

The High Costs of Chronic Student Absenteeism

Chronic student absenteeism is expensive on a variety of levels.

By Helen Levy-Myers



“You can have the best facilities, the best teachers, and the best curriculum in the world, but none of that matters if students are not in school.”

California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson is right. The cold, hard truth is that chronically absent children struggle throughout life. Students who miss just two or three days each month

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in kindergarten and first grade may never catch up, according to “In School + On Track 2015,” the California attorney general’s report on elementary school truancy and absenteeism (Harris 2015).

About 83% of the chronically absent students in grades

K–1—those who miss 10% or more of the school year—are not reading at grade level at the end of third grade. Those students are four times more likely to drop out of school before graduation, according to the report. Without a high school diploma, they have a difficult time

getting employment or advancing beyond an entry-level job and are eight times more likely to end up in jail.

But that just scratches the surface of how expensive chronic student absenteeism is.

The Financial Price of Chronic Absenteeism

School district funding is a combination of federal, state, and local monies. At the local level, property taxes support most of the funding that local government provides for education; additional funds can come from levies and bond appropriations.

States rely primarily on income and sales taxes to pay for elementary and secondary education and generally determine the distribution of funding according to a formula. Many states base funding on the number of students enrolled in a district using a membership formula. For example, a district may receive \$7,200 for each student enrolled in that district.

The other method, average daily attendance (ADA)—which is used in states such as California, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas—bases funding on the number of students actually in attendance in a school or district each day. A school can have an ADA of 95% and still have 30% of its students chronically absent because each day, different students make up that 95%.

This type of funding takes that \$7,200 used in the example above and divides it by 180 instructional days, or \$40 a day for every day of school in an average 180-day school year. When a student misses a day of school, the school system leaves \$40 on the table (Henderson 2015), despite the fact that the district still needs to pay its staff, keep buildings open and in operation, run buses, and so forth.

The cost of high absenteeism really starts to add up. For example,

10,000 students in a district \times 180 days in the school year \times 3% absenteeism \times \$40 average ADA rate = \$2.16 million in lost funding.

On closer examination, the formula is actually more complicated than it seems. Two states illustrate the complexity:

- California bases ADA on the first 135 days of school before the April 15 Second Principal Apportionment (P-2) filing. Therefore, if a student misses a day of school in March, the district loses money. But if a student misses a day in May after the P-2 filing, the school district is not penalized. The school district must offer 180 days of school, yet the ADA ratio is based on the first 135 days.
- Texas mandates the time of day attendance is taken. If a student leaves 10 minutes after attendance is taken, the school still receives the full ADA funding for that day.

Attendance is particularly important for multiyear budgeting when districts are looking at current and future revenues and expenses. Increasing attendance by just 3% can result in a huge gain in state funding.

Student attendance also plays a part in federal funding. For example, Federal Impact Aid uses ADA as part of its school district funding calculation. The law establishes several broad categories of federally connected schoolchildren who may generate payments for their school districts, such as students who reside on eligible Indian land and children who have a parent who is an active-duty member of the uniformed services. To receive aid, the ADA must include a certain number or percentage of those federally connected students.

The Department of Education's Impact Aid office has an online calculator to help determine funding (www2.ed.gov/programs/8003/calculator/edlite-calculator.html). When you enter your data and change the

attendance numbers, you can see how attendance affects funding.

Keeping Students in School

No doubt, chronic absenteeism has financial and societal costs. Here are three strategies to help keep students in school and learning:

Establish a mentoring program. National research about mentoring shows the importance of positive relationships between caring adults and young people. Research shows that of young people who participate in the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America mentoring program, 46% are less likely to start using illegal drugs, 27% are less likely to start drinking alcohol, and 52% are less likely to skip school (Tierney, Grossman, and Resch 1995). Big Brothers Big Sisters of America offers programs to help organizations start a community-based mentoring program (www.blueprintsprograms.com/factsheet/big-brothers-big-sisters-of-america).

My Brother's Keeper Success Mentors Initiative, an Obama administration initiative to eliminate chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools, uses in-school staff, coaches, teachers, AmeriCorps members, and others to meet with three to five students three times a week in a mentoring relationship (White House 2016). The initiative plans to expand to a million students within five years.

Provide transportation. According to researcher Michael Gottfried (2016), providing bus transportation furnishes a schedule and structure that makes getting to school more routine for students—especially younger students. Gottfried reports that riding the school bus increased kindergarten attendance by 20% in families where the mother doesn't work and therefore doesn't necessarily have a morning schedule, the travel time to school is greater than average, or the student has not attended preschool. (See the video



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presentation at <http://edpolicyinca.org/events/reducing-truancy-and-chronic-absenteeism-california-schools>. The topic of transportation begins at 45:00.)

Engage parents. Schools that implement a program of school, family, and community collaboration see improved attendance rates, according to Joyce Epstein and Steven Sheldon of Johns Hopkins University’s Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships. Their studies conclude that practices that improve daily attendance and decrease chronic absenteeism include providing parents with a school contact person and communicating with parents often (as needed) with regard to student attendance (Epstein and Sheldon 2010).

Matthew Kraft of Brown University and Todd Rogers of Harvard University conducted a study of 435 at-risk, minority, low-income high school students who were participating in a summer credit recovery program. During that five-week program, parents of students in the control group received a brief (10 words or fewer) weekly text message about their students’ schoolwork.

The researchers conclude that “this teacher-to-parent communication empowered parents to support students’ efforts to earn course credit towards graduation—increasing the probability that students passed a course by 6.5 percentage points during a credit recovery program. This is a 41% reduction in the fraction of students who failed to earn course credit.

“For participating students, these course credits could be the difference between being on-track or off-track to graduate from high school. In the process of increasing student passing rates, this intervention improved student attendance, and shaped outside-of-school parent-student conversations” (Kraft and Rogers 2015).

Students whose parents received messages with an actionable suggestion had an attendance increase of 3.2% over the control group. The authors note that “reduced student absenteeism appears to be a key student behavior affected by messages.”

Conclusion

Successfully graduating students who are college and career ready is the long-term goal of K–12 education.

Increasing student attendance ensures that the district has the resources necessary to reach that goal.

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