

## Examining Truancy and Early Chronic Absenteeism in California

When students are not in school, they miss the opportunity to become part of their school community and to grow academically, socially, and emotionally. Students with low attendance have been shown to be at heightened risk of academic failure in later grades and high school dropout, as well as other potentially harmful behavior. For these reasons, the issues of truancy and chronic absenteeism are receiving increased attention among school and community leaders as well as policymakers.

### What are Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism?

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 of 30 minutes or more during the school year (EC Section 48260 (a)). The Code outlines a set of steps that schools and districts are required to take once a student is identified as truant, including parental notification, requiring attendance at a truancy prevention program, and fines (EC Section 48264.5).<sup>1</sup>

Truancy is typically associated with older students, as they are more likely to be unsupervised and have greater opportunity to miss school without parental consent. In contrast, “chronically absent,” while not formally defined or codified, is typically understood<sup>2</sup> to mean that a student was absent (excused or unexcused) for at least 10% of the school year (roughly 18 days), though there is not consensus about this. When chronic absenteeism occurs at the elementary level, it is considered to be “early.” This distinction is important because young children generally miss school with their parents’ consent, thus linking parental involvement with absenteeism solutions.

### Contributors and Correlates

Contributors to truancy are generally grouped into three levels: individual, family, and school. Contributors to early chronic absenteeism generally mirror those of truancy in these three factors, but with an added emphasis on community factors. These contributors, along with a description of outcomes and correlates, are outlined in Table 1 on page 2.

### Responses, Interventions, and Innovations

Research has found that successful responses and interventions to truancy encourage family involvement, use both rewards for attendance and punishment for absenteeism, provide case management for individual students, and utilize a network of community support. Truancy is generally tracked at the school or district level and truancy data can be used to analyze the role truancy plays in individual and community outcomes. For example, new research on truants in Baltimore, Maryland suggests that victims, as well as perpetrators, of violent crime were more likely to be chronically truant (defined as 20 or more absences) during the academic year.<sup>3</sup> Perpetrators appeared to miss significantly more school days than victims.

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description, see the California Department of Education website, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/tr/>.

<sup>2</sup> Chang, H. N., & Romero, M. (2008). Present, Engaged, and Accounted For The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty.

<sup>3</sup> Examination of Youth Violence in Baltimore City, [http://www.baltimorehealth.org/info/2009\\_08\\_31\\_YouthViolenceReport.pdf](http://www.baltimorehealth.org/info/2009_08_31_YouthViolenceReport.pdf)

Table 1: Contributors and Correlates of Truancy and Early Chronic Absenteeism

Contributors to Early Childhood Absenteeism (ECA) and Truancy	
<b>Individual</b>	School commitment, motivation, self-esteem, relationships with other students, gang involvement
<b>Family</b>	Poverty, homelessness, family composition and mobility, substance abuse, lack of reliable transportation, and ineffective parental discipline at home
<b>School</b>	Inappropriate academic placement, lack of positive relationships with teachers, bullying, deficient attendance policies
<b>Community<sup>4</sup></b>	Lack of supports for a positive transition to elementary school (ECA only), weak or few community institutions in distressed neighborhoods, high levels of community violence

  

Outcomes and Correlates	
<b>Early Chronic Absenteeism</b>	Negative effects on students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes later in school and in life
<b>Truancy</b>	High school dropout, poor academic performance, substance abuse, delinquency, early sexual intercourse and teenage pregnancy, and committing assault, property crime, and weapon-related violence

Chronic absenteeism is not routinely measured or tracked and is therefore not as well understood as truancy. There is no prescribed way to handle chronic absenteeism; teachers and administrators are left to devise their own methods to define and deal with students who are chronically absent and determine if any preventative or support measures are warranted. Advocacy groups have attempted to attract attention to this issue; for example, Attendance Counts formed to “build public awareness and political will,” “foster state campaigns,” and “encourage local practice” about the issue of early chronic absence in schools.<sup>5</sup> This three-tiered approach seeks to encourage states to regularly track early chronic absenteeism and also to ensure there are meaningful interventions to address the issue.

## Current Issues

Recently, a heightened level of interest has developed about truancy, with two pieces of legislation introduced in the California State Senate. SB 1148 (Alquist) seeks to codify “chronic truant” as a student with unexcused absences for at least 10% of the school year and for such a designation to be reflected on the student’s permanent record. The current language in the California Education Code outlines steps toward intervention only as far as a student’s sixth unexcused absence. Any new “chronic truant” designation would initiate additional action after a student accumulated roughly 18 unexcused absences during the school year. Another bill, SB 1317 (Leno), would legislate a misdemeanor for parents of a student deemed a “chronic truant,” as well as add additional programs designed to address chronic truancy. The intent of these proposed programs would be to serve as an alternative to a court’s ruling of a misdemeanor.

Another bill, SB 1357 (Steinberg) has been introduced and seeks to codify the definition of “chronically absent” as a student who was absent for at least 10% of the school year for reasons that were both excused and unexcused. The bill also calls for attendance data to be included in the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) so that schools may use these data in early warning systems.

This increased attention at the state level reflects a growing recognition of the need to monitor student attendance in an effort to circumvent the negative outcomes generally associated with truancy and early chronic absenteeism and ultimately to improve outcomes for youth, their families and communities.

<sup>4</sup> Chang & Romero (2008)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.attendancecounts.org/>