Chronically Absent Student Populations in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD), 2010-2013

Chronic Absenteeism Issue Brief Series
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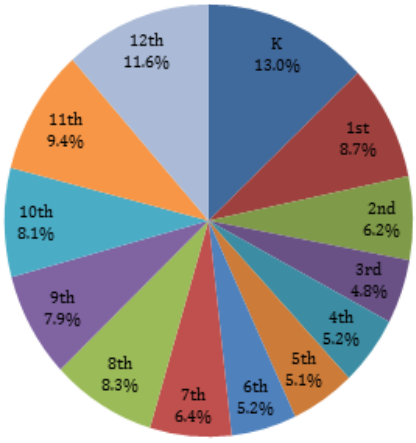
Poor school attendance has high costs in terms of young people's academic learning, connection to peers, teachers and schools, health, high school graduation, and future employment.[1] Chronic absence—missing at least 10% of school—is an important benchmark of poor attendance. From 2010 through 2013, over 1 in 10 SCUSD students were chronically absent each academic year: 5020 student in 2010-2011, 6223 students in 2011-2012 and 5205 students in 2012-2013. [2] This brief describes the population of chronically absent students in terms of some of their background characteristics and experiences. We also describe some districtwide attendance trends for specific sub-populations.[3] Key findings include:

1. Chronic absence rates varied across grades;
2. Most chronically absent students lived in low-income households;
3. Chronic absence rates varied across racial/ethnic groups;
4. Large numbers of chronically absent students were English Learners;
5. Approximately one in five special needs students were chronically absent each year.
6. Large and increasing percentages of young people in foster care were chronically absent;
7. More than one in four homeless students were chronically absent;
8. High rates of school transfer were associated with high levels of school absenteeism.

1) Chronic absence rates varied across grades.

Each year chronic absence rates were consistently highest in early elementary school and high school and lowest in second through fifth grade. Kindergarteners and 12th graders had the highest rates of chronic absence and together comprised one quarter of all chronically absent students.

Figure 1. Chronically Absent Students by Grade Level, 2012-2013



2. Most chronically absent students lived in low-income households.

One indicator of low family income is receiving free/reduced-price meals (FRM). Over the three-year period, chronic absence rates became more similar across student populations that received and did not receive subsidized meals. Various factors could account for this change, including increases in chronic absence among secondary school students who are less likely to enroll in the FRM program even if they qualify.

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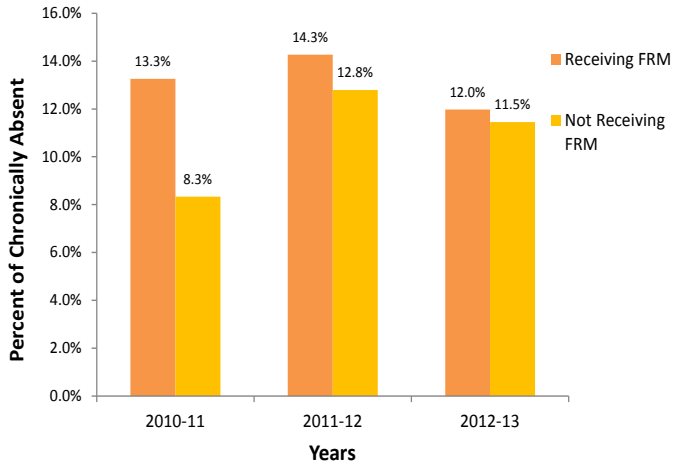
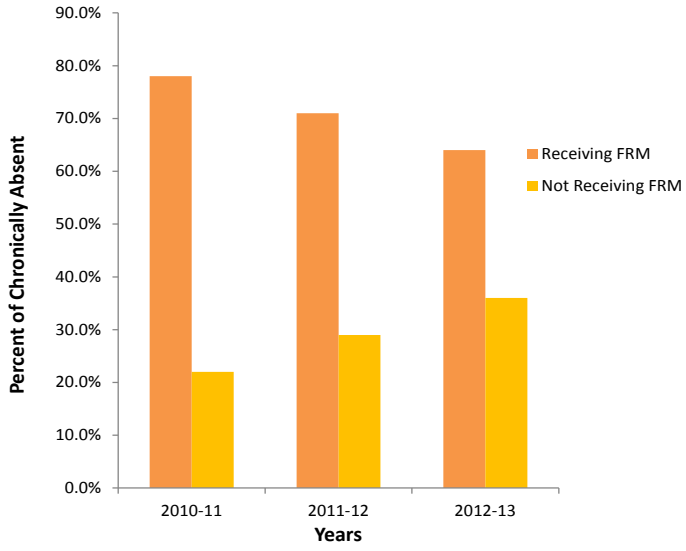
Figure 2. Percentage of FRM Recipients/Non-Recipients That Were Chronically Absent (2010-2013)



However, FRM recipients made up the majority of chronically absent students.

Figure 3. Percentage of Chronically Absent Students Who Were FRM Recipients (2010-2013)

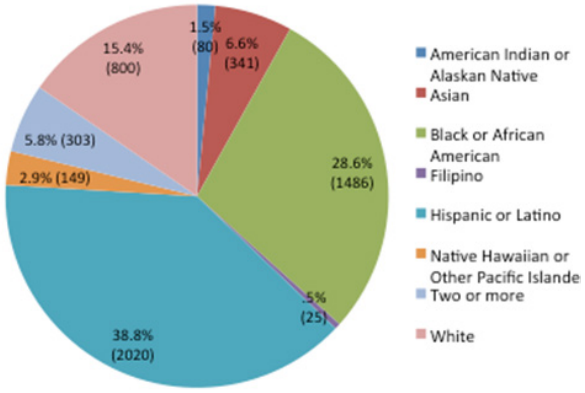


These data suggest that each year a substantial proportion of chronically absent students lived in households struggling financially to meet basic needs.

3. Chronic absence rates varied across broad racial/ethnic categories.

In 2012-2013, the greatest numbers of chronically absent students each year were identified as Latino, Black/African American and White. The racial/ethnic makeup of the chronically absent student population remained fairly similar from year to year; the most substantial shift was a just under 2% increase in the percentage of students identified as Black/African American.

Figure 4. Chronically Absent Students By Race/Ethnicity, 2012-2013



Black/African American and Native American/Alaskan Native students were chronically absent at higher rates than we might expect given their representation in the overall district population, while students identified as Filipino and Asian were underrepresented. However, we were able to further analyze chronic absenteeism within the Asian population using five categories: Chinese, Laotian, Hmong, Vietnamese and "Other Asian." [4] Within the population of chronically absent Asian students from 2010-2013, there were more Laotian and Hmong students than we might expect given their representation in the overall Asian student population, while Chinese and Vietnamese students were underrepresented. In 2012-2013, of the 341 chronically absent students identified as Asian, 33.4% were Hmong, 32.8% were "Other Asian," 20.2% were Laotian, 8.2% were Chinese and 5.3% were Vietnamese.

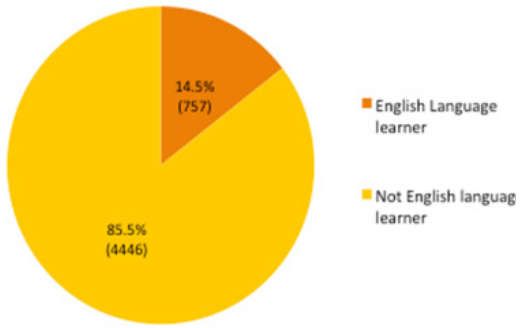
In 2012-2013, Laotian students comprised only 7.4% of the Asian student population, but one in five chronically absent Asian students was Laotian. Among all Laotian students, 11.8% were chronically absent that year, compared to 1.3% of Chinese students, 4.9% of Hmong students, 2.6% of Vietnamese students, and 5.1% of "Other Asian" students.

The chronic absence rates of some racial/ethnic groups shifted substantially during this time period. The proportion of Native American/Alaskan Native students who were chronically absent increased sharply in 2011-2012 from approximately one in five to almost one in three, and then decreased somewhat the following year. Students identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander were also chronically absent at higher rates in 2011-2013 than in 2010. These trends highlight the need for collaboration between school and community leaders to provide culturally responsive engagement and support.

4. Large numbers of chronically absent students were English Learners.

Across the three academic years respectively, 8.3%, 9.0%, and 8.1%, of English learners met the threshold for chronic absence. Students classified as English Learners were chronically absent at slightly lower rates than we might expect given their representation in the overall student population. They made up 17.5% of the chronically absent population in 2010-11, 15.3% in 2011-12, and 14.5% in 2012-2013. However, large numbers of chronically absent students were English Learners (757 students in 2012-13), underscoring the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach and support strategies.

Figure 5. Percentage and Number of Chronically Absent Students Who Were English Learners, 2012-2013



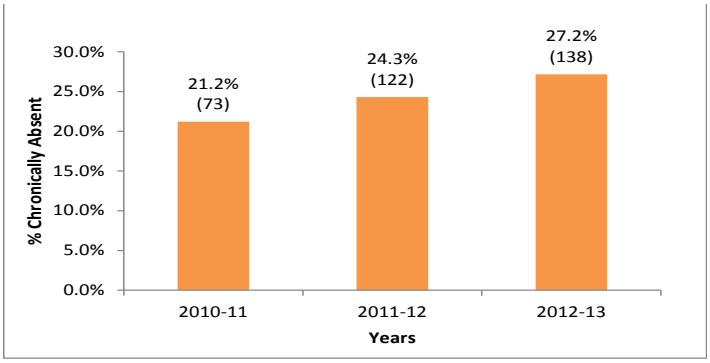
5. Approximately one in five special needs students were chronically absent each year.

Students classified as having one or more "disabilities" comprised 8.2% of the overall population in 2010-2011, 8.8% in 2011-12 and 9.0% in 2012-2013.[5] The percentage of chronically absent students with special needs increased to 14.9% from 13.5% over these three years. In 2012-2013, 773 students' attendance records met the threshold for chronic absenteeism.

6. Large and increasing percentages of young people in foster care were chronically absent.

Although young people in foster care comprise a small percentage of the overall SCUSD student population, they warrant special attention as wards of the state and a focus population within California's education funding and accountability mechanism (the Local Control Funding Formula). Students in foster care were an increasing percentage of the overall chronically absent student population from 2010-2011 (1.5%) to 2012-2013 (2.7%). In addition, a consistently high and growing percentage of students in foster care were chronically absent (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6. Percentage and Number of Students in Foster Care Who Were Chronically Absent, 2010-2013



During this time the numbers of chronically absent students in foster care grew to 138 in 2012-2013 from 73 in 2010-2011.

7. More than one in four homeless students were chronically absent.

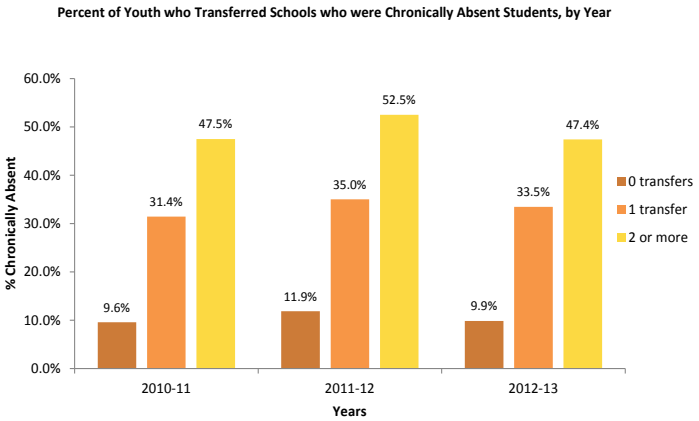
Students are considered homeless when they lack a fixed, permanent, and adequate nighttime residence. Homeless students may be living in shelters, transitional housing programs, temporary housing, motel/hotels, cars and travel

trailers, the street or other public places, or places not suitable for or normally used as a nighttime residence.[6] Students identified as homeless made up an increasing percentage of the chronically absent student population, going from 7% in 2010-2011 to 8.6% in 2012-2013. Overall, the data show that more than one in four homeless students were chronically absent during each academic year from 2010 to 2013. The absolute number of chronically absent homeless students grew from 351 in 2010-2011, to 508 in 2011-2012, and back down to to 448 in 2012-2013.

8. High rates of school-transfer were associated with high levels of school absenteeism.

Approximately one in five chronically absent students transferred to different schools in the district at least once during the academic year. Students who transferred more than once during the year were almost four times more likely to be chronically absent than their peers. Over one third of these students missed at least 10% of school.

Figure 7. Percentage of Students Chronically Absent by Number of School Transfers during the Academic Year, 2010-2013



This analysis suggests the importance of paying special attention to the academic and other needs of students who transfer to different schools multiple times.

Conclusion

This brief has described district-level chronic absence patterns based on three years of student data. Across the district, more than 1 in 10 enrolled students missed at least 10% of school. As many as 1 in 3 young people were chronically absent from school in some sub-populations.

Each of the student populations for which districts receive additional funding through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)—low-income students, students in foster care and English Learners—would benefit from additional support for school attendance. A large majority of chronically absent students are free/reduced price meal recipients, a proxy for growing up in low-income households. More than one in four students in foster care were chronically absent in 2012-2013, representing an increase over previous years. More than seven hundred and fifty English Learners were classified as English Learners as chronically absent that year. The large numbers of chronically absent Latino/a and Black/African American students, and the overrepresentation of Black/African American, Native American, Pacific Islander, Laotian and Hmong students in the chronically absent population, highlight the need for culturally responsive outreach and solutions. Students who transfer schools during the academic year, special needs students and homeless students should also be a focus of support.

Chronic absenteeism is a chronic problem in SCUSD. In order for investments in educational reforms to foster stronger, more equitable educational outcomes, young people must come to school regularly. The populations identified in this brief and the leaders and organizations that serve them should be priority district partners, forging school-community collaborations to support school attendance.

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This brief and others are available at regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/chronic-absence-in-the-sacramento-unified-school-district. These briefs were created through a collaboration with SCUSD and Community Link, with the generous support of The California Endowment.

Endnotes

[1] See Brief #2: The Cost of Chronic Absence in the Sacramento City Unified School District Chronic Absence Issue Brief Series at regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/chronic-absence-in-the-sacramento-unified-school-district

[2] Chronic absence rates reflect the percentage of students who were enrolled in the district for at least one month, and who missed at least 10% of the days they were enrolled in school. To assess chronic absence, we consider student absence rates, which are generated as follows: absence rate=(#days absent/#days enrolled) x 100%. These calculations rely upon district-generated data on "# days absent" and "# days enrolled." According to district staff, in secondary schools where attendance is marked for each class period, "# days absent" is generated by counting every day's worth of periods a student is marked absent as the equivalent of one day absent. Primary school "tardies" are not counted as absences. We are unable to independently verify district-generated figures.

Students enrolled in SCUSD for at least one month were included in this analysis. However, for the purpose of this calculation, we excluded attendance data for students in Grade 13 and with School code = "Home/Hospital." We were unable to include data for students attending John Morse Therapeutic Center, Yav Pem Suab Academy, Success Academy, Language Academy, The Academy, Sacramento Accelerated, Capital City, and sites coded "Non-public school," and "Special Education Independent."

[3] Districtwide trends might differ at the level of indi¬vidual schools.

[4] Specific Asian sub-population categories were used for all groups that included at least 500 students.

[5] Students classified as "disabled" do not include students coded as having "Speech Disability." Classification includes students with the following conditions (as per SCUSD codes): Autism, Deaf, Deaf-Blind, Emotionally Disturbed, Hard of Hearing, Mentally Retarded, Multihandicapped, Orthopedically Disables, Other Health Disabled, Traumatic Brain Injury, Visually Disabled, Established Medical Disability, Established Medical Disability and Specific Learning Disabilities.

[6] "Homeless" definition downloaded 8/17/12 from www. Scusd.edu/homeless-services.