

Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) schools, students and community members are paying a price for chronic absence. This brief describes some of these financial, learning and social costs.

Financial Costs

Much of California's public education funding is allocated to school districts based on student attendance. When students do not come to school, school districts lose money. While complex school finance formulas and attendance data make it difficult to assess exact amounts lost, we estimate that during just the 2010-2011 school year SCUSD missed out on receiving approximately 4.3 million dollars due to excess absence—students' absenteeism beyond what is considered "satisfactory attendance."¹

Of this, approximately 3.1 million dollars—the rough equivalent of fifty classroom teacher salaries²—reflects the attendance of chronically absent students. Thus approximately 73% of funding lost due to excessive student absence was associated with the attendance of only about 10% of the student population.

Learning Costs

Studies have demonstrated that school attendance affects academic achievement.³ Therefore, beyond direct financial costs to the district, chronic absence costs children in terms of learning. An association between chronic absence and academic learning is evident in 2010-2011 tests of English and Math proficiency across all grade levels, as well as pass rates on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).

On English proficiency tests, chronically absent students scored as "proficient" or "advanced" at much lower rates than their peers across all grade levels (see Figure 1). This proficiency gap is even greater in secondary school. Math proficiency tests reveal a similar pattern (see Figure 2), although the gap in proficiency between chronically absent students and their peers is even greater than in English.

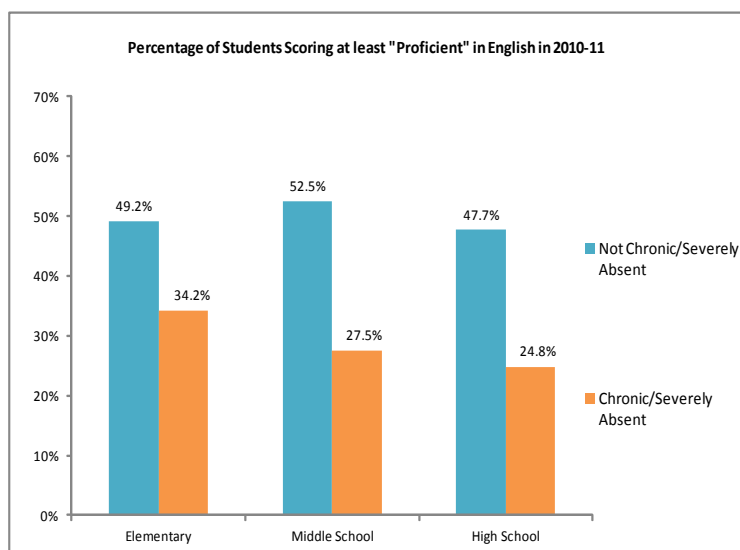


Figure 1. Percentage of students scoring at least "proficient" in English in 2010-2011

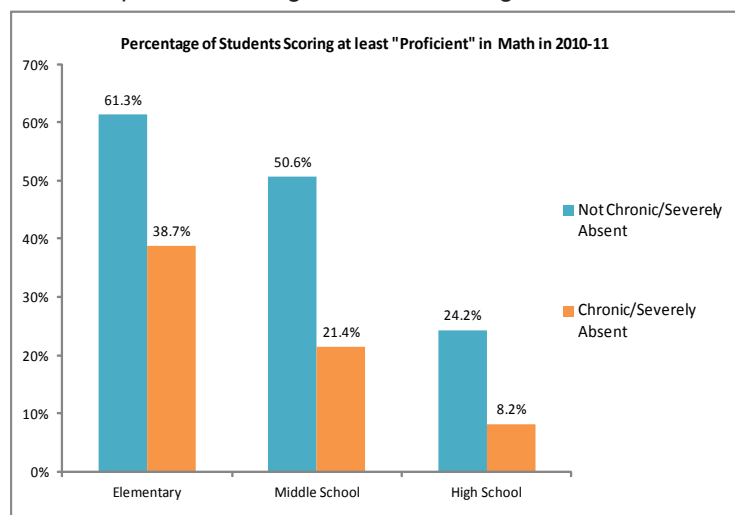


Figure 2. Percentage of students scoring at least "proficient" in Math in 2010-2011

To graduate from high school all California students are required to pass the CAHSEE English Language Arts (ELA) and Math exams or fulfill the requirement with a modification. Students first take these exams in tenth grade, and those who

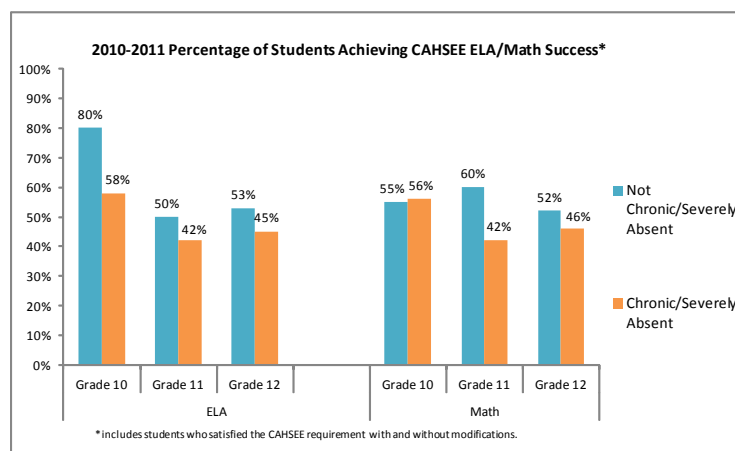


Figure 3. 2010-2011 Percentage of Students Achieving CAHSEE ELA/Math Success(Chronically/Severely Absent Students vs. Students not Chronically/Severely Absent)⁴

do not pass try again in the eleventh and, if necessary, twelfth grades. Figure 3 shows that in 2010-2011, chronically and severely absent students were typically less likely to achieve success on the CAHSEE exams.

It is important to note that analyses presented here *do not* show that chronic absence causes lower test scores. It is possible, for example, that student absence is caused in part by having low levels of academic proficiency. However, there does appear to be a relationship between attendance and academic test scores, and other research suggests that while this relationship is complicated, some of the score differential is most likely attributable to attendance.⁵ These learning gaps likely affect not only students who are chronically absent but their peers as well, as classroom teachers and schools allocate time and resources to remediate the lost learning.

Uncalculated Costs

These readily available data allow us to see some of the immediate costs of chronic absence in terms of financial resources and academic learning. Less visible are the social costs to young people and the community. Although we have not conducted such analyses for Sacramento, other research suggests that decreased attendance is related to an increased sense of disconnection from peers, teachers and schools⁶, unhealthy behaviors such as tobacco, alcohol and drug use⁷, not graduating from high school⁸, and future financial hardships such as unemployment.⁹

All Sacramentans bear the cost of chronic absence. Conversely, all will benefit from investment in identifying and eliminating barriers to school attendance.

References:

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Endnotes:

¹For the purpose of this analysis, we included students enrolled at least 80% of the year (>143 days). Each student was “allowed” nine absences. Every absence above 9 was included in the analysis. Cost was calculated by multiplying each absence * \$41.35, SCUSD’s daily revenue allocation for 2010-2011.

²Based on the 2010-2011 average teacher salary of \$63,345, downloaded from EdData 8/6/12 at http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/App_Resx/EdDataClassic/fsTwoPanel.aspx?#!bottom=/_layouts/EdDataClassic/fiscal/TeacherSalary.asp?tab=0&level=06&ReportNumber=4096&County=34&fyr=1011&District=67439. Does not include the cost of benefits.

³for example, see Gottfried 2010

⁴includes all students who satisfied the CAHSEE requirement, including those requiring modifications

⁵see Gottfried 2010

⁶e.g. Eckstrom et. al 1986, Finn 1989, Johnson 2005

⁷e.g. Halfors et. al 2002, Wang et al 2005

⁸e.g. Rumberger 1995, Rumberger and Thomas 2000

⁹e.g. Alexander et. al 1997, Broadhurst et al. 2005, Kane 2006