

County Perspective

County boards work to reduce chronic absenteeism rates

Roughly one in 10 California students were chronically absent — defined as missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason in an academic year — in the 2016–17 school year, according to the California Department of Education. A disproportionate number of these students are students of color, as well as low-income, homeless, foster and special education students, further widening opportunity and achievement gaps.

With chronic absenteeism a key priority of the Local Control and Accountability Plan and an accountability indicator on the California School Dashboard, districts and county offices of education statewide are making a push to bring down these numbers. The reasons for students missing school vary, but the costs — academic and monetary, due to the loss of average daily attendance funds — can quickly accumulate.

“Missed instruction leads to lower academic performance overall,” said San Bernardino County Office of Education Board President Sherman Garnett, noting that the pattern starts early and kindergartners who are chronically absent can quickly fall behind their peers. A National Center for Children in Poverty analysis of chronically absent kindergarten students revealed lower subsequent academic performance in first grade than their peers without attendance problems. Among low-income children who often lack the resources to make up for time missed, chronic kindergarten absences translated into lower achievement in fifth grade. Research also shows that by sixth grade, chronic absenteeism is a leading indicator of dropping out of high school.

To address these issues, education leaders and organizations are taking a proactive approach to promoting a culture of attendance. Under Assembly Bill 2815, passed in 2017, attendance supervisors now must identify and respond to patterns of chronic absenteeism or truancy (three or more unexcused absences), identify and address contributing factors, ensure that students with attendance problems are identified and supported as early as possible, and raise awareness of attendance issues with district staff and families.

School district and county boards of education members can also:

- » Adopt a resolution affirming their commitment to strong attendance.
- » Set a board policy regarding chronic absenteeism (See CSBA sample policy BP/AR 5113.1 - Chronic Absence and Truancy).
- » Ensure attendance data is used to calculate how many students are at risk due to chronic absence overall and disaggregate by school, grade and student population.
- » Convene parents and community agencies to review data, and partner with schools to identify and address barriers to attendance.
- » Make sure that districts and schools report their rates of chronic absence and describe strategies for increasing attendance in their school improvement plans as well as their LCAPs.

Garnett, who is also a member of California’s State School Attendance Review Board, is one of a number of experts providing training to school district attendance officers on these best practices.



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— Sherman Garnett, San Bernardino County Office of Education Board President

“Every community is different and requires different resources that you have to put together at the community level,” he said, stressing the need to adapt to local concerns. In a county as geographically large as San Bernardino, with a 12 percent rate of chronic absenteeism, this can include guidelines for rural communities with school transportation challenges and urban districts with a large number of transient students. The San Bernardino County Office of Education also works with the District Attorney’s office to reduce truancy, which can trigger legal procedures such as review boards.

“If kids are not going to school, they are not going to learn,” concluded Garnett. **S**

Resources

- CSBA Chronic Absenteeism resources: www.csba.org/ChronicAbsence
- Attendance Works: www.attendanceworks.org
- Child Welfare & Attendance, California Department of Education: www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/cw/
- California Association of Supervisors of Child Welfare and Attendance: www.cascwa.org