ATTENDING SCHOOL EVERY DAY:
MAKING PROGRESS, TAKING ACTION
IN OAKLAND SCHOOLS

A Project of the Oakland Achieves Partnership 2014
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The Oakland Achieves Partnership is publishing this report on school attendance as part of its continued efforts to improve public education in Oakland and expand opportunities for all of our children. This partnership consists of Great Oakland Public Schools Leadership Center (GO), Urban Strategies Council, First 5 Alameda County, Oakland Public Education Fund, the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, the YMCA of the East Bay, the Rogers Family Foundation, and the United Way of the Bay Area.

Urban Strategies Council staff member Rebecca Brown, Ph.D. authored the report. Urban Strategies Council staff Joe Jackson and Sarah Marxer contributed most of the data analysis and editing, while Benj Vardigan from Oakland Public Education Fund, Kathleen Harris from GO, and the Attendance Works team contributed Bright Spot school profiles. Attendance Works staff, including Hedy Chang, Cecelia Leong, and Elise Dizon-Ross, also included some analyses in the report, and the research, information, and strategies developed by their organization are drawn from heavily in this report. Their extensive knowledge of local and national school attendance policies, as well as their sharp data analysis, proved invaluable. Jean Wing and Theresa Clincy of Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) also provided expert advice and editing for the report. The Office of Research, Assessment, and Data also provided the data that allowed us to examine individual student patterns of attendance in OUSD.

The Oakland Education Cabinet Attendance Collaborative helped to identify Oakland schools that are tracking and using attendance data with exemplary results. The strategies they suggest to improve attendance are summarized in the report.

We believe that it is through our collective effort - our engagement with the entire community - that we can fulfill the promise for all children in Oakland to graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college, career, and their community.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY TERMS:

**Chronic Absence:** Missing 10% or more of school days. 18 days out of the entire school year. Includes any absence, excused or unexcused.

**Satisfactory Attendance:** Missing less than 5% of school days, 9 days in the full school year.

OUSD is making progress on improving attendance.

Oakland Unified is a leader in tracking and addressing chronic absence. The District has reduced chronic absence steadily, from 16 percent in 2005-06 to 11 percent in 2012-13.

Chronic absence has a strong negative effect on reading and math scores.

Students who are chronically absent are less than half as likely to score proficient or advanced on the state reading and mathematics assessments than other students.

Chronic absence is a greater problem in the early school years and in high school.

15% of kindergarteners and 16% of tenth and eleventh graders were chronically absent, compared to sixth graders, the grade with the lowest chronic absence rate of 7%.

Disparities are pronounced.

- Different ethnic groups within OUSD have widely different rates of chronic absence (see left).
- Students in foster care had a 19% rate of chronic absence.
- Students with disabilities had a rate of 18% chronic absence.
WHAT CAN WE DO TO CONTINUE PROGRESS ON ATTENDANCE IN OAKLAND?

What can schools do?
- Put together an attendance team.
- At the beginning of the year, identify chronically absent students from the previous year and the first few weeks of the school year.
- Develop strategies that address the unique challenges of different student groups.
- Work with community partners to support attendance strategies.

What can families do?
- Give your child the message that attendance matters.
- Avoid extended vacations during school time.
- Set bedtime and morning routines.
- Don’t ask older students to help with daycare and household errands during school time.
- Turn to the school for help.
- Hold schools accountable for providing chronic absence data.

What can the community do?
- Stop blaming parents and help them get their children to school.
- Use community resources - mental and medical health providers, social workers and others - to address the problems contributing to chronic absence.
- Provide the right incentives and an engaging curriculum that will bring students to school.
- Train mentors to recognize the warning signs of poor attendance and make them aware of the available community resources to support children and families struggling with attendance.
- Increase attention to the role that unhealthy or unsafe school climates contribute to children missing school.
- Expand student access to health care, particularly when medical conditions create barriers to school attendance.
- Address health needs. Health concerns, particularly asthma and dental problems, are among the leading reasons students miss school in the early grades. Schools and medical professionals can work together to give children and families health care and advice.
- Address transportation barriers. The lack of a reliable car, or simply missing the school bus, can mean some students don’t make it to class. Schools, transit agencies and community partners can organize car pools, supply bus passes or find other ways to get kids to school.

Who can deliver the message about attendance?
- Educators
- Policymakers
- Business Leaders
- Health Professionals
- Faith and Community Leaders
- Parents
- Students
WHY FOCUS ON ATTENDANCE?

CHRONIC ABSENCE IS DEFINED AS MISSING 10% OR MORE OF SCHOOL DAYS. THAT IS 18 DAYS FOR A CHILD ENROLLED FOR THE ENTIRE SCHOOL YEAR. CHRONIC ABSENCE IS A STRONG PREDICTOR OF ACADEMIC CHALLENGES.

While attendance alone cannot solve all of our educational challenges, it is an essential ingredient for ensuring more children succeed academically and graduate from high school. Clearly, unless students are present in the classroom, they cannot benefit from what is being taught in the classroom.

However, the attendance picture is much more nuanced than this simple fact implies. Available research expands our understanding of the consequences of absenteeism and how it affects different student populations. Specifically:

- Being chronically absent – missing 10% of schools days or 18 days per year – is a powerful predictor of later academic achievement and even predicts eventual dropout.

- Some groups are much more likely to be chronically absent than others, contributing to disparities between groups.

- Some grade levels tend to have more chronically absent students.

- When schools and districts understand their chronic absence patterns, it allows them to develop comprehensive strategies that target students specific needs and focus on all students rather than just those with severe challenges.
What does the national research tell us?

1. Chronic absence is a better measure of whether a school has an absenteeism problem than Average Daily Attendance (ADA), since the latter may mask the underlying patterns of different groups within the school.

2. A study of more than 60,000 students in New York City found that chronically absent students had lower grades and were more likely to drop out than students with better attendance. This research also found that some strategies were effective in reversing these patterns, especially attendance mentoring, data dashboards, incentive programs and awareness campaigns.

3. Children’s ability to read at grade level in third grade is strongly impacted by attendance in kindergarten and first grade:
   a. 64% of those with satisfactory attendance in kindergarten AND first grade were likely to read at grade level.
   b. 41% of those chronically absent in either kindergarten OR first grade were likely to read at grade level.
   c. 17% of those chronically absent in both kindergarten AND first grade were likely to read at grade level.

4. Kindergarteners who are chronically absent are more likely to be retained in third grade.

5. Attendance in a student’s freshman year is strongly predictive of whether they will finish high school – a better predictor than 8th grade test scores or other student characteristics.

6. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be chronically absent. While this is a complex issue, some factors that may challenge families in getting their kids to school include: a lack of reliable transportation, long work hours in poorly paid jobs with little flexibility, unstable and unaffordable housing, inadequate health care and community violence. National studies have found that 20% of low-income children, 25% of homeless children, and 40% of transient children were chronically absent.

7. Missing school has a more powerful influence on literacy development for low-income students than for their more affluent peers because disadvantaged students are less likely to experience cognitively rich home and neighborhood environments. In other words, formally educated parents are able to share the results of their education with their children in their general interactions as well as in helping with homework when students miss school.
This report provides an in-depth look into the local attendance patterns of students in Oakland. We examine where we stand on attendance overall, where groups and grade levels differ in attendance patterns, and how attendance is impacting outcomes.

After seeing where we are on attendance overall, we examine strategies that are being employed at the district level to impact attendance and those that experts have developed from research and practice. We also look to strategies being used with success at some Oakland schools. We chose “bright spot” schools who had been struggling with chronic absenteeism but have shown strong improvement in attendance. We then conducted interviews with school leaders to capture details of the strategies that are proving effective. Finally, we provide concrete ideas from the Attendance Collaborative for how we all can take action.

While we passionately feel that all children in Oakland are “our children,” we often come across barriers to data access that make it impossible to include all students in the same analyses and comparisons. This is true for the data for this report; like the large majority of schools nationally, charter schools currently do not collect data that can be used to assess the chronic absence of individual students. However, this year will be different. California’s new resource allocation plan, or Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), now requires all schools to monitor and publicly report the number of chronically absent students\(^1\). Future reports will include this data. For now, this report is primarily a review of chronic absence in schools managed by Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) schools; however, we have included a section that gives us some limited information on attendance in charter schools, using their existing measure of Average Daily Attendance, and have included examples from among all our public schools in the “bright spots” section.
The report is organized as follows:

1. We look at the data on attendance in Oakland.
2. We look to experts for strategies and what’s already being done. This includes:
   a. A strategy framework by national experts on attendance (Attendance Works).
   b. District-level strategies currently in place.
   c. School-level strategies that are improving attendance in five Bright Spot schools.
   d. Community-wide strategies for making attendance all of our priority.
WHAT DOES THE ATTENDANCE DATA IN OAKLAND TELL US?

KEY FINDINGS

OUSD is seeing a gradual decline in chronic absence and increase in satisfactory attendance. The chronic absence rate in OUSD in 2005-06 was 16% and has steadily declined to 11% in 2012-13. At the same time, satisfactory attendance rose from 63% in 2005-06 to 69% in 2012-13.

Attendance rates among Oakland’s students are lowest at both ends of the K - 12 continuum. 528 kindergarteners (15%) were chronically absent. Tenth and eleventh graders have the highest absenteeism rates, with about 16% of students chronically absent.

Sixth graders have the highest attendance rates. 78% of 6th grade students have satisfactory attendance. The sixth grade chronic absence rate is about half that of kindergarten and 10th and 11th grades. A Baltimore study found a strong relationship between sixth-grade attendance and the percentage of students graduating on time or within a year of their expected graduation rate.

Disparities are pronounced.

- Chronic absence among White and Asian students was 5%, while African American and Latino students had chronic absence rates of 18% and 10%, respectively.
- Students in foster care had a 19% rate of chronic absence.
- Students with disabilities had an 18% rate of chronic absence.

The chronic absence rate of English Learners (EL) increases as they move through grade levels. EL students have chronic absence rates that are lower than the OUSD average in elementary schools but higher in high school.

Missing school makes it difficult for students to reach academic benchmarks. Students who are chronically absent are less than half as likely to score proficient or advanced on the state reading and mathematics assessments than students who attend school regularly.

Preliminary data suggests charter schools have similar problems with attendance. Charter schools have not kept comparable data on chronic absence but schools with Average Daily Attendance at the extremes of high and low have similarly predictive achievement outcomes.
What does attendance look like overall in OUSD?

Over the past eight years, attendance rates across the district have shown signs of improvement. In 2012-13, 69% of students – approximately 24,000 students – had satisfactory attendance, up from 63% in 2005-06. Satisfactory attendance reached a high point in 2011-12, with 74% of students missing less than 9 days of school each year.

During this same period, Oakland made steady progress on reducing chronic absence, which dropped from 16% in 2005-06 to 11% in 2012-13. While this downward trend is encouraging, this still means that 3,857 students were chronically absent in 2012-13. However, this rate is consistent with a national sample which estimated a 10-15% chronic absence rate across several states.

Figure 2: OUSD Student Attendance 2005-06 to 2012-13

Chronic absence in OUSD has declined from 16% in 2005-06 to 11% in 2012-13, while satisfactory attendance has increased.
How are OUSD school’s doing on attendance?

We did an analysis of OUSD schools’ chronic absence levels to see what proportion of schools are at or near OUSD’s goal to reduce chronic absence to 5%, and what proportion are farther from it. We found that:

- 19% of schools (15 schools) reduced chronic absence to 5% or less.
- 23% of schools (18 schools) are nearing this goal with levels between 5% and 10%.
- 29% of schools (23 schools) are struggling with chronic absence rates of between 10% and 15%.
- 28% of schools (22 schools) have more than 20% of students chronically absent.

OUSD’S ATTENDANCE GOALS

1. INCREASE SATISFACTORY ATTENDANCE. OUSD STRIVES TO HAVE 85% OF STUDENTS WITH “SATISFACTORY ATTENDANCE” – MEANING THEY MISS LESS THAN 5%, OR 9 SCHOOL DAYS, OUT OF THE ENTIRE YEAR.

2. REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENCE. OUSD’S GOAL IS TO HAVE 5% OR FEWER STUDENTS CHRONICALLY ABSENT.

Figure 1: Percentage of schools by extent of chronic absence.

About 1 in 5 schools met OUSD’s attendance goal criterion of 5% or fewer students chronically absent.
How do attendance patterns differ for different groups?

Grade Level

As is the trend nationally\(^{14}\), OUSD’s chronic absence rate for kindergarteners is particularly high. While the cause for this is complex, in part it may be because in California, as in 34 other states, kindergarten is not mandatory\(^{14a}\) and regular attendance for young children may be seen as less important than for school in higher grades. Students and families also may be adjusting to the school routine and structures, and after school care is a challenge for parents whose children are in half-day programs. Whatever the reason, the research is clear that chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with poorer student outcomes for several years ahead.

Chronic absence then spikes again in high school. Some compelling research out of Chicago shows that chronic absence in 9th grade is a better predictor of dropping out of school than 8th-grade test scores\(^{15}\).

Figure 3: Percentage of Students Chronically Absent, by Grade, OUSD 2012-13

In OUSD in 2012-13, chronic absence peaked among 10th graders at 16%\(^{16}\). 
Race/Ethnicity

Clear differences in the chronic absence rate are observable between racial/ethnic student groups\textsuperscript{17}. African Americans had the highest rate by far - almost twice that of Latinos and over three times that of White and Asian students. Given that disparities in achievement outcomes by race/ethnicity follow a similar pattern, addressing the underlying causes of attendance issues may be an important component of strategies for supporting vulnerable racial/ethnic groups to be successful in school.

\textbf{Figure 4: Percentage of Students Chronically Absent by Ethnicity, OUSD 2012-13}

African American students had by far the highest rate of chronic absence, followed by Latino students.
English Learners

OUSD has a large population of diverse English Learners; 10,553 OUSD students (30%) are English Learners. Forty-nine percent of students enrolled in OUSD speak a language other than English at home. In this report, we found that English Learners are less likely than the average student in OUSD to be chronically absent in elementary school and more likely than average in high school. Exploration of the underlying causes may help to target English Learners who are more at risk.

**Figure 5: Percentage of English Learners Chronically Absent Compared to All Students by School Level, OUSD 2012-13**

English Learners’ chronic absence levels are lower than average in elementary and higher than average in high school.
Students in Foster Care

Students identified as being in foster care (256 students) were the most likely of all of the groupings to be chronically absent, with a rate of 19%. This includes youth that are in the child welfare system, but excludes those in kin care.

Figure 6: Percentage of Foster Students Chronically Absent Compared to All Students, OUSD 2012-13

Foster youth are almost twice as likely to be chronically absent than the overall OUSD population.
Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities make up 11% of the population in OUSD (4,031 students). The chronic absence rate for this population is significantly higher than the OUSD average chronic absence rate.

Figure 7: Percentage of Students with Disabilities Chronically Absent Compared to All OUSD Students, OUSD 2012-13

Students with a disability are almost twice as likely to be chronically absent as the average OUSD student.
What impact are attendance patterns having on achievement?

**California Standards Test (CST)**

Consistent with national research, chronic absence in OUSD had a strong impact on performance on standardized testing. Most studies have focused on the impact of chronic absence on students’ reading level (using English and Language Arts proficiency on the CST as a proxy). We find here that chronic absence also has a strong negative impact on math proficiency.

**Figure 8: Percentage of Students Proficient or Higher in English Language Arts and Math by Attendance Status, OUSD 2012-13**

Nearly half of students with satisfactory attendance tested proficient or above in English and Math, while only 1 in 5 chronically absent students tested proficient.
How are Oakland’s charter schools doing on attendance?

As mentioned earlier, we are not able to do a direct comparison between those students in District schools and in charter schools because charters have been using a different way of measuring attendance (until this school year when all schools are required to collect chronic absence data). For now, what is available is the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) of charter schools, a flawed statistic for uncovering attendance problems because this school level measure masks underlying group differences. A recent study\(^6\) suggests, however, that, at the extremes, ADA is suggestive of a high or low risk of chronic absence in the school.

Figure 9: The Proportion of Charter Schools with Low, High and Uncertain in Risk for Chronic Absence Problem, California Charter School Association 2012-13

10% of charter schools have an Average Daily Attendance level that suggests a high risk for a chronic absence problem, closely mirroring OUSD’s 11% chronic absence rate.
Like chronic absence in OUSD, the high risk and low risk categories of ADA are strongly predictive of academic outcomes. Schools with very high ADA had twice the rates of proficiency or above on the CST ELA test and more than three times the rates of proficiency or above in math.

Students in schools with extremely high ADA scores were much more likely, on average, to be proficient in English and Math than students in schools with extremely low ADA.

Figure 10: Oakland Charter School English Language Arts and Math Proficiency by High and Low Risk for Chronic Absence, 2012-13
STRATEGIES FOR IMPACTING ATTENDANCE

To really make an impact on the attendance of all of our students in Oakland, we need a city-wide effort, from the school district and the schools themselves, as well as from families and members of the community. This strategy section explores the many efforts underway, as well as ideas for all of us to help improve attendance.

We include:

1. **Expert Strategies.** We examine the intervention model used by Attendance Works, an organization that has done extensive national and local research, consulting, and advocacy around attendance. This framework provides a model for developing a comprehensive strategy to address attendance problems, from the school level and the system level.

2. **OUSD Strategies.** We explore on-going district-level strategies employed by OUSD.

3. **School Strategies.** We profile Oakland public schools who have struggled with student attendance in the past, but have shown notable progress (termed “Bright Spots”).

4. **A Call to Action.** We share the ideas generated by the Attendance Collaborative of the Oakland Education Cabinet, including strategies for families, community members, educators, policymakers, business leaders and students.
Attendance Works Strategy Framework

Attendance Works is an organization that has done extensive national research on attendance, consulting with schools and districts around strategies for reducing chronic absence, and advocacy around developing programs, practices, and policies that will have a significant impact on attendance problems. They provide guidance for both school level and systems change. You’ll see that many of these strategies mirror those that are being employed by the district and individual schools in Oakland.

A. Recognize Good and Improved Attendance
B. Engage Students and Parents
C. Monitor Attendance Data and Practice
D. Provide Personalized Early Outreach
E. Develop Programmatic Response to Barriers (as needed)
**What Works in Schools?**

**A. Recognize Good and Improved Attendance**

Regular recognition and rewards to students and families for improved attendance can go a long way toward sending a clear message that attending school every day is a priority. Importantly, the goal is not perfect attendance, which would exclude struggling students, but rather improvement. This can be especially effective since students often respond better to rewards than to lectures from parents and teachers.

**B. Engage Students and Parents**

Engagement works on two levels. First, if the school environment is warm and welcoming and offers enriching learning opportunities, students want to attend. Secondly, it is critical to engage parents in the discussion so that they really understand the implications of attendance on the hopes and dreams that they have for their child. By building awareness of the importance of attendance, even and especially in the early years of pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade, parents can make positive choices for their child.

**C. Monitor Attendance Data and Practice**

In order to identify where a problem exists and to track progress, schools need to make it a regular practice to track student level data and develop early warning systems to catch problems and intervene.

**D. Provide Personalized Early Outreach**

When problems are identified, outreach to families and students who are missing school can be essential for identifying barriers to attendance — hunger, illness, shelter, transportation or other challenges — and the supports or resources that would help improve attendance. This type of outreach is best carried out by someone who has or develops a strong relationship with the family, such as a peer or mentor, and the approach will need to consider local context.

**E. Develop Programmatic Response to Barriers**

If large numbers of students are affected by chronic absence, that suggests some type of systemic barrier or barriers are at play. Identifying the barriers to attendance can indicate the appropriate solutions, whether that involves improving access to healthcare, providing tutoring, offering mentoring, developing morning or after school care or other approaches.
What works at the system level?

While some roots causes of attendance problems have their sources in families or school, some change often needs to occur within higher level institutions, including the school district. These can include:

A. Positive Messaging

The key to positive messaging is to bring awareness of families and students to the connection between attendance and the student’s future success. Rather than using the threat of fines or court action to compel attendance, this approach works to engage the family so that they want their child to attend.

B. Actionable Data

We discussed above the critical importance of data in identifying problems and tracking progress, and the ability of schools and other organizations to track this data relies on the district to have accurate, easily accessible, up-to-date data, which should be available and reviewed monthly.

C. Capacity Building

Building the knowledge of school staff and community partners around what chronic absence is, how to track the data, and how to intervene is critical to the success of a community’s effort to improve attendance.

D. Shared Accountability

Identifying chronic absence, using it in decision-making, and then evaluating progress, must be built into a formal system of accountability. For example, schools should be required to incorporate this important work into their school improvement plans.
What district-level strategies has OUSD implemented?

• Publicly acknowledging improvements in schools and encouraging peer sharing among schools with effective strategies in place. Last year during professional development, OUSD celebrated schools with:

  ○ The lowest chronic absence rate
  ○ The most improved chronic absence rate
  ○ Meeting or bettering District goal of 5% chronic absence rate
  ○ Eliminating or reducing kindergarten chronic absence

• Providing actionable, up-to-date data to schools for tracking progress.

• Developed an Attendance Manual with a Chronic Absence Intervention Protocol to guide all staff involved in attendance management when they have a student with an attendance problem.

• Offering regional and district-wide professional development to train staff about attendance strategies, including using data.

• Developed an Attendance Toolkit in collaboration with community partners (http://atschool.alcosa.org/attendance_Initiatives) that includes:

  ○ Parent flyers in multiple languages
  ○ Talking points about attendance for multiple audiences
  ○ School self-assessments
  ○ Guidelines for establishing school-wide attendance incentives
  ○ Attendance certificates to incentivize and reward good attendance
  ○ Tips for getting in touch with hard to reach parents

• Produced and distributed an Attendance Video to communicate the importance of attending school every day. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcH6kBNH2FQ)

• Providing targeted district support to struggling schools.

• Nurturing strong partnerships with public and community agencies to address student attendance.
What is working in schools to increase attendance?

While the system-wide changes at the district level are critical for effecting change in attendance patterns, schools face challenges that reflect the unique characteristics of their student population and context. To get a sense of what specific schools are doing to address their attendance problems, we interviewed the principals of some schools that have been successful in addressing their attendance challenges and provide their profiles here.

**BRIGHT SPOT SCHOOLS:**

- **PLACE @ PRESCOTT:**
  Adamant about Attendance

- **GARFIELD ELEMENTARY:**
  Creating a Culture of Good Attendance

- **ROOSEVELT MIDDLE SCHOOL:**
  Using Data to Drive Change

- **WEST OAKLAND MIDDLE SCHOOL:**
  Walking a Little Taller

- **OAKLAND UNITY HIGH SCHOOL:**
  Taking Attendance Seriously
Adamant about attendance

For an under-resourced school struggling with low attendance rates, the challenges can be great. But when you’re a tight-knit campus that is “adamant” about attendance, you go to equally great lengths to turn things around.

“Adamant” is how Principal Enomwoyi Booker describes the commitment to improving attendance at PLACE @ Prescott Elementary in West Oakland. Over the past four years, this focus has created a remarkable shift; since 2009-10, chronic absence at PLACE has dropped from 31% to 16%. Among the school’s predominantly African American students, progress has been even more dramatic, with rates down from 32% to 13%.

Booker believes improved attendance has had an impact on academic achievement. In 2012, PLACE’s California Standards Test (CST) scores in Science showed some of the greatest improvement in Oakland, with an 11 percentage-point increase in the number of students scoring proficient or advanced.

How did PLACE @ Prescott make these strides?

Personalized outreach

Booker and the school’s teachers and support staff have gone the extra mile to connect with families of frequently absent students. Home visits show families how important the school considers attendance and often lead to solutions that make a big difference. In one case, the school wound up buying an alarm clock for a tardy student’s older sibling so he could help his brother get to school on time. “We have these conversations on the porch, or through the car window at the curbside if a child’s dropped off late to school,” explains Booker. “We break it down, figure out how we can help, then do whatever it takes.”

“ATTENDANCE IS BIGGER THAN JUST THE SCHOOL,” SAYS BOOKER. “IT’S THE COMMUNITY. IT’S A CITY-WIDE CONCERN.”
Family to family
Booker says other parents have also been essential partners in the attendance cause. “We have great parent leaders and liaisons who’ve been able to explain to other parents how important regular attendance is,” says Booker. On a campus like PLACE with several long-time staff and so many families that know each other, “teachers and parent leaders have gained trust in the community, and families will connect with each other to make sure kids are at school on time. There’s always somebody who can help somebody else out.”

Sharing data
Just as all parts of the school community share the job of doing outreach around attendance, they also share the data. Truancy and chronic absence lists are used school wide, for coordination of services, individualized student plans, and after-school participants. In this way, PLACE @ Prescott has integrated attendance work across the school.

On-site health services
As in many Oakland schools, health factors – especially asthma – are a major barrier to attendance at PLACE. To address this, Booker says, “We try to offer as many support services here as we can.” The campus hosts a monthly Breath Mobile for students with asthma, plus a dental clinic and vision screening. If students are missing chunks of the day due to doctor appointments, teachers encourage parents to schedule appointments at the very beginning or end of the day whenever possible.

The long road to school
Twenty percent of PLACE @ Prescott students live outside the immediate neighborhood, making transportation an issue both daily and during registration time. To spare families a trip to the District offices, PLACE arranges for on-site enrollment during the summer so that kids are squared away before the first day of school.

Excitement as incentive
While PLACE honors students with perfect attendance in a hallway photo display and with certificates, Booker says the real key is the school’s culture and curriculum. “It’s a calm, warm, inviting place,” she says. “Kids are excited about learning, and we offer as many opportunities as we can for kids to have different experiences. That’s also a draw. We’re a STEM school, with hands-on science, and kids are excited about that. They don’t want to miss school because they might miss out on science or our arts program. They want to be here.”
Creating a Culture of Good Attendance

“Every single day, every single minute counts.” Principal Nima Tahai constantly stresses the importance of attendance for staying on track in school to students, parents and staff at Garfield Elementary School, and he knew that to make change he needed it to be a team effort. Tahai stressed that his best work was to allow his attendance team to dream big and get the support they needed to make changes for the school.

By reinforcing positive messages about attendance, contacting families when student absences first start adding up and providing intensive case management services to families facing serious health and economic challenges, the attendance team at Garfield has cut chronic absence rates in half. By the end of the 2013-14 school year, the chronic absence rate at Garfield was 7%. Over time, Garfield has developed a three-tiered approach that has aligned data, systems and programs to promote good attendance for all students. But very little of this was in place eight years ago. “When we began the work,” recalls Jamie Lopez, Managing Director of East Bay Asian Youth Center, “it was all case management.”

When the district began providing more regular data reports to schools on chronic absence that showed the different levels of absenteeism for students, Lopez says they were able to understand the challenges in a more comprehensive way instead of solely focusing on the students and families with the most severe needs. With advice from Attendance Works director, Hedy Chang, Lopez and the two family liaisons who staff Garfield’s Family Resource Center were able to craft different levels of responses to students based on how many school days they had missed. They began working with the school’s attendance clerk to reach out to students at risk for chronic absence but not yet missing 10% of the school year. This opened up a second tier of interventions.

BRIGHT SPOT SCHOOLS: GARFIELD ELEMENTARY
When Nima Tahai took over as principal in 2010-11, Lopez and the family liaisons had built positive relationships with many of the teachers, and Tahai was able to leverage these relationships in driving change in the school.

The team then built on that foundation and worked to shift the culture, which was one that blamed parents and students for absences. They looked for an early win that did not require the entire staff to cooperate. The team decided to recognize students every trimester for perfect attendance rather than once a year. He suggested, “Why don’t we put up all the pictures of kids with perfect attendance every trimester?” And while it was nice for the kids and parents, it also began to change staff attitudes.

Tahai also talked about attendance at every staff meeting. “My role is messaging constantly. But talking isn’t enough.” The attendance team also made strategic use of data, with support from the district office, which provided chronic absence data by classroom. “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,” Tahai says. He told his staff “Let’s look at kindergarten. That’s ridiculous how high chronic absence is — 15%. Let’s do something.” The teachers and attendance team began to focus on kindergarten attendance and encouraged families through special events and weekly recognition for perfect attendance. By the end of 2012-13, the intensive focus paid off. Garfield’s kindergarten chronic absence rate was cut in half to 7%.

With parents, the team worked closely with the attendance clerk to emphasize the importance of attendance. “We weren’t as firm as we needed to be,” he noted. “Now we say, ‘We don’t do things like take extra days off for the holidays here. Your child needs to be here. There may be a million reasons why you can’t be here, but we’re not even going to go there. We can help.’ ” The blend of support, caring and clear messaging about attendance as a key to students’ long-term success is paying off. “Our attendance has improved every time we’ve had one of those conversations,” says Tahai.
Using Data to Drive Change

Principal Cliff Hong knew that too many students missed class at his middle school, but it was not until he analyzed the data that he saw the picture clearly. Every day, 50 to 60 Roosevelt Middle School students were absent and as many as 15% of students were missing nearly a month of school every year. Within a year, however, Hong cut his absentee rate in half and saw his school’s standardized test scores climb by 30 scale points.

How did he do it?

A data-driven focus on attendance, engagement from the full community, and support from school district leadership were the keys to his success. His story is part of a growing national narrative of schools that are improving student achievement by reducing chronic absenteeism.

Hong managed to work with the community, his feeder schools, and the school district as he turned around chronic absence rates at Roosevelt Middle School from 15% in 2010-11 to 8% in 2011-12.

There have been several positive outcomes because of this work. Most importantly, students are learning more because of the increased time in school. Academic achievement, as measured by state standardized tests, rose 30 points last year, the highest API they had had in 14 years, and the most improved of any Oakland Unified School District middle school.

“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 celebrations and a point of team unity, which motivated staff.”
Some of the tools Roosevelt used include:

- Giving certificates to students with good attendance and improved attendance and recognizing them in assemblies.

- Organizing an “attendance team” with various staff members. Theirs included an attendance clerk, a family liaison, a school nurse, a graduate student intern, and the school principal.

- Setting goals. Roosevelt’s goal was to have an average of 95% attendance overall and no chronic absence and to have similar rates of attendance among their three largest ethnic groups (African-American, Asian Pacific Islander, and Latino).

- Meeting every two weeks to look at the cases of chronically absent students and identifying the reasons for the absences as well as beginning to develop a picture of individuals and groups. For example, at Roosevelt, some students had transportation issues, others had illnesses they previously did not know about, etc.

- Strategically assigning one team member to follow up on students and their families. For example, Roosevelt’s nurse took on students whose absences were primarily health related. Team members would speak with students and call families.

- Having family conferences. For students whose attendance rates did not improve, the attendance clerk and principal met face to face with students and a parent/guardian to lay out expectations and sign an improvement plan.
Walking a Little Taller

West Oakland Middle School (WOMS) has recently changed leadership, welcoming Clara Roberts as the new principal. Former principal Ron Smith spent three years at WOMS and was an example of how to boost attendance for youth in this older age range. During his tenure, chronic absence at WOMS dropped from 33% to 18%.

How did Smith and his team make this happen? “It comes down to having systems in place that really focus on the kids,” he says. “You create an environment where the kids want to be, where it’s clean and safe. We call it our ‘new shoes theory’: [You have] something new, you feel good, and you walk a little taller and feel better about yourself.”

Beyond the basics

The key to building that environment, Smith says, is offering engaging electives that appeal to the entire student body. “The biggest thing we’ve done is to offer various programs that diversify from the traditional classes,” he says. “We’ve built in programs from art to dance to music to STEM - things they can get excited about.” In the case of the popular Boys Group, staff intentionally scheduled it for 7th period, when absence rates tend to be higher.

“These things give kids something to think about that’s not just English or math class,” says Smith. “When we do those things, kids become more engaged. You have to get out of the trap of believing that traditional education is the only way. Culture and climate, basic academic foundation, and extracurricular activities: when we do all things at a high level, you start seeing the outcomes with kids coming to school every day.”

“Let’s get rid of every excuse.”

When trying to turn around chronic absence, the WOMS staff aims to meet students and families where they are, with a personalized approach that gets at the root causes. “It’s usually not as simple as a kid just missing a bus,” explains Smith. “There are family issues, issues of custody, health issues. When we understand these things, we can figure out the best way to address the situation.”

The next step, Smith says, is finding on-site solutions to kids’ attendance obstacles. “A student with asthma? Let’s refer him to our health professional on campus. If they need counseling support, let’s loop into that cycle so [one of our counselors] can help them here on site. It’s the full-service community schools...
model, but, even bigger than that, it’s just reading into what the kids need. We’re able to reach past them not coming to school and look at other things that are affected. Let’s get rid of every excuse. If we can do that, then 95% of kids will be at school every day. We’re trying to build a culture where a kid says, ‘I can go to school to be safe. I want to be there.’”

Smith credits his in-house team for much of this deep work. WOMS’s assistant principal, office assistant, health professionals, counselors, and Coordination of Services Team (COST) are in frequent contact with families. “Families are used to talking to us,” says Smith, “[which helps us] move forward in terms of getting kids to school.”

**Leveraging partnerships and data**

Smith stresses that WOMS would not be able to do this attendance work without a dynamic range of partners, with students’ families atop that list. A core group of parents helps staff with outreach to families about the importance of attendance. “Parents here are focused on supporting us,” he says, “and they allow us to make decisions that support their kids. Parents in our Family Resource Center are actively engaged in how to make the school better.”

Smith also cites the YMCA, which leads the after-school program, and Safe Passages, which helps run the school’s Coordination of Services Team. He says the District has been instrumental in connecting WOMS with partners like Safe Passages and Alameda County Health, which provides on-site counseling. He also appreciates the attendance data from the district. “I need to have a number,” he explains. “Then I can say to a parent, your child came to school more last month than this month.

When asked about the overall impact of attendance on student success, Smith puts it this way: “The simple answer is you gotta be here to learn. But I think if a kid sees the value of being in school, what happens next is you can start working on other things besides the basic foundation of learning. We’re at a place in education where it’s more than just the basic academic stuff. We have to have them think about how this effort they’re putting in applies to them ten years from now, in their job, in their life.”
Taking Attendance Seriously

According to principal Sam Brewer, making a difference on attendance comes down to the simple but powerful decision to make attendance a real priority and to get administration and office staff buy-in. With this shared focus, the adults in the school are able to work together to monitor the attendance rates and intervene when a student is in trouble.

The main intervention that Principal Brewer speaks of is not a surprise - meeting with parents and trying to find a solution that will help the parent to either address barriers or take attendance more seriously. But there are critical elements built into the culture of Unity that encourage parents and students to take responsibility for making sure that the students get to school on time.

Signing on the Dotted Line

Unity emphasizes that each player in the school community has a responsibility for students’ attendance. To emphasize this and gain commitments up front, Unity requires a three-way school-parent-student contract, part of which addresses the importance of attendance. The contract outlines the responsibilities for all three parties on the contract.

- Parents responsibilities include:
  - ensuring that the student arrives on time and has a reliable means of transportation home,
  - informing the school as early in the morning as possible each day when the child will be absent,
  - giving notice in writing for extended absences.
- Parents are given the message that “any student’s absence from school harms the student and the school.”
- Students responsibilities include:
  - arriving to school on time and dressed in uniform, prepared for the day’s work,
  - attending all classes each day as scheduled,
  - listening attentively,
  - participating fully, but politely, in all class discussions.

UNITY KNOWS THAT TO GET KIDS TO SCHOOL, EVERYONE NEEDS TO BE ON BOARD. AND SOMETIMES, GETTING PEOPLE ON BOARD REQUIRES A CONTRACT AND A CONSEQUENCE.
• Faculty and administration responsibilities include:
  ° dedicating themselves fully to the education of the students,
  ° advising and informing parents when students have challenges,
  ° making every reasonable effort to respond to parent inquiries.

Taking a Hard Line

Attendance is among the considerations that can lead the school to refer the student for a behavioral intervention and support plan. Students who miss more than ten days per semester will be required to participate in this type of planning. If students don’t then meet the requirements of the plan, they may receive restrictions of campus privileges such as extracurricular trips and off-campus study tours. Repeated incidents may then lead to processes leading to expulsion. Moreover, if the student has 15 consecutive unexcused absences with no parental contact, the student will be disenrolled.

While Unity’s approach may seem a bit formal, the school takes attendance seriously because they take education seriously. They know that to get kids to school, everyone needs to be on board. And sometimes, getting people on board requires a contract and accountability.
The Attendance Collaborative of the Oakland Education Cabinet identified the actions on the following pages that communities can undertake or strengthen to make sure that more of our kids get to school more often.

www.atschool.alcoda.org
WHAT CAN FAMILIES DO?

• Avoid extended vacations that require your children to miss school. Try to line up vacations with the school’s schedule. The same goes for doctor’s appointments.

• For younger children, set a regular bedtime and morning routine. Make sure they get 9 to 11 hours of sleep. You can lay out clothes and pack backpacks the night before.

• For older children, help set homework and bedtime routines that allow for 8½ to 9½ hours of sleep. Make sure that when the lights go out, so do the cell phones, video games and computers.

• Get to know the teachers and administrators. With younger children, make sure you introduce your child to teachers before school starts and keep in touch with the teachers. For older students, school officials can help you stay on top of academic progress and social contacts to make sure your child is staying on track.

• Show your child that attendance matters to you and that you won’t allow an absence unless someone is truly sick.

• Don’t ask older students to help with daycare and household errands during the school day.

• Turn to the school for help. Many schools offer services for the whole family.

• Ask your principal to calculate chronic absence rates for the whole school. Even if your child attends regularly, it’s important to know how many students in your child’s school are missing 10% or more of the school year.
WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

- Put together an attendance team.
- At the beginning of the year, identify chronically absent students from previous year and the first few weeks of this school year.
- Develop strategies that address the unique challenges of different student groups.
- Work with community partners to support attendance strategies.
- Use the Oakland Attendance Collaborative Toolkit to Reduce Early Chronic Absence  http://atschool.alcoda.org/attendance_initiatives
WHAT CAN THE COMMUNITY DO?

- Get past blaming parents and instead help them get their children to school.
- Use community resources – mental and medical health providers, social workers and others – to address the problems contributing to chronic absence.
- Provide the right incentives to bring students to school.
- Train adult mentors of school age children to recognize the warning signs of poor attendance and ensure adult mentors are aware of the available community resources to support children and families struggling with attendance.
- Increase attention to the role that unhealthy or unsafe school climates play in children missing school.
- Expand student access to health care, particularly when medical conditions create barriers to school attendance.
- Address health needs. Health concerns, particularly asthma and dental problems, are among the leading reasons students miss school in the early grades\(^{21}\). Schools and medical professionals can work together to give children and families health care and advice.
- Address transportation barriers\(^{22}\). The lack of a reliable car, or simply missing the school bus, can mean some students don’t make it to class. Schools, transit agencies and community partners can organize car pools, supply bus passes or find other ways to get kids to school.
- Distribute the Oakland Attendance Collaborative flyer on why attendance is important and what to do to improve it.


www.atschool.alcoda.org
WHAT MESSAGE SHOULD WE GIVE TO STUDENTS?

• School is your first and most important job. You’re learning about more than math and reading. You’re learning how to show up for school on time every day, so that when you graduate and get a job, you’ll know how to show up for work on time every day.

• Students who attend school regularly are more likely to graduate and find good jobs. In fact, a high school graduate makes, on average, a million dollars more than a dropout over a lifetime.

• School only gets harder when you stay home too much. Sometimes it’s tempting to stay home because you’ve got too much work or you don’t understand what’s going on in class. But missing a day only makes that worse.

www.atschool.alcoda.org
WHO CAN DELIVER THE IMPORTANT MESSAGES ABOUT ATTENDANCE?

- **Educators:** From the superintendent to the classroom teacher, educators across the school district can bring the messages to students and families every day. Letters to parents, back-to-school nights, school assemblies, and classroom competitions can bring more kids to school.

- **Policymakers:** Mayors, council and school board members can use their positions as community leaders to elevate attention to attendance in the media, as well as bring together key stakeholders to identify and address barriers to getting to school. They can also shape policy to improve the collection of attendance data.

- **Business leaders:** Business leaders can play an important role in attendance campaigns by helping with public messaging, as well as providing resources for school-based attendance incentives. They are more likely to get involved if they understand how poor attendance can affect their interests in ensuring students have the skills to become good employees and whether parents who are current employees show up to work every day.

- **Faith and community leaders:** Religious leaders, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs and other community organizations can reach children and families outside the school setting. Health care providers, including pediatricians and visiting nurses, can also share the importance of good attendance.

- **Parents:** Parents fundamentally shape whether children develop a habit of attendance and have the resources they need to get to school every day. Parents can deliver the message to their children and to other parents that missing too much school can put students at academic risk. A good campaign will engage parents, not blame them.

- **Students:** When young children are excited about going to school and understand that their teachers expect them to be in class, their enthusiasm can help motivate other students. High school students can talk to younger children about the importance of attendance.

![every day counts](www.atschool.alcoda.org)
This school year 2014-15, let's make a commitment to make attendance a high priority in all of our public schools.
Average Daily Attendance is defined as the total days of student attendance divided by the total days of instruction. The state uses a school district’s ADA to determine its general purpose (revenue limit) and some other funding.

Charter schools are tuition-free publicly funded independent schools established by teachers, parents, or community groups under the terms of a charter (agreement) with a local or national authority.

Chronic absence means missing 10% or more of school days for any reason – excused, unexcused, or suspension.

District schools are tuition-free schools in the United States supported by taxes and controlled by a school board.

Satisfactory attendance is attending 95% or more of school days in an academic year.

Truancy typically refers only to unexcused absences. It signals the potential need for legal intervention under state compulsory education laws. In California, it refers to a child absent at least 3 days without a valid excuse or late 3 times to class by at least 30 minutes without a valid excuse.

School year refers to the part of the year when school is in session, usually from August to June. Typically, the Oakland Unified School District school year has 180 days. Charter schools are required to operate 175 days but have flexibility to extend the school year.
REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

2 See www.attendanceworks.org for a comprehensive summary and links to articles.


6 Connolly, F. “Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools’ Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten.” 2012.


10 Ready, DD. “Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early.” 2010.


12 Connolly, Faith, and Linda S Olson. “Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools’ Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten.”


19 Bright spot profile contributed by Attendance Works: www.attendanceworks.org.


21 www.attendanceworks.org

22 www.attendanceworks.org