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JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER for Youth and Their Communities

Chronic Absence in Redwood City, California Schools

Background

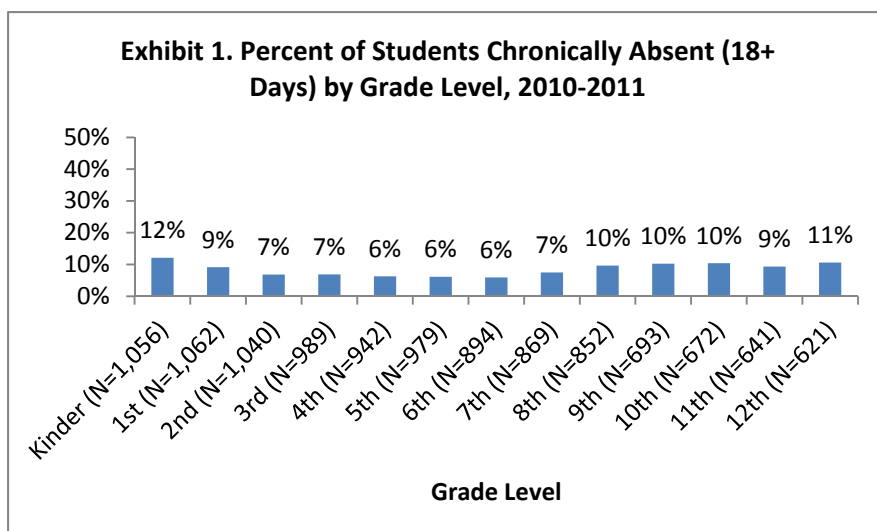
Students with low school attendance are at heightened risk of negative outcomes.¹ Truancy, which involves mostly older students and unexcused absences, has received policy attention for many years, but chronic absenteeism, which can affect students of any age and involves both excused and unexcused absences, has recently received increased attention among communities, schools, and parents. “Chronically absent” was codified by the California legislature in 2010 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)). At the request of the Redwood City 2020 Cabinet – a local collaborative with a mission to improve youth outcomes – the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University conducted an analysis to study chronic absenteeism among Redwood City students. This snapshot examines the characteristics and outcomes of these students using the Youth Data Archive (YDA) to link individual records of students in Redwood City School District (RCSD), Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD), and San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA). With these data, we examined the extent to which chronic absenteeism is present in Redwood City, and explored the contributors to and consequences of absenteeism that may be present in the community.

Findings and Interpretation

During the 2010-11 school year, 8% of RCSD students and 10% of SUHSD students matriculating from RCSD were chronically absent. Chronic absence rates differed substantially by grade level. Exhibit 1 shows that during the 2010-11 school year the highest rates of chronic absence were in kindergarten and twelfth grade. We also found that the largest, statistically significant factor in whether a student was chronically absent was their chronic absence status in the prior year.

¹ Allensworth, E. M., & Easto, J. Q. (2007). *What Matters for Staying On-track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research.; Balfanz, R., Durham, R., & Plank, S. (2008). *Lost Days: Patterns and Levels of Chronic Absenteeism Among Baltimore City Public School Students 1999-00 to 2005-06, Absenteeism Issue Brief*. Baltimore, MD: Baltimore Education Research Consortium.

Missing school also played a role in student academic outcomes. After controlling for background factors, the number of days a student was absent 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. In Redwood City, middle and higher achieving students were at greatest risk of academic decline due to chronic absence.



Notes: Includes all day absences only, both unexcused and excused.

Redwood City students involved with HSA through child welfare or public assistance programs 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 the multiple complications experienced by children in the child welfare system.² Ten percent of students receiving public assistance were chronically absent compared to 8% of students who were not receiving assistance.

From Findings to Action

The findings from this research are relevant for students, parents, teachers, school officials, and policy makers. Kindergarteners had the highest rates of chronic absence, which points to the need for early interventions targeted both to students and their parents. Chronically absent students were likely to repeat their chronically absence in subsequent grades, further underscoring the importance of early intervention. Those with excessive absences had lower achievement on both the math and English Language Arts standardized tests, highlighting the essential role attendance plays in academic outcomes and the importance of communicating this to students and parents. It is important for schools and districts to develop a system for tracking chronic absence information to have accurate data on which to base interventions. The underlying factors influencing students' chronic absence will need to be considered in interventions, as they are diverse – from transportation issues to chronic health problems. Under California law, students may be suspended for absenteeism, a policy that can create even more absence. It may be necessary for districts to examine their suspension policies to rectify this problem. Redwood City partners have already begun to use this analysis to think about and implement strategies to address chronic absence.

² Finkelstein, M., Wamsley, M., & Miranda, D. (2002). *What Keeps Children in Foster Care from Succeeding in School? Views of Early Adolescents and the Adults in Their Lives* New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice