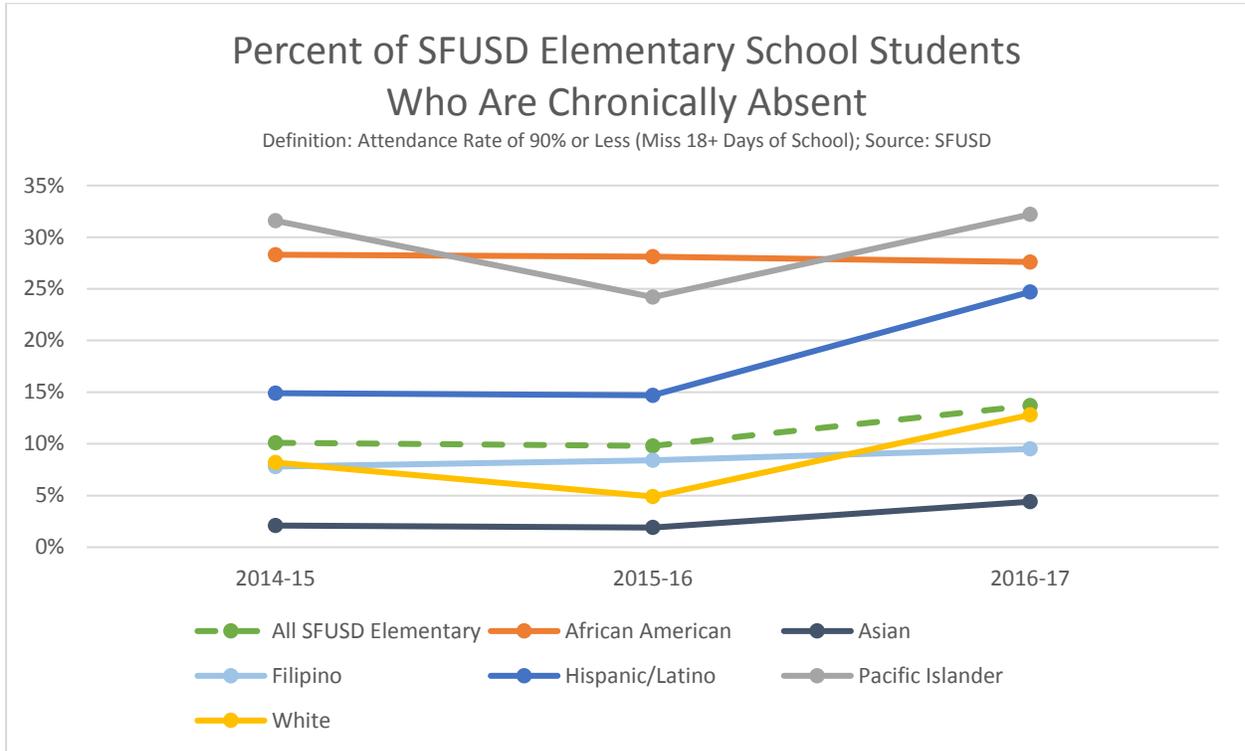


# Reduce the percent of SFUSD Elementary School Students who are Chronically Absent



The above chart outlines the rates of chronic absenteeism by race/ ethnicity for all elementary school students in the San Francisco Unified School District between 2014 and 2017.

## Data Definition & the San Francisco Trend line

Chronic absenteeism includes excused absences, unexcused absences and suspensions. Students are considered chronically absent if they have been enrolled for at least 45 days and miss 10% or more of the school year. Absenteeism in the early grades is important because it has been shown to negatively impact academic achievement. Specifically, greater absenteeism in kindergarten is associated with lower achievement in reading, math and general knowledge at the end of first grade.<sup>i</sup> Chronic absenteeism is one of several metrics that the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) began measuring with the 2014-15 implementation of the School Quality Improvement Index, a new system of school accountability.<sup>ii</sup>

Chronic absenteeism is related, but not identical to truancy, which is a legal term defined by a student who has three full-day unexcused absences in a school year, three unexcused tardies of 30 minutes or more in a school year or any combination thereof. For more information on truancy see the SFUSD Student and Family handbook.<sup>iii</sup>

Across elementary school students in SFUSD, 14% of students were chronically absent in the 2016-17 school year, a 4% increase from 2014-15 and 2015-16. With the exception of African American students,

all subgroups experienced an increase in chronic absenteeism between 2015-16 and 2016-17. Across all years, the highest rates of chronic absenteeism were experienced by African American, Pacific Islander, and Latino youth, as well as youth in special education and youth with low socioeconomic status.

Because only three years of data are available for this indicator, we are limited in our ability to analyze the direction of this trend line. For most groups, the rates of chronic absenteeism remained relatively static between 2014-15 and 2015-16 and increased in 2016-17.

## Story Behind the Curve

Attendance Works is a San Francisco-based state and national initiative to reduce chronic absenteeism started in 2010 that has worked extensively with SFUSD to identify and address the factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism. This section highlights policy and programmatic changes that have occurred in San Francisco in the past decade, as well as some factors that Attendance Works and other national research have identified as impacting attendance.

### Policy and Practice Shifts in San Francisco

According to Attendance Works, trauma, health, transportation, housing instability and awareness about the importance of regular attendance are particularly relevant in San Francisco. Attendance Works also notes that the particular challenges that keep children out of school can be neighborhood and/or school-specific. Along with the implementation of more accurate and timely online attendance-taking processes, SFUSD has launched targeted efforts, described below, to address chronic absenteeism.

**Citywide Truancy Reduction Initiative.** In 2006 Senator Kamala Harris (then the District Attorney of San Francisco) launched a city-wide initiative to reduce elementary school truancy. The initiative notified parents to inform them of their legal duty to ensure that their children attend school, and included school-based mediation and wraparound services for the parents of chronically truant students. The initiative is reported to have contributed to a marked reduction in the truancy rate among elementary students.<sup>iv</sup> This effort continues at the State level, and it is SFUSD policy to send a letter home to parents when youth are identified as truant, and the school may request a meeting with the student and parent to agree on action steps.<sup>v</sup>

**Chronic Absenteeism and Public Housing.** In 2012 HOPE SF conducted research and found that 53% of students living in public housing sites were chronically absent. In response, HOPE SF leadership worked with SFUSD, DCYF and other partners to implement a range of school-based, community-based, and resident-led supports. Through these efforts they saw the rate of chronic absenteeism among students living in HOPE SF housing drop 14%, down to 39% in 2015. Despite these efforts, elementary schools with the highest rates of chronic absenteeism are still those with the largest populations of youth in public housing.<sup>vi</sup>

**Child Welfare and Attendance Liaisons.** SFUSD Child Welfare and Attendance Liaisons (CWALs) assist in developing and implementing intervention plans which promote positive relationships between parents, community representatives, and school personnel and address attendance issues. The CWAL acts as a link between parents and community groups, teachers and other employees of the SFUSD for the purpose of providing information and support for students.<sup>vii</sup>

**Addressing disparities in suspensions and disciplinary actions.** There has been a downward trend in suspension rates at SFUSD that mirrors the decrease in suspensions Statewide. This trend has been credited to the implementation of the 2013 California Local Funding Formula and Local Control Accountability Plan that created incentives for school districts to prioritize school climate and create stronger accountability regarding suspension and expulsion rates by requiring school districts to submit plans for addressing school climate.<sup>viii</sup> As a result, in 2013 SFUSD started training teachers on Behavioral Response to Interventions, which focuses on early identification and support of students with behavior and learning needs as a way to reduce the need to remove students from class. A series of other efforts including the use of Early Warning Indicators, Restorative Justice Practices, and, in particular, the SFUSD Safe & Supportive Schools Resolution have furthered these changes.

While the Safe and Supportive Schools Resolution did not initially include chronic absenteeism as an area of focus, district staff soon found that addressing chronic absence had to be a key part of this work, and implemented a plan to reduce the chronic absenteeism rate which includes:

- The implementation of a more timely and accurate online attendance taking system,
- Training and supporting principals and site staff to promote and reinforce the importance of daily attendance across the system in partnership with Attendance Works,
- Additional targeted supports for chronically absent students including home visits, school refusal assessments, and attendance support conferences for families,
- Piloting the Truancy Action Partnership program in collaboration with the Superior Court of San Francisco, the Human Services Agency, and Department of Public Health in which judges and agency representatives meet with families at high needs schools, and do a multiagency triage of services and supports for truant student's families and
- School Attendance Review Board hearings in which representatives from the school district, social services, probation, law enforcement, and other community agencies and individuals meet to collaboratively identify persistent attendance issues, and develop solutions to resolve these issues.

As many of these efforts are recent, their impact on attendance remains to be seen. For more information on the implementation of these programs please see the full 2017 Safe and Supportive Schools Report.<sup>ix</sup>

## Factors impacting rates of Attendance

While the causes of chronic absenteeism are multifold, there is strong evidence to indicate that the following factors have a role in rates of attendance.

**Lack of access to Health or Dental care.** Children without access to mental, medical, and dental or other needed health care may be unable to attend school due to their unmet health needs. Research shows that health issues are a "leading contributor" to chronic absenteeism.<sup>x</sup> Additionally, children may be out of school to provide support to parents and caregivers with health issues, and/or to care for younger siblings while parents and caregivers work.<sup>xi</sup>

**Experience of Trauma.** The National Child Traumatic Stress Network reports that for elementary school students experiencing trauma, the impact of this trauma may appear through physical health issues (e.g. frequent headaches or stomachaches) and/or behavioral changes including increased irritability,

aggression or anger. These manifestations of trauma may partially explain why children experiencing trauma are also likely to report more school absences.<sup>xii</sup>

**Family Knowledge and Attitudes.** Families and caregivers may have had negative experiences of school themselves, which may lessen their responsiveness to attendance notices or contact from the school. Systemic racism plays out in many ways within school systems, and it is worth noting that in communities of color, the frequency and severity of negative school experiences may be much higher. Caregivers may also lack information about the importance of consistent attendance.<sup>xiii</sup>

## What Works: A Selection of Best Practices to reduce the percent of Students who are Chronically Absent

Local and national research supports numerous strategies to effectively reduce chronic absenteeism. This section offers a summary of potential strategies.

**Community and Family Engagement.** Attendance Works reports that engaging students and families is a critical step to improving attendance. This can include outreach to increase awareness of the importance of attendance as well as seeking input to better understand the needs and inform subsequent interventions.

The Absences Add Up Campaign, a national effort to inform parents on the importance of consistent school attendance, developed a list of best practices for increasing parents knowledge and understanding about the importance of attendance.<sup>xiv</sup> These tips highlight that effective outreach and education is not just about the information conveyed, but *how* it is conveyed. Family outreach and engagement strategies should be designed in a way that is responsive to difficult experiences and seeks to heal past harm.

**School-based Health and Family Services.** For elementary school students in particular, the causes of chronic absenteeism often have more to do with family circumstances such as poor health and financial insecurity, than individual factors. As such, efforts to support elementary school attendance need to support families in meeting their basic needs.<sup>xv</sup> The Center for American Progress highlights school-based access to services as a critical strategy to reduce student poverty.<sup>xvi</sup>

**Addressing Trauma.** Trauma-informed interventions should reflect the complexity of youth who have been repeatedly exposed to trauma over the course of many years. Effective approaches to addressing trauma may also vary by community, taking cultural norms into account.<sup>xvii</sup> Considering the high rates of chronic absenteeism, particularly among African American and Pacific Islander youth, it is critical that the trauma-informed interventions are culturally responsive and effective for these communities.

**Improving School Climate.** School climate plays an important role in ensuring that students feel safe and welcome at their schools and engaged in their education. Research shows that as early as kindergarten, students benefit from curricula that include representations of all student communities and promote a sense of pride in cultural heritage. Books and lesson plans that address racism explicitly are more effective than those that rely on representation alone. While much of the research has focused on high school ethnic studies curricula, a solid base of evidence supports the benefits of these components throughout K-12.<sup>xviii</sup>

**After-School/ Out-of-School Opportunities.** A 2002 report on California’s afterschool programs by the California Department of Education found many positive impacts that resulted from the programs. Students who participated in afterschool programs demonstrated increased achievement, regular attendance, good behavior, and were less likely to be held back a grade. At-risk students in the lowest quartile on standardized test scores and English Learners showed the greatest improvement. Students also showed improved social skills and behavior that resulted in fewer disciplinary incidents at school and fewer suspensions. The cost savings to the state as a result of the decrease in student retention is substantial.<sup>xix</sup>

Research suggests that when youth have an opportunity to develop caring relationships with adults and peers outside the school day, this can reinforce important social emotional learning that supports them in developing positive relationships at school, which in turn increases attendance.<sup>xx</sup>

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