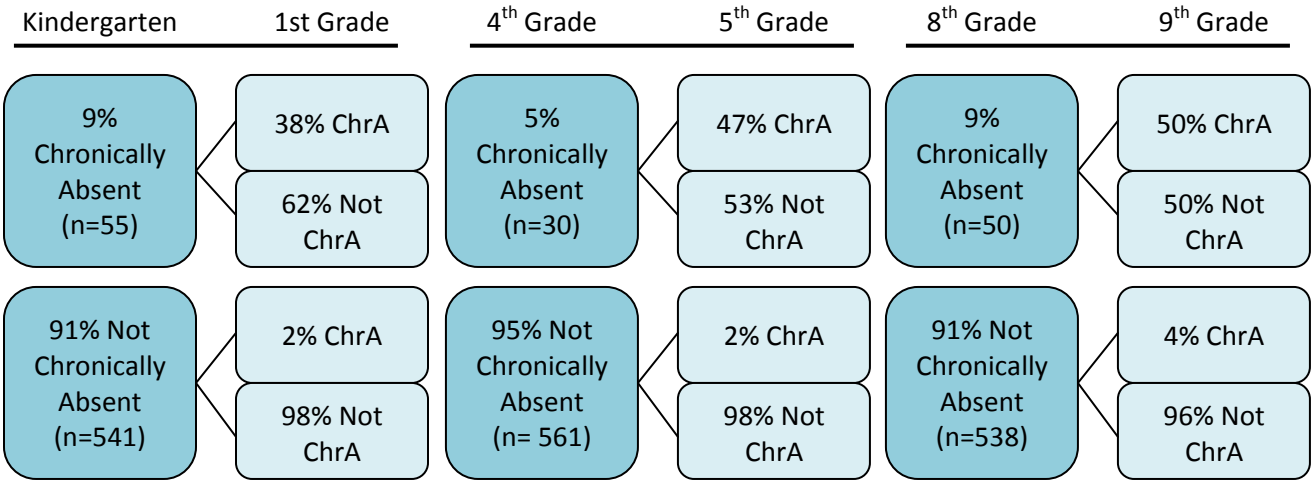
Exhibit 6. Characteristics of RCSD and SUHSD Students Receiving Public Assistance, by Chronic Absence Status, 2010-2011

	0-17 Absences	18+ Absences
Gender		
Female	48%	49%
Male	52%	51%
Ethnicity		
Latino	93%	89%
White	3%	6%
Other	3%	4%
Parent Education		
Did Not Complete HS	58%	58%
High School Graduate	31%	31%
College Graduate	4%	2%
Special Education	16%	24%
English Learner	65%	64%
Free/Reduced Price Lunch	90%	85%
Received Detention*	7%	9%
Was Suspended	6%	14%
Made a School Transition	9%	15%
Commutes 1+ miles	38%	56%
Commutes 2+ miles	14%	23%
3 or More Days Tardy*	5%	24%
Sanctioned for any Reason	76%	73%
For Attendance	54%	36%
Less than 5 Case Members	82%	69%
5 or More Case Members	18%	31%
Total Students	**1,560**	**172**

Notes: Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.
*Elementary and middle grades only (N=1,340; 138).

likely to be chronically absent in the following school year. Exhibit 7 on the following page shows the rate of chronic absence in the first year of each cohort followed by the chronic absence rates of those same students in the second year. In the kindergarten cohort, among students who were chronically absent in kindergarten, 38% went on to be chronically absent in first grade (year two), compared to just 2% of students who were not chronically absent in kindergarten. Forty-seven percent of chronically absent students in the fourth grade cohort were also chronically absent in fifth grade compared to 2% of students who were not chronically absent in fourth grade. Half of the chronically absent eighth grade cohort repeated their absence patterns in ninth grade compared to 4% of students who were not chronically absent in eighth grade.

Exhibit 7. Percent of Students Chronically Absent (ChrA) in Year 2 by Chronic Absence Status in Year 1 (Kindergarten, Fourth Grade, and Eighth Grade Cohorts)



Chronic absence can be a persistent problem for some students. Exhibit 8 shows the percent of students in each cohort who were never chronically absent during the analysis period, those who were chronically absent in one of the analysis years, and students who were chronically absent in two or more years during the period. Most students in each cohort did not experience chronic absence – of students who began the analysis period in kindergarten, 83% were never chronically absent during the time period, as were 86% of the fourth grade cohort, and 84% of the eighth grade cohort. Among the remaining students who were chronically absent in each cohort, about half were chronically absent in just one year and half repeated their chronically absent behavior in two or more years.

Exhibit 8. Percent of Students by Number of Years Chronically Absent (ChrA) in Analysis Period

	Kindergarten Cohort	Fourth Grade Cohort	Eighth Grade Cohort
Never Chronically Absent	83%	86%	84%
Chronically Absent			
Chronically Absent 1 Year	9%	7%	8%
Chronically Absent 2 or More Years	8%	7%	7%
Number of Students	**596**	**591**	**588**

Notes: Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Key Factors Influencing Chronic Absence

There are many reasons a student might be chronically absent. For example: a hectic morning routine at home, potentially involving caring for younger siblings; inability to access reliable transportation; developmental limitations; chronic health issues; or a student's involvement with agencies such as law enforcement or the child welfare system that may overwhelm their ability to care about school. We do not have the means to examine many of these important factors influencing student attendance, though we do have the ability to look at other key components. The previous sections highlight the areas in which chronically absent students differ from students in other absence categories, but do not show how large of a role each characteristic plays in a student's chronic absence status. We use regression analysis to isolate the role each component plays in whether a student is chronically absent.

At both the elementary and high school levels we found that the largest, statistically significant factor in whether a student was chronically absent was their chronic absence status in the prior year, after controlling for student demographics and other background characteristics. This finding underscores our earlier observation that being chronically absent is an indicator of students being chronically absent in subsequent years. Another sizeable, statistically significant component of being chronically absent in the elementary and middle school grades was whether a student had accumulated three or more tardies during the school year. At the high school level, higher suspension levels were also significantly related to students' chronic absence status. Again, the fact that days missed for suspension are included in absence totals may be confounding these results and they should be interpreted with caution. Other demographic factors were also found to be statistically significant, but the role they played in contributing to a student's chronic absence status was smaller than the factors outlined above. We found that receiving public assistance did not play a significant part in whether a student was chronically absent, though receiving a child welfare service did play a smaller, statistically significant role for elementary and middle school students.

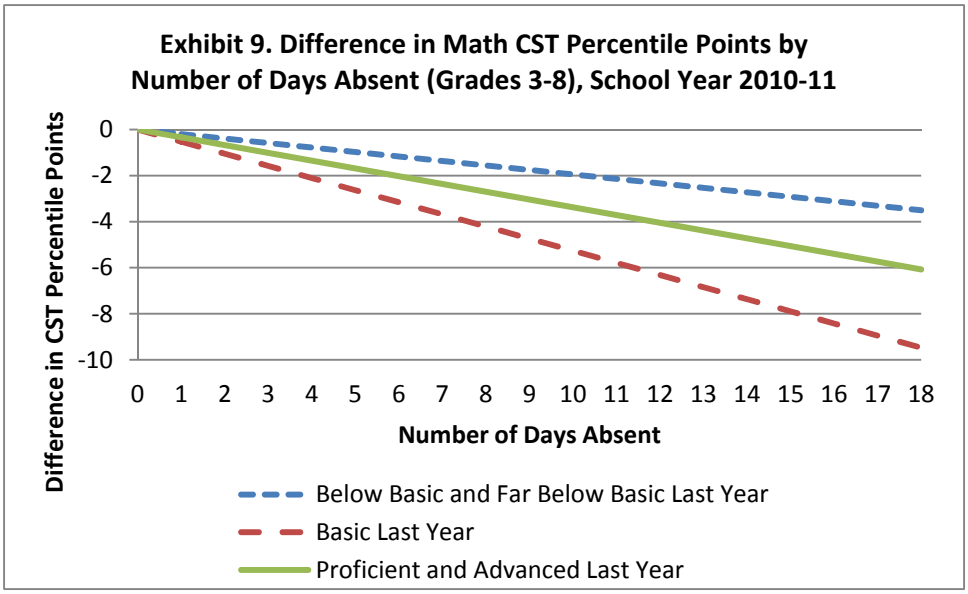
Linking Absence to California Standards Testing and High School GPA

Other studies have shown that missing considerable amounts of school is linked with low achievement on standardized tests (Applied Survey Research, 2011; Philbeck Musser, 2011). In order to examine this link among Redwood City students, we estimated the relationship between the number of days a student was absent and their California Standards Test (CST) percentile in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math. We used percentiles in order to make a student's CST scores comparable across grades and years; percentiles give students' scores relative to their peers in the same grade and year. We standardized the CST scores according to the distribution of scores among all students in California. From our earlier analysis we know that students with a high number of absences were more likely to be at-risk for low achievement – English learners, students with discipline issues, and those whose parents did not complete high school. Therefore, we controlled for these and other demographic characteristics using regression analysis in order to isolate the role of school attendance on CST performance. We also controlled for students' prior year CST achievement; therefore no students were included before third grade, as the CST is first administered in second grade.

We first examined the relationship between all four absence categories (0-5 absences, 6-11 absences, 12-17 absences, 18+ absences) and CST achievement, while controlling for student background characteristics and prior CST performance, in RCSD students. We found that chronic absence (18+ absences) had a statistically significant, negative relationship with CST achievement at the elementary level for both ELA and math. Being in the 12-17 absences category also had a statistically significant, negative effect on CST achievement in math, though not in ELA.

We then examined the relationship between the number of days absent and CST achievement. The number of days absent had a significant negative effect on CST percentiles in both math and ELA at the elementary level, even after taking into account students' background characteristics and prior achievement. The findings in Exhibit 9 show that in math, for students who entered the school year with a Basic CST level from the year prior, chronic absence had the largest negative effect. For these students, being chronically absent (18 days missed) was associated with a decline in CST performance of 9.5 percentile points. Chronic absence had the second largest negative effect for students who began the school year with a Proficient or Advanced math CST level from the year before. For these students, being chronically absent was associated with a 6.1 percentile point decline in CST score, and for those

who began the school year Far Below or Below Basic, chronic absence was associated with a decline of 3.5 percentile points on the math CST. CST percentile declines of any magnitude can move students from one category down a level, for instance from Basic to Below Basic. It is noteworthy that all these declines were statistically significant and occurred after controlling for important correlates to achievement, including demographic and socio-economic background as well as prior year achievement.



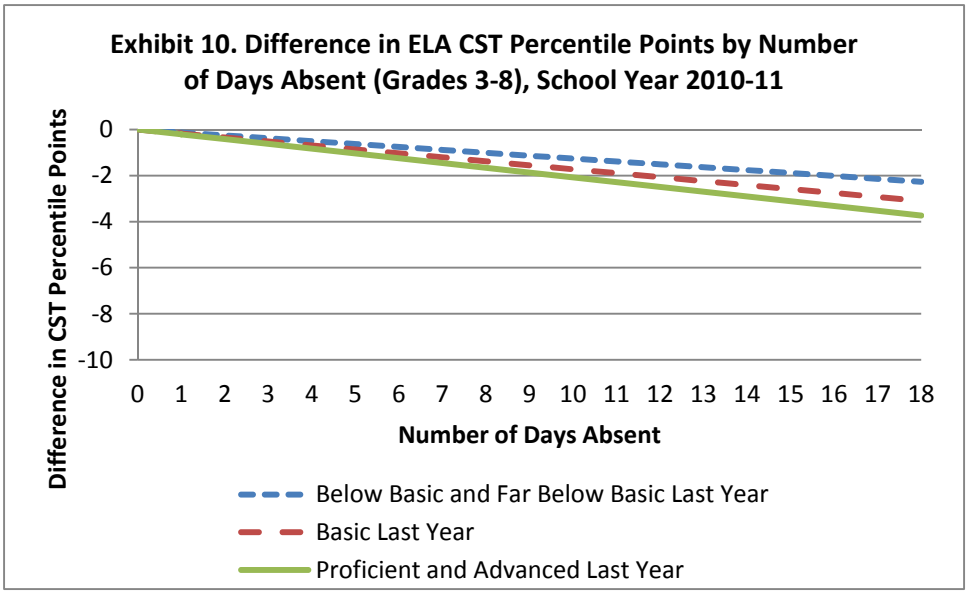


Exhibit 10 reports the same type of analysis for the ELA CST test. Overall, chronic absence plays a smaller role in students' ELA achievement than it did for math, though the students most affected by chronic absence continue to be those who entered the school year having achieved a score of Basic, Proficient, or Advanced on the CST in the prior year. Among those who entered the school year having achieved Proficient or Advanced on the ELA CST in the prior year, chronic absence is associated with a decline in CST performance of 3.7 percentile points. Among those entering the school year having scored Basic in ELA in the prior year, chronic absence is associated with a decline in 3.1 CST percentile points and for those who were Below Basic or Far Below Basic in ELA in the prior year, chronic absence is associated with a decline of 2.3 percentile points.

Missing school is clearly a problem for students in both math and ELA, but appears to be more of a concern for their performance on the math CST. It is important to note that the students who were most affected by chronic absence in grades 3 to 8 were those who were Basic, Proficient, or Advanced during the prior school year. Movement to a lower percentile can move students down a proficiency level in some cases. Even if it does not, these results tell us that on average, students who were not yet Proficient, especially those at the Basic level and were also chronically absent, were not making

forward progress toward proficiency. Those who were Proficient or Advanced in the prior year and chronically absent were at-risk of losing that status due to their absences.

At the high school level, we did not find a strong link between the number of days absent and CST percentiles. For these students, we also examine another measure of academic success, Grade Point Average (GPA). Using GPA, we found a small but statistically significant negative effect of number of days absent on achievement.

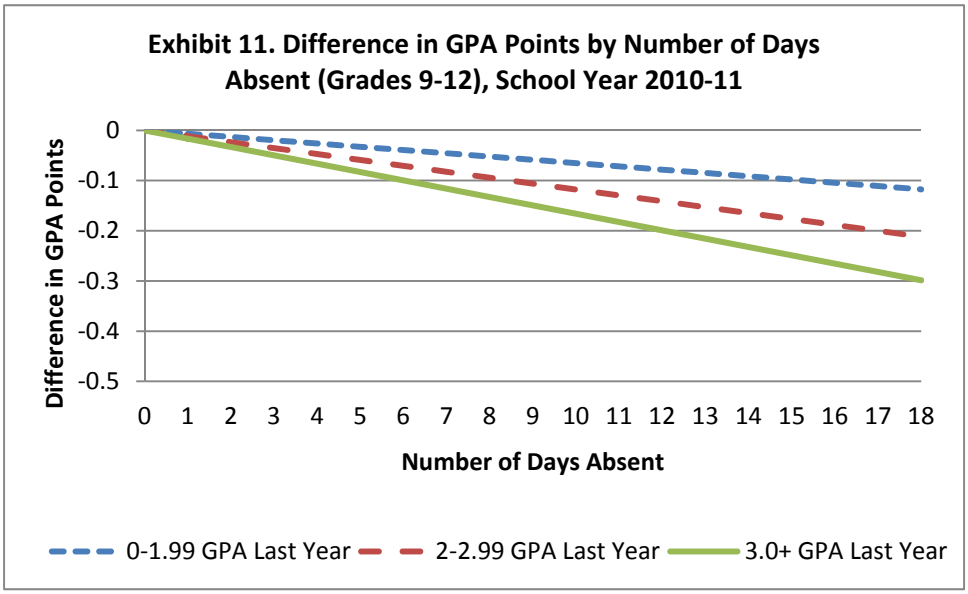


Exhibit 11 shows that students who began the school year as higher achieving were at greatest risk of GPA decline due to chronic absence. Among students who achieved a 3.0 or higher during the previous school year, being chronically absent (18 days) in the current year was associated with a decline of 0.30 grade points on a 4.0 scale. This means that, on average, a student who achieved a 3.0 GPA last year and was chronically absent in the current year would be expected to obtain a 2.7 GPA. For students obtaining between a 2.0 and 2.99 GPA in the previous year, being chronically absent was related to a decline in GPA of 0.21 grade points. Thus, on average, a student who achieved a 2.0 GPA last year and was chronically absent in the current year would be expected to obtain a 1.79 GPA. Among students acquiring a GPA of 1.99 or lower during the previous school year, chronic absence was associated with a decline of 0.12 grade points. Meaning that on average, a student who achieved a 1.5 GPA last year and was chronically absent in the current year would be expected to obtain a 1.38 GPA. For students at both the high school and elementary levels, middle and higher achieving students are at greatest risk of academic decline due to chronic absence.

Research and Policy Implications

The findings from this research are relevant for students, teachers and classrooms, school districts, and to the broader policy landscape. These findings show that chronic absence can be an issue even for school districts with high levels of Average Daily Attendance (ADA), such as RCSD. Chronic absence rates in high school are similar to those found in the elementary and middle grades. This is in contrast to truancy rates, which are far higher in the later grades. Though truancy rates are higher than rates of chronic absence in both RCSD and SUHSD, the relatively low threshold for truancy casts thousands of students into this category and may make it difficult for teachers and administrators to devise interventions that are specific enough to influence students to improve their attendance. Focusing on chronic absence – a smaller group of students who are missing considerable amounts of school – may provide school and district leaders with valuable insight into the characteristics of these students. This insight may allow them to then develop appropriate supports and interventions. These interventions

can happen at the individual (student), setting (schools or classrooms), or system (school district or community) levels. Implementing supports at all three levels is essential to addressing chronic absence in multiple contexts. Additional information on interventions can be found in the accompanying brief, "Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students."(John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, 2012)

District-Level Chronic Absence Data Tracking System

To this end, districts and schools may find it useful to develop systems to identify and track students who are chronically absent. Some districts may already have this capability as part of an Early Warning System (EWS) and state-level efforts in this area are already underway. As mentioned earlier, California State law now includes a provision to collect chronic absence data as an EWS indicator in CALPADS. Also, Attendance Works advocates for schools and districts to track chronic absence in addition to ADA to identify students susceptible to negative outcomes associated with missing excessive amounts of school. In addition to flagging students who are chronically absent, this provides an opportunity to identify students who may be at-risk for becoming chronically absent before they reach that level. A system to identify and track chronically absent students is a necessary precursor to developing individual- and setting-level interventions.

Use of Key Indicators

Findings from this analysis indicate that there are certain key indicators for students with chronic absence, including being chronically absent the prior year, elementary and middle school students accumulating three or more tardies, and high school students who experienced a suspension – though before devising interventions to address suspended students, it will first be necessary to determine if students with excessive absences are being suspended for missing school. With these individual-level indicators in mind, it may be important for teachers and administrators to know whether a student was chronically absent the previous year in order to provide encouragement and additional support to that student as they enter a new school year. Practitioners may also want to track elementary and middle school students' tardiness and provide support to students approaching three tardies. In the case of suspensions, additional assistance may be warranted for high school students returning from suspension so that they continue to show up at school. If districts find that students are being suspended for missing school, it may be necessary to examine the suspension policy, which may be causing students to miss additional instructional time because of suspension after they have already missed a considerable amount of school of their own accord. Any of these measures, in addition to informal interventions already taking place, need to be formalized and tracked at the setting and system level to understand which students are receiving support, their level of effectiveness, and who may still be in need.

The analysis also shows that kindergarteners had the highest rates of chronic absence in the two school districts, which may point to the need for interventions to be targeted at both students entering school for the first time and their parents. Students who were chronically absent were more likely to repeat their chronically absent behavior in subsequent grades, underscoring the importance of early intervention. Additionally, students who missed excessive amounts of school were found to have lower achievement on the math and ELA CST. In messaging to parents of younger students, it may be important to highlight that chronic absence in one year – even in the early grades – often means chronic absence in the following years, and that chronic absence is associated with lower achievement.

A Process for Intervening

Many interventions currently in place in California and nationally are targeted at truancy rather than chronic absence (see below for ideas on adapting these to chronic absence). As discussed earlier, the California Education Code mandates certain steps be taken after a student is identified as truant at both the elementary and high school levels. This process may even rise to the level of the School Attendance Review Board (SARB) or incur fines for students. Once a student reaches the SARB level, the intention is for multiple agencies collaborate with students and families to devise a plan for improving the student's attendance and for providing supports to help the student comply. It is then incumbent upon the student and family to execute that plan. The SARB and school district follow up with the student to see whether their attendance has gotten better. If the student's attendance has not improved, his or her case could be referred to the police department to bring charges against the student or parent, Child Protective Services may open a voluntary case, or his or her case may be sent to the county SARB, among other consequences. In Redwood City, there is a SARB at the elementary level, but not the high school level. High school students can be referred to the county SARB, if necessary.

The Redwood City Police Department (RCPD) also has a Truancy Abatement Program (TAP) in place. The TAP enables personnel at the Redwood City School District office or Sequoia High School[3] to alert the police department if there is a student who is truant. Officers will then attempt to locate the student on the street[4] or in their home and compel them to return to school. Officers may only contact students in plain sight. Students who are contacted are first warned and then issued a citation upon the second contact. A citation is an infraction that is handled in traffic court; a student's police record is not affected. Also, students with multiple citations via the TAP cannot enter the SARB process unless the case is referred by the school district. There is currently no interface between the TAP and SARB. This highlights the need for better coordination between the police and school districts in order to track which students are receiving citations and who may need to be referred to the SARB to receive support and access to interventions. Additionally, schools do not appear to have a formal process for tracking whether truant students were returned to school by law enforcement. Collection of these data could, in itself, act as a point of intervention or support when students return to school.

There are other locales with more severe penalties in place to address truancy, most notably in Baltimore, Maryland, where parents of truant students have received jail time. California also has increased the penalty for parents of truant students, with the passing of SB1317 (Leno) in 2010, which codified "chronic truant" as a student missing 10% or more of the school year for unexcused reasons (EC Section 48263.6). Through this enacted legislation, parents can now also be charged with a misdemeanor and face fines up to $2,000 or receive jail time of up to one year (Penal Code Section 270.1).

To address chronic absence at the elementary level, informal interventions appear to be taking place with individual students at the discretion of teachers and school administrators. These students are typically identified at the classroom or school level after someone notices that they have missed several days during a recent period of time. Teachers and principals may then take it upon themselves to

[3] The other schools in the high school district and some schools in the elementary district are outside of RCPD jurisdiction. The remaining schools in the district have relationships with the appropriate city or county law enforcement agencies. These jurisdictions may or may not have a Truancy Abatement Program in place.

[4] Any student suspected of being truant may be contacted in plain sight, not only those students identified as truant by the schools.

intervene, for example talking to the student or contacting parents, to help the student improve their attendance. At a time when schools are losing personnel, it may be problematic to rely on adult observation to trigger action to address students' attendance issues. Furthermore, informal interventions are insufficient to address chronic absence systematically. A system to track chronic absence in the school setting is necessary to address this. Where absence tracking is already in place, schools and districts may consider taking advantage of existing checkpoints such as student report cards and parent-teacher conferences to monitor absence and talk about attendance with parents. Collecting and reporting chronic absence data at the district level will also be critical in enabling the broader community to understand the extent of the issue.

Along with a system for accurately identifying and monitoring students who are chronically absent comes the need for an intervention process for students. Ideally, this process would be customized to the issue of chronic absence, rather than to truancy. Chronically absent students may not necessarily be truant, missing school for reasons that are sanctioned under the Education Code, and therefore are not in violation of any laws; therefore, police involvement may not be warranted. It will be important for schools and districts to take a close look at any new process to ensure that it is appropriate for chronic absence, or to make adjustments to a process currently in place to address truancy, but which may currently also be informally applied to students who are chronically absent. A formalized, setting- and system-level process would help provide accountability for schools and districts and provide a feedback mechanism in how chronic absence is being addressed and how effectively it is being done.

Examples of Interventions in U.S. Cities

As mentioned earlier, there are a number of programs in place designed to reduce chronic absenteeism in schools and districts across the nation. For example, the Baltimore City Student Attendance Working Group's efforts have resulted in daily attendance tracking in schools, alerts for principals on who is at risk of becoming chronically absent, and attendance teams to help address the causes of absenteeism with both students and families (Chang, Fernandez, Fothergill, & Hernandez, 2010). The New York City Department of Education developed a tool to track student attendance and alert school staff when students are accumulating absences. The Department also implemented a support structure for principals to utilize community resources and government-funded services to assist students with attendance issues (Hauer, White, & Yerneni, 2008). A report from the Center for New York City Affairs revealed a decline in the chronic absence rates of New York City schools by the 2009-10 school year (Center for New York City Affairs, 2011). The City of Grand Rapids, Michigan has developed a Youth Master Plan that outlines a set of recommendations for action, including a goal to increase school attendance. The city is working with community organizations to integrate services within schools to ensure regular student attendance (City of Grand Rapids, 2010).

Conclusion

Findings from this analysis show that kindergarteners had the highest rates of chronic absence in the two school districts, which may point to the need for interventions targeted both at students entering school for the first time and their parents; students who were chronically absent were more likely to repeat their chronically absent behavior in subsequent grades, underscoring the importance of early intervention; and students with excessive absences were found to have lower achievement on both the math and English Language Arts (ELA) California Standards Test (CST). A limitation of this analysis, though, is that we do not have the means to understand *why* students are chronically absent. There is currently no data on the reasons students miss school repeatedly: whether students miss the bus, feel

unsafe at school due to bullying, have frequent asthma attacks, or any one of a multitude of explanations.

As chronic absence gains more attention among families, districts, and other stakeholders, there may be a need for analyses such as the one we have produced here. Many existing studies provide insight into which types of students are more likely to be chronically absent by producing point-in-time counts of students in a grade, school, or district. Others are able to follow students longitudinally to see how chronically absent students fare on standardized tests in later grades. These studies are essential in describing the landscape of chronic absence in multiple contexts. Our study provides another level of rigor to the field by conducting regression analysis that controls for student background characteristics in determining the key factors associated with chronic absence. For example, though students who are English learners may be more likely to be chronically absent, this characteristic may not be the largest factor contributing to their chronic absence status. Regression analysis allows us to determine the magnitude of the relationship between student characteristics and chronic absence and isolate the role played by chronic absence in student outcomes. Though students who are chronically absent are shown to have lower achievement in later grades than students who were not chronically absent, it cannot be said that the sole reason for the gap is absence from school – other factors influence a student's academic outcomes. Conducting regression analysis allows us to capture how much of the gap is due to chronic absence and how much can be attributed to other factors. This type of rigorous analysis provides additional, nuanced information to better inform practitioners and stakeholders when addressing absenteeism in their communities.

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