

# The Chronic Absence Project

## Director, Hedy Chang

Date: January 12, 2010

To: Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger  
Superintendent Jack O'Connell  
Secretary Glen Thomas

From: Hedy Chang, Director  
Chronic Absence Project

**Subject: Race to the Top – Coalition White Paper on Attendance Data and Early Warning Systems**

It is with great pleasure and sincere hope that I provide the following white paper on chronic absence for your consideration as you finalize the development of California's Race to the Top application. The paper includes specific recommendations on this critical issue, which has been largely unaddressed as a policy issue in Sacramento, and deserves your attention. Quite frankly, chronic absence, even in the earliest of grades, is one of the best predictors of high school dropout, and California needs to do more to identify students and schools in need.

Several weeks ago, this paper and an initial list of support was provided to your staff as time was of the essence. I am pleased to say that the following organizations have come together as partners to draw attention to this important work. They include:

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| Applied Survey Research                      | Dental Health Foundation                |
| Bay Area Council                             | Education Trust - West                  |
| Bay Area Partnership for Children and Youth  | Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California  |
| Brown Miller Communications, Inc.            | League of Women Voters of California    |
| California ACORN                             | Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce    |
| California Family Resource Association       | Los Angeles County Education Foundation |
| California School Health Centers Association | Marin County Superintendent of Schools  |
| Children Now                                 | Oakland Unified School District         |
| Chronic Absence Project                      | PICO California                         |
| CRESS Center, UC Davis                       | Portola Valley School District          |
|  | Public Advocates                        |
|  | Santa Cruz County Office of Education   |

Thank you for your consideration and support.

Sincerely,

Hedy Chang

***Using Chronic Absence Data To Improve Student Performance: Recommendation for  
California's Race to the Top Fund Application  
December 2009***

***Background***

The goal of the federal Race To The Top Fund is to improve student achievement, close the achievement gap and ensure students are prepared for success in colleges and careers. California's Race to the Top Fund (RTTT) application will be more competitive if it sets forth a multi-dimensional vision that offers a comprehensive and coherent agenda for implementing reforms that emphasizes identification and supports for high need students as they make key educational transitions starting with the first entry into formal schooling. More specifically, in order to succeed, especially in our lowest-performing schools and most struggling communities, we believe California's Race to The Top application must:

- 1) Help districts and schools to assess whether significant numbers of their students are missing so much school that they do not have the opportunity to learn, and
- 2) Help schools identify students in need and implement policies, support services and community partnerships that improve one of the most critical indicators of school failure – chronic student absence.

While addressing this attendance problem is only one of a multiplicity of factors that schools and districts must tackle in order to improve educational outcomes, it is especially worthy of attention given it has been historically overlooked and offers an opportunity to intervene early with relatively low cost interventions.

***Understanding Chronic Absence***

Chronic absence occurs when children miss 10% or more (nearly a month) of school over the course of a year *for any reason*. Unlike truancy, which refers only to unexcused absences, chronic absence includes both excused and unexcused absences that may result from illness, family mobility, etc. Unfortunately, although teachers take roll every day, most schools in California currently do not know if they have a problem with chronic absence because schools generally focus on average daily attendance figures as well as truancy. Both can mask chronic absence. For example, even in a school with 95% average daily attendance, 30% of the students could be chronically absent if these absences are concentrated among a small but still significant minority of students. At the same time, truancy figures miss chronic absence especially among young children who typically do not stay home without the knowledge of an adult who can call in an excuse.

Although chronic absence is not a problem in every school and district, research suggests that it can be a much more significant issue than many imagine, beginning in the early years. The study, *Present, Engaged and Accounted For*, found that chronic absenteeism affects at least an estimated 1 out of every 10 kindergartners and first graders in the nation. Even more disturbing, an analysis of attendance patterns in 9 mostly urban school districts found that local rates can be much higher. In some localities, chronic absence

affected a quarter of all K-3<sup>rd</sup> graders. Researchers have found even higher rates among middle and high school students.

### ***Impact of Chronic Absence***

National research shows that students who miss a month or more of kindergarten are more likely to perform poorly in first grade, an effect particularly pronounced in reading among Latino children. Among children living in poverty, chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with low academic achievement in fifth grade.<sup>1</sup> This data reflects the reality that if children miss extended periods of school in their first years of school, they are unlikely to “learn to read” so they can “read to learn” by 4<sup>th</sup> grade, especially if families lack the resources to help their children make up for lost classroom time on task. By sixth grade, missing 20% (or two months) of school predicts high school drop-out with 70% accuracy.<sup>2</sup> By ninth grade, missing 20% of school can be a better predictor of dropout than eighth-grade test scores.<sup>3</sup> Along with behavior problems and failure of core academic courses, poor student attendance is one of three critical early warning signs for dropout. In addition, when chronic absence reaches high levels, it affects all students as teachers must spend time reviewing concepts for children who missed the lesson in the first place. It also decreases the educational resources available to all students by reducing state funding which is distributed on the basis of average daily attendance.

### ***Causes and Solutions***

Chronic absence in the early grades reflects the degree to which schools, communities and families adequately address the needs of students. Attendance is higher when schools provide a rich, engaging learning experience, have stable, experienced and skilled teachers and actively engage parents in their children’s education. Chronic early absence decreases when educational institutions and communities actively communicate the importance of going to school regularly to all students and their parents, and reach out to families when their children begin to show patterns of excessive absence. Attendance suffers when families are struggling to keep up with the routine of school despite the lack of reliable transportation, working long hours in poorly paid jobs with little flexibility, unstable and unaffordable housing, inadequate health care or prevalence of chronic disease, and escalating community violence. At the same time, communities can help lower chronic absence by providing early childhood experiences that prepare children and families for entry into formal education.

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<sup>1</sup> Hedy N. Chang & Mariajose Romero, *Present, Engaged & Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty: September 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Balfanz, Lisa Herzog, Douglas J. Mac Iver, “Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions.” *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223–235: Copyright 2007, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q., *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in the freshman year*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research: 2007. (Retrieved November 8, 2008).

The good news is chronic absence and dropouts can be significantly reduced when schools and communities work together to ensure children attend school regularly. The most effective efforts:

- Use data on chronic absence to identify patterns, set a target for reduction and monitor progress over time;
- Take comprehensive approaches involving students, families, and community agencies;
- Examine factors contributing to chronic absence, especially from parent perspective;
- Pay attention to attendance early, ideally starting in pre-K;
- Combine strategies to improve attendance among all children, with special interventions targeting those who are chronically absent; and
- Offer positive supports to promote school attendance before resorting to punitive responses or legal action.

Given this reality, we believe that California's RTTT application must include a combined state and local approach to reducing chronic absence.

### ***Recommendations***

We recommend and request the state adopt the following components as part of its RTTT proposal:

- A) Support the development of early warning systems that help school districts to identify and intervene, at the earliest age possible, when young children are at risk of academic failure, based upon data on chronic absence, academic achievement and classroom behavior.
- B) Ensure absenteeism/attendance (total number of days absent and total days enrolled over the course of the academic year) is added as a field to longitudinal student databases. It should be added to CALPADS, as well as local data systems in which it is not already in place, so that absenteeism can be tracked for individual students along with grades, and other predictive indicators.
- C) Use the MOUs with districts to encourage them to enter data on absences and total days enrolled into CALPADS.
- D) For districts that enter attendance by individual student, create incentives for districts to provide the data by offering resources (technical assistance and modest grants) to help districts:
  - 1) Analyze their own attendance data to identify schools and populations where chronic absence is a problem.
  - 2) Assist underperforming schools to longitudinally examine levels of chronic absence for the school, as a whole, for each grade, subgroup and student, and

develop strategies for how they can address the issue in their school improvement plans.

- 3) Identify common district wide barriers to school attendance and develop strategies for addressing chronic absence in the schools with the highest levels of chronic absence through school policies, student support services, school-community partnerships or other interventions as needed.

E) Provide professional development to teachers, school administrators, and school boards to familiarize them with early warning signs of drop-out including chronic absence, poor grades, problematic behavior, as well as best practices for intervening at the individual, classroom, school and community level.

### ***Conclusion***

We believe addressing chronic absence is essential because it directly supports the following goals outlined by RTTT including:

- Building data systems that measure student growth and success
- Equipping teachers and educators to use data to inform effective practice
- Turning around the lowest-achieving schools
- An invitational priority on improving early learning outcomes

Tracking chronic absence will enhance California's capacity to support children, especially those at highest risk, through key transitions critical in a child's educational trajectory, beginning with kindergarten readiness. It is a key ingredient of ensuring alignment and a continuum of learning from cradle to career.

We urge you to ensure that these concepts are meaningfully included in our Race to the Top Fund application and where possible, look for other policy and funding opportunities to enhance the capacity of schools, families and communities to address this critical issue.

Signed

Applied Survey Research  
Bay Area Council  
Bay Area Partnership for Children and Youth  
Brown Miller Communications, Inc.  
California ACORN  
California Family Resource Association  
California School Health Centers Association  
Children Now  
Chronic Absence Project  
CRESS Center, UC Davis  
Dental Health Foundation

Education Trust - West  
Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California  
League of Women Voters of California  
Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce  
Los Angeles County Education Foundation  
Marin County Superintendent of Schools  
Oakland Unified School District  
PICO California  
Portola Valley School District  
Public Advocates  
Santa Cruz County Office of Education