

Press Release

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In California, One out of Ten Schools Have High Levels of Chronic Absence

San Francisco, May 18, 2018—A new analysis of state data shows that while chronic absence affects nearly all schools in California, it is also heavily concentrated: Nearly one out of ten traditional public schools in California, or 822 schools, had high levels of chronic absence, that affect 20 percent or more of their students.

At such high levels, all students in the classroom are potentially affected when teachers have to deal with the churn of sporadic attendance.

Seize the Data Opportunity in California: Using Chronic Absence to Improve

Educational Outcomes, released on May 18, 2018, by Attendance Works, Children Now and the Center for Regional Change, University of California Davis, shows which schools and counties are heavily affected by chronic absence and offers insights into how to target supports to help families and students have an equal opportunity to learn.

“Our analysis is a call to action,” said Hedy Chang, Executive Director of Attendance Works, and a report co-author. “The report urges anyone interested in improving educational outcomes to use chronic absence data recently released by the California Department of Education to identify which schools and groups of students most need support, so they have an equal opportunity to learn.”

The analysis uses chronic absence data from the 2016-17 school year recently released in the state’s publicly available [DataQuest](#) portal. An interactive data map developed by the Center for Regional Change, University of California Davis shows a snapshot of the schools and counties most affected.

In California, which serves one of every six public school children in the country, nearly 11 percent of California’s more than 6.5 million children were chronically absent in the 2016-17 school year, meaning they missed so much school for any reason – excused, unexcused or suspensions—they were academically at risk.

While focused on California, the analysis can be a model for other states because it demonstrates how publicly available chronic absence data can be used to inform the allocation of resources for schools and counties.

“High levels of chronic absence in a school are a red alert for systemic barriers to daily attendance occurring at home, in the community, within the school or a combination of all,” said Brad Strong, Education Director of Children Now and a report co-author. “It is a sign that additional support from the district, other public agencies and community partners is needed to address those barriers.”

The new analysis reveals:

- Nearly one out of ten traditional public schools in California, or 822 schools, have high levels of chronic absence, (20 percent or more of students chronically absent). Almost half of all schools (4,980) have a more modest problem, with less than 10 percent of students chronically absent.
- Approximately half of all chronically absent students (330,986) are found in 3,099 schools with significant levels of chronic absence (10-19.9 percent of their students chronically absent). For these schools, integrating chronic absence into existing reforms may be especially important.
- Nearly 20 percent, or one out of five, of high schools in California experience high chronic absence levels (20 percent or more students chronically absent). This calculation is likely to be an undercount given that California has a lower threshold than most other states for considering students present for a day.
- Elementary schools make up the largest number of traditional schools with high chronic absence rates (373 schools). But California has many more elementary schools, which tend to be smaller in size than middle or high schools.
- Chronic absence is especially high in alternative education settings, such as continuation schools, county and district community day schools and juvenile court schools. These schools also have a more stringent approach to calculating chronic absence.
- Many small rural, northern California counties have few schools but high levels of chronic absence. Because there are few schools in these sparsely populated areas, educators and partner agencies might consider regional approaches to pooling resources that can help improve attendance.
- Counties in southern California and the Central Valley have the greatest number of schools struggling with high numbers of chronically absent students. Information about where high percentages and large numbers of students struggle with school attendance can inform resource allocation decisions.

- Schools with higher suspension rates, greater numbers of drop-outs, lower graduation rates and fewer students completing college track courses have higher levels of chronic absenteeism. While previous research has found that chronic absence is a strong predictor of poor academic outcomes among individual students, this analysis finds that *school* level chronic absence is associated with *school* level outcomes. More research is needed to determine when and how high levels of absenteeism impact school learning environments for all students, including those who maintain good attendance.

Chronic absence is now a required reporting metric for local and state report cards under the federal [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) and an optional measure for school accountability. California's [DataQuest](#) shows the chronic absenteeism rates of schools and school districts and which subgroups have the highest chronic absenteeism rates.

Given the breadth of the problem, the report lays out recommendations that key stakeholders – students and families, school leaders, community agencies and partners, district leaders, research institution and the California Department of Education – can take to turn around chronic absence.

“Chronic absence data is an essential tool for supporting existing efforts to boost student success, whether those initiatives are focused on instruction and curriculum or school climate and social emotional learning,” Chang says. “The goal is not to create a separate, new effort but to ensure explicit attention to chronic absence is integrated into the existing work and used as another lens for understanding what is needed to achieve more equitable student outcomes, especially for our most vulnerable students,” Chang adds.

“At the end of the day if our children and youth are unable, unsupported or unwilling to attend school regularly, none of our other investments in student learning will really matter,” says Nancy Erbstein, Department of Human Ecology and Faculty Affiliate, Center for Regional Change, University of California Davis.

[Attendance Works](#) is a national initiative dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. The [Center for Regional Change at University of California, Davis](#) catalyzes research to support building healthy, equitable, prosperous, and sustainable regions in California and beyond. [Children Now](#) is a nonpartisan umbrella research, policy development and advocacy organization dedicated to promoting children's health, education, and well-being in California.