

# LEADING ATTENDANCE IN CALIFORNIA

## A Toolkit for Principals To Address Chronic Absence



### >> INTRODUCTION

**California** principals know from experience and common sense what research confirms: Showing up for class matters. Students can't benefit from investments in high quality instruction and more engaging, rigorous curriculum unless they are in their classroom. As early as the first month of school, chronic absence (missing 10% or just 2 days or more of school) can be an early warning sign of academic trouble, whether a student is in preschool, kindergarten or high school.

Nationwide, an estimated one in 10 students is chronically absent. While California does track precise numbers in middle and high school, a 2014 analysis conducted by California's Attorney General Office found an estimated 250,000 elementary students are chronically absent, with the highest levels in kindergarten.

Whether excused or not, if absences add up and, for many students, the academic consequences are decidedly negative. Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade and are more likely to have poor attendance in later grades. By middle and high school, chronic absence is a proven early warning sign that a student will drop out. This is especially true for those students living in poverty, who need school the most and are sometimes getting the least. In California, principals can make a difference when they:

- A. Cultivate A School-Wide Culture of Attendance**
- B. Use Data To Determine Need for Additional Support**
- C. Take a Team Approach and Develop Staff Capacity**
- D. Advocate for Additional Resources and Improved Policy**

As a principal, you can take these strategies and tailor them to the realities of your own school community and staff. You can find positive, effective positive, preventive approaches to improving attendance before turning to more costly punitive measures. With the right plan in place, you can improve student attendance and with it, raise academic achievement.

### >> ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

The Leading Attendance in California toolkit provides the template, tools and messaging you need to reduce chronic absence in California schools. It also features profiles of principals who are rallying their staffs to improve attendance. This document is just a summary.

Please Go to:  
<http://bit.ly/CAprincipaltoolkit>  
for the full toolkit.

### >> DEFINING TERMS

#### **Chronic Absence**

Students missing so much school they are academically at risk. In California it's defined as missing 10% or more of school in excused, or unexcused absences or due to suspensions.

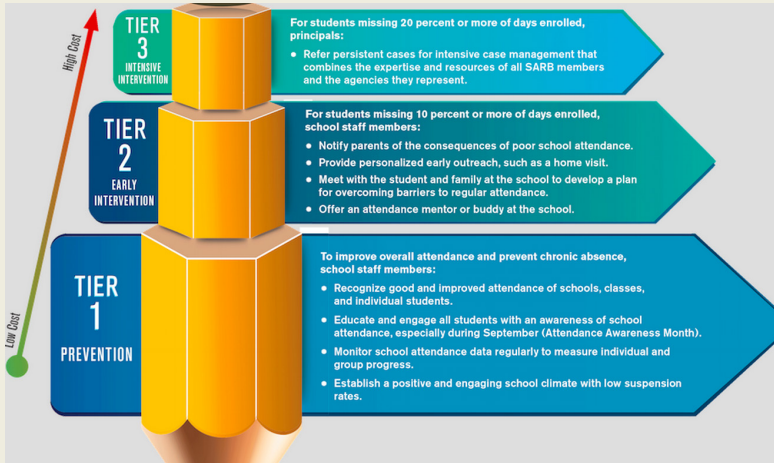
#### **Truancy**

Students missing school without an excuse. In CA, it refers to a child absent 3 days without a valid excuse or late 3 times to class by more than 30 minutes without a valid excuse.

#### **Average Daily Attendance**

How many students show every day. In California, for funding purposes, it is defined as total days of student attendance divided by total days of student instruction.

## >> A TIERED APPROACH



## >> CALL TO ACTION

**Encourage your superintendent to join a Call to Action and commit to prioritize attendance, mobilize the community and drive with data.**

**Go to [www.attendanceworks.org/join-our-call-to-action/](http://www.attendanceworks.org/join-our-call-to-action/) to sign up.**

## >> WHAT PRINCIPALS CAN DO

### 1. Cultivate a School Wide Culture of Attendance

All schools should have a welcoming and engaging school environment that emphasizes building relationships with families and the importance of going to class every day. Principals can model this approach and engage staff in consistently sending the message that attendance matters.

Principals and school staff can help families understand what their children are learning in school and what children will miss if they are absent. Research suggests the most effective communication goes beyond talking about the benefits of attendance to making parents aware of the adverse impact of absences on. Few families realize that absenteeism is a problem as early as kindergarten and preschool.

#### Principals can:

- » Start outreach to families before the school year begins
- » Leverage existing activities to communicate the importance of good attendance
- » Nurture a school-wide system of attendance incentives
- » Use Attendance Awareness Month to launch a year-long focus on chronic absence

### 2. Use Data to Determine Need for Additional Support

While a strong school-wide culture of attendance is essential, it may not always be sufficient. Some students, especially those who are chronically absent, may need a higher level of intervention. The best predictor of chronic absence in the current year is poor attendance during the prior year and/or in the first month of school. Chronic absence can be turned around if data is used to identify and connect them — as early as possible — to positive, engaging supports to help motivate them to attend school and address challenging barriers. California school districts are now required to report chronic absence rates in annual LCAPs, so the data may be available from your district office.

#### Principals can:

- » Collect your school's chronic absence data
- » Review your school's attendance data
- » Identify individuals and groups of students who are missing 10% of their days on roll
- » Use data, both quantitative and qualitative, to provide additional supports for chronically absent students
- » Set goals and monitor progress

## >> VOICES

“ We learned a great deal about our students and their families as we uncovered reasons for absences and developed solutions. The progress also became a reason for celebration and a point of team unity, which motivated staff.”

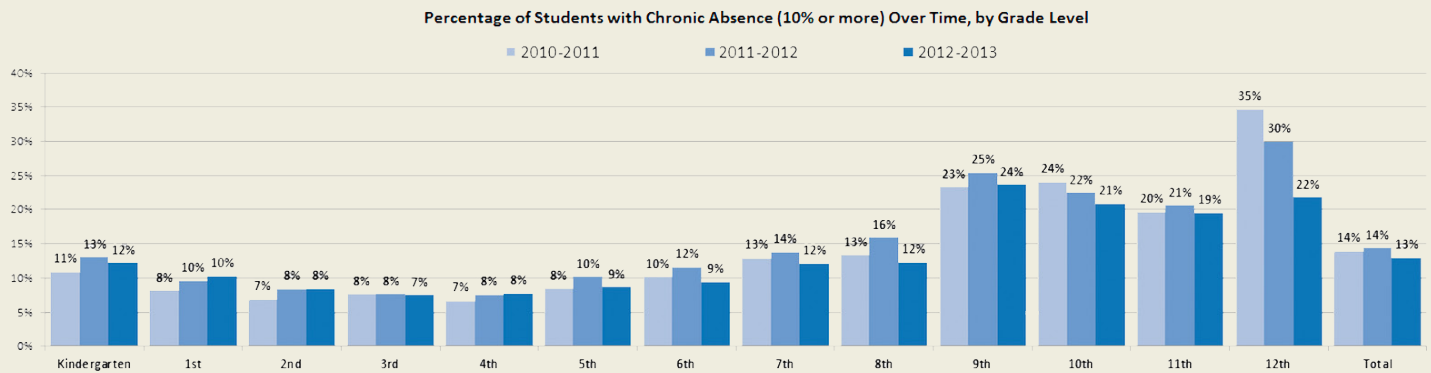
**-Cliff Hong, Roosevelt Middle School, Oakland**

## >> FREE DATA TOOLS

Attendance Works has developed a set of free data tools specifically for California school districts. These tools can reveal patterns in chronic absence by student population, grade levels and school.

Go to <http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/tools-for-calculating-chronic-absence/california-tools/>

The AERIES student information system software is now equipped to produce chronic absence data using these tools.



### 3. Take a Team Approach and Develop Staff Capacity

While principals are crucial to launching attendance work, sustaining improvement depends upon the support and buy-in of the school as a whole. Below are tips for how you can take action to build the capacity of your school to engage in this work.

#### Principals can:

- » Identify or establish a team to address attendance
- » Develop an initial plan of action
- » Create a tiered system of supports
- » Develop staff capacity
- » Tap all available district and community resources

### 4. Advocate for Additional Resources and Improved Policy

As a trusted school leader, you can recommend changes in policy and allocation of resources that will make it easier to improve chronic absence. From the School Board to the State House, there are policy and budget levers at every level of government.

#### Principals can:

- » Call for your district to provide real-time data to all schools
- » Advocate coordination and sharing of best practices across schools
- » Learn about current local or state attendance policy and join with other administrators and professional associations to advocate for better policy
- » Encourage district leadership to act on this issue
- » Support improved county and city policy for monitoring chronic absence and allocating resources

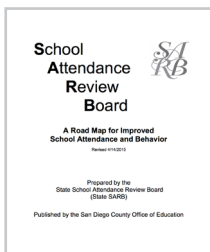
“ My role is messaging constantly. But talking isn’t enough. When teachers could see the list of students by name and hear what the attendance team has done in each case, it shifted their attitudes.”

- Nima Tahai, Garfield Elementary School, Oakland

“ We’ve made attendance a school-wide priority. We had a plan, we followed the plan, and at the end of the school year we analyzed the plan. Our plan worked.”

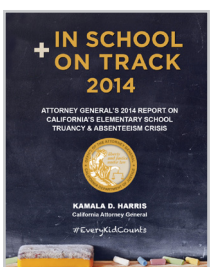
- Paige Swan, Smith River Elementary School, Del Norte County

# >> ATTENDANCE WORKS & CALIFORNIA RESOURCES



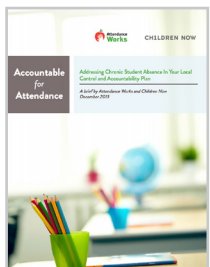
## School Attendance Review Boards Handout

The California Department of Education offers strategies for improving attendance in its new handbook for local School Attendance Review Boards. The handbook emphasizes the importance of looking at the percentage of students missing 10 percent or more of school days and intervening to turn around problems.



## In School and on Track

The California Attorney General's Office released In School and On Track, which finds that truancy and chronic absence in elementary schools runs highest among African-American students and children living in poverty.



## Addressing Chronic Student Absence In Your Local Control and Accountability Plan

Attendance Works and Children Now released Addressing Chronic Student Absence In Your Local Control and Accountability Plan to help California districts, county boards of education and communities reduce chronic absence.



## The California School Boards Association Chronic Absence and Truancy policy

The California School Boards Association released a model Chronic Absence and Truancy policy so that boards could easily adopt a policy that facilitates tracking and intervening with chronically absent students.

**All of these resources and additional free tools can be found at <http://www.attendanceworks.org/policy-advocacy/state-reports/california/>**

## Acknowledgements

Leading Attendance In California was made possible with the generous financial support of The California Endowment, Californians Dedicated to Education Foundation, Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, Re(a) d Zone, a Bay Area early literacy initiative of the 50 Fund, the legacy fund of the Super Bowl 50 Host Committee, and W.K. Kellogg Foundation.