



engage and educate for equity

## RACE MATTERS in

# EARLY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

### Children's Educational Achievement is Essential for Our Nation's Future

- Our nation's vitality depends on the **talents and ingenuity** of each successive generation. The United States will need 60 percent of its population to possess a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025 to remain globally competitive.<sup>i</sup>
- Grade-level reading proficiency by the end of third grade is a **strong predictor of future success**, including high school graduation and advanced education, employment outcomes, and successful adulthood.<sup>ii</sup> For children to develop this competency, they must be in school to learn.
- Yet, **chronic absence** from preschool and elementary school settings – a critical measure of attendance -- negatively impacts academic achievement for many students, especially if it occurs over multiple years. Chronic absence in kindergarten is especially problematic for the long-term academic performance of low-income students. They lack the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom and are more likely to face systemic barriers to getting to school, leading to more than one year of poor attendance. Certain barriers to regular school attendance disproportionately affect children of color, especially African American, Latino and Native American children, who tend to experience much higher levels of chronic early absence.<sup>iii</sup> One quarter of all kindergarten children are classified as either at-risk or chronic absentees.<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, when chronic absence affects a large number of students, it affects not just the students missing school, but can also slow down instruction for the entire classroom, since teachers need to repeat material for returning absentee students.
- As we seek to raise the academic success rate for all children, we must take specific steps to ensure that racial gaps in chronic early absenteeism are closed, since more than half of the country's child

#### Defining Chronic Absence

Attendance Works defines chronic absence as missing 10 percent or more of the school year (equivalent to 18 days out of a 180 day school year), *regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused*. If children miss this much school while in grades K-3, it is chronic *early* absence.

The definition is based upon research by the National Center for Children in Poverty, which found that this level of school absence in the first years of school was associated with lower academic performance in subsequent grades.

It is different from truancy, which typically only refers to *unexcused* absences. Definitions of truancy vary by state.

population will be non-white by 2023.<sup>v</sup> Latino children currently comprise one in four children under the age of 5.<sup>vi</sup> School absenteeism can be a problem for children of any age. It is especially important to interrupt and prevent a pattern of poor attendance while children are young -- before they have missed so much school that they are far behind academically, and while building a habit of regular attendance is easier to nurture. Now more than ever before, our **shared fate** as a nation depends on closing these racial gaps.



*For guidance to frame communications about racial disparities, please refer to RMI's "How to Talk about Race" tool at <http://www.aecf.org/~media/PublicationFiles/MORE%20Newsletter%20Toolkit%20Starter%20Version5228PK%20for%20adobe.pdf>.*

## **“Racialized” Barriers Compromise Regular Early School Attendance**

*“Racialized” means that (1) the barriers to regular early school attendance disproportionately affect families and communities of color and (2) these barriers are the results of (often reinforcing) institutional policies, practices and perceptions that maintain inequity. The items below are illustrative. Readers are encouraged to identify specific institutional barriers that exist in your locale.*

- **Environmental toxins that cause health problems.** African American children and those of Puerto Rican descent are disproportionately exposed to environmental conditions that trigger severe asthma – allergens, air pollution, and stressful circumstances. Hospitalization, doctor visits, and sleep disturbances that result from severe asthma contribute significantly to school absenteeism.<sup>vii</sup> Elementary schools whose physical facilities are in need of significant repair experience higher absenteeism than others.<sup>viii</sup> Schools with large minority enrollment, in districts with a high percentage of students from low-income families, are most likely to be in the worst physical condition.<sup>ix</sup> Yet, in the decade prior to the latest recession, “school districts with the largest enrollments of white students had significantly higher spending on their school facilities...than school districts where minorities make up the majority of student enrollments.”<sup>x</sup>
- **Limited and ineffective outreach to parents.** Black, Hispanic, and Asian American children, in relation to their White counterparts, enter kindergarten in schools that are less likely to undertake outreach to parents to ease the transition to first grade or to institute parent-teacher partnerships for child success from the beginning.<sup>xi</sup> Focus groups with immigrant parents reveal that parents have varying childrearing practices and culturally based ideas about how to prepare their children for school success, but schools have not built upon parents’ approaches.<sup>xii</sup> Effective, culturally and linguistically appropriate parent outreach is even more important for parents who themselves may have little prior experience with formal school or, even worse, feel alienated from school because of negative experiences from their own childhood.
- **Logistical difficulties.** Lack of reliable transportation, conflicting or changing parent work schedules, and challenges particular to immigrant families can make it difficult for some students to get to school regularly. Car ownership varies by race. One in four Black households (24 percent) and one in six Latino households (17 percent) do not own a car, compared to one in 14 White households (7 percent).<sup>xiii</sup> To the extent that housing is segregated, families of color without cars will live in communities where neighbors are less likely to own a car, too.<sup>xiv</sup> Immigrant families can face unique difficulties such as actual or threatened deportation of parents, and the need to return to one’s country of origin for unexpected family emergencies.

- **Residential instability.** Residential instability (e.g., frequent moves, doubling up, homelessness) is associated with absenteeism and poor academic outcomes for children.<sup>xv</sup> Instability particularly impacts children of color from families with lower incomes, who are *disproportionately* exposed to family financial struggles, home foreclosures, the incarceration of a parent, foster care placement and unsafe neighborhood conditions. Children in immigrant families whose livelihood comes from agricultural work on multiple sites are particularly vulnerable to frequent moves. Further, residentially stable students in schools with high student turnover rates are also more likely to experience educational disruption because of teachers' necessary adjustments to changes in classroom composition.
- **Early school suspension/expulsion.** The pattern emerging from the still limited but growing availability of data about kindergarten and elementary school suspension and expulsion is clear: African American, Hispanic and Native American students are disproportionately likely to receive these forms of discipline. The majority of suspensions and expulsions for students of color are administered for discretionary reasons rather than violent behavior, suggesting the need for the examination of potential suspension/expulsion bias in kindergarten and elementary schools.<sup>xvi</sup> And students of color are more likely to be disciplined more severely for minor misconduct.<sup>xvii</sup>



*For guidance to identify barriers that produce racial inequities, please refer to RMI's "What's Race Got to Do with It?" tool at <http://www.aecf.org/~media/PublicationFiles/MORE%20Newsletter%20Toolkit%20Starter%20Version5228PK%20for%20adobe.pdf>.*

## Effective Actions Can Close Racial Gaps

- **Good data on absenteeism are needed, disaggregated by race.** School districts should invest resources in determining whether and to what extent chronic early absence is a relevant problem for particular children, grades, schools, neighborhoods or student sub-populations. Analyses should include disaggregation of data by race/ethnicity. Step-by-step guidance to obtain good data is available at [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org), which offers tools for calculating chronic absence (<http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/tools-for-calculating-chronic-absence/>) as well as guidance about unpacking the factors of chronic absence (<http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/assessments/>). It is important to recognize that when chronic absence affects large numbers of students in a particular school, student sub-population or neighborhood, it is often an indication of more systemic challenges related to a lack of resources, or problematic practices or policies that have an adverse impact on many families. Where such challenges and barriers exist, they will need to be addressed in order to have optimal impact on school attendance. At the same time, schools and communities should **not** rely upon demographic generalizations to predict *which specific students* are likely to have poor attendance.
- **Measurement of chronic absence should begin early.** Chronic absence should be monitored beginning in kindergarten, ideally in prekindergarten, in order to determine which children should be contacted because they are beginning to miss too much school. Then early outreach can be used to identify and address barriers to attendance before students miss so much school that they require more expensive remediation. This is especially important among children living in poverty, who are most adversely affected by the lost time in the classroom. It is also especially critical during times that students transition to new school environments.

- **School facilities and programs should contribute to student health.** Maryland’s Asthma Control Program promotes an Asthma-Friendly School Initiative that includes proactive maintenance of buildings and school facilities to reduce asthma triggers and improve indoor and outdoor air quality.<sup>xviii</sup> More broadly in terms of student health, a checklist is available at <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/School-Health-Center-Self-Assessment-Tool-Revised-2-25-2011t.pdf> to analyze the performance of school-based health programs for reducing chronic absence and improving school attendance.<sup>xix</sup>
- **Schools can help parents address logistical barriers.** A Providence, RI, elementary school recognized transportation problems as a contributor to chronic absences. They were able to accommodate parents’ work schedules by offering an early care and breakfast program and secure a federal grant to provide other students transportation to the school and offer family wrap-around services.<sup>xx</sup>
- **Schools and parents can be partners to advance regular school attendance.** Transition outreach programs that enable parents and children to know what to expect from school and help parents support their child’s educational success can improve student attendance, as exemplified by the school readiness project of the University of Pittsburgh’s Office of Child Development<sup>xxi</sup> and research from the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University.<sup>xxii</sup> The latter points out the contribution of home visits, as well.
- **Teachers’ skill sets can be expanded to minimize suspensions.** Training for teachers in cultural sensitivity may reduce teacher-student conflict and result in fewer suspensions. In addition, school-wide implementation of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program has been shown to reduce discipline referrals and the use of suspensions.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- **Schools’ partnerships with other systems can reduce absenteeism.** Through a data sharing arrangement with Baltimore City Public Schools, child welfare workers have access to attendance data for children they monitor and can step in early to address emerging problems. As a result, Baltimore identifies 100-180 children a month whose families receive direct services and case management from Family Preservation workers,<sup>xxiv</sup> providing interventions that can prevent chronic absenteeism.
- **Local decision-makers have a role to play to close racial gaps in chronic early absenteeism.** Beyond the classroom setting, attention must be given to rectifying differential district funding for school facilities, improving the vitality of underinvested neighborhoods, and reducing exposure to harmful pollutants – all of which burden families of color *disproportionately*, and all of which contribute indirectly, though significantly, to chronic school absenteeism.

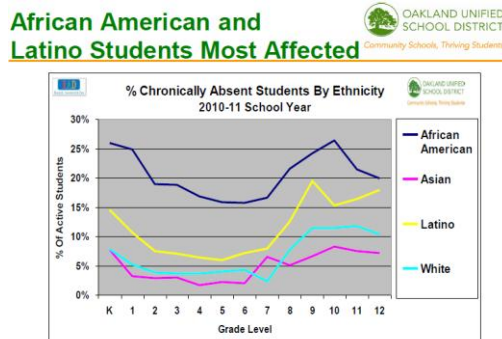


*For guidance to improve chances that policies and practices will reduce racial disparities, please refer to RMI’s “Racial Equity Impact Analysis” tool at <http://www.aecf.org/~media/PublicationFiles/MORE%20Newsletter%20Toolkit%20Starter%20Version5228PK%20for%20adobe.pdf>.*

## A Case Example

### Reducing the Achievement Gap by Attending to Chronic Absence and Suspension: A Profile of Oakland Unified School District

An early adopter in the field of chronic absence, the Oakland Unified School District used its attendance data to crunch its chronic absence numbers in 2009 with technical assistance from Attendance Works and the Urban Strategies Council. Deeply committed to reducing racial inequities, the district examined chronic absence levels for its different ethnic populations, as well as by school and grade. Reflecting national trends, the data showed deep racial disparities.



Further analysis revealed that elementary school absenteeism is especially high in kindergarten and in particular neighborhoods already challenged by environmental health hazards and poverty. Moreover, a higher level of chronic absence rates among African American students, starting in elementary school, suggested that improving school attendance as early as kindergarten could help reduce racial inequities in academic achievement.

As a result, Oakland Unified has made reducing chronic absence, along with addressing racial disparities in student suspension, central to its strategic plan to raise achievement and reduce inequities. The chronic absence work involves careful tracking of data and a full-service community schools model that brings community partners onto campus to help reach out to

students and families and work together to overcome barriers to attendance. The barriers include a lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, unstable housing or mental health concerns. Go to <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/oakland/> for an in depth description of Oakland's comprehensive approach, which has begun to demonstrate a measurable reduction in chronic absence, especially at the school sites who have advanced the work most deeply.

To close discipline gaps, the district is also promoting alternatives to suspensions and creating restorative justice programs. Preliminary indications (<http://www.urbanstrategies.org/aamai/images/docs/suspensiondisparitieswebinar6.20.12.pdf>) suggest that this is a promising route to a decrease in referrals for suspension.

The efforts to reduce chronic absence and suspensions both depend on:

- Use of data to inform planning and trigger action
- Consistency in defining indicators
- School staff training
- School policy review
- Prevention strategies
- Early interventions

Underlying both efforts is the recognition that students are more likely to learn if they're in school. Too many children of color are losing too many days of school, whether to illness, truancy or disciplinary action. Oakland Unified's efforts to reduce chronic absence and suspension rates will give these students a more equitable chance to succeed in school and graduate.

## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, PowerPoint presentation prepared by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, slide 5.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010, [http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Initiatives/KIDS%20COUNT/123/2010KCSpecReport/AEC\\_report\\_color\\_highres.pdf](http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Initiatives/KIDS%20COUNT/123/2010KCSpecReport/AEC_report_color_highres.pdf). Accessed 11.15.12.
- <sup>iii</sup> E.g., <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Oregon-Research-Brief.pdf>; <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Maryland-background-paper-Version-05-10-11.pdf>; <http://www.utahdataalliance.org/downloads/ChronicAbsenteeismResearchBrief.pdf>. Accessed 1.16.13.
- <sup>iv</sup> M. Romero and Y-S. Lee, *A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty, October 2007, [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_771.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_771.pdf). Accessed 11.14.12.
- <sup>v</sup> [http://articles.cnn.com/2008-08-13/us/census.minorities\\_1\\_hispanic-population-census-bureau-white-population?\\_s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2008-08-13/us/census.minorities_1_hispanic-population-census-bureau-white-population?_s=PM:US). Accessed 1.10.13.
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- <sup>vii</sup> C.E. Basch, *Healthier Students are Better Learners*, Teachers College, Columbia University, March 2010, [http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/12557\\_EquityMattersVol6\\_Web03082010.pdf](http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/12557_EquityMattersVol6_Web03082010.pdf). Accessed 11.14.12.
- <sup>viii</sup> D. Branham, *The Wise Man Builds His House Upon the Rock: The Effects of Inadequate School Building Infrastructure on Student Attendance*, *Social Science Quarterly*, December 2004, <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Effects-of-Inadequate-Building-Infrastructure-David-Branham-Dec-2004.pdf>. Accessed 11.14.12.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Growth and Disparity: A Decade of U.S. Public School Construction*, Building Educational Success Together, October 2006, p.20, <http://www.21csf.org/csf-home/publications/BEST-Growth-Disparity-2006.pdf>. Accessed 11.15.12.
- <sup>x</sup> *Growth and Disparity: A Decade of U.S. Public School Construction*, Building Educational Success Together, October 2006, p.27, <http://www.21csf.org/csf-home/publications/BEST-Growth-Disparity-2006.pdf>. Accessed 11.15.12.
- <sup>xi</sup> V.E. Lee and D.T. Burkam, *Inequality at the Starting Gate*, Economic Policy Institute, Washington, D.C. 2002.
- <sup>xii</sup> Resident focus group, Annie E Casey Foundation, cited in *Unequal Opportunities for School Readiness*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d., [http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/fact\\_sheet2.pdf](http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/fact_sheet2.pdf). Accessed 11.16.12.
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- <sup>xiv</sup> A. Berube et al., *Socioeconomic Differences in Household Automobile Ownership Rates: Implications for Evacuation Policy*, <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~raphael/BerubeDeakenRaphael.pdf>. Accessed 11.16.12.
- <sup>xv</sup> M. Cunningham et al., *Residential Instability and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Education Program*, Urban Institute, May 2010, <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412115-mckinney-vento-program.pdf>. Accessed 11.15.12.

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<sup>xvi</sup> E.g., Urban Strategies Council, *African American Male Achievement Initiative: A Closer Look at Suspensions of African American Males in OUSD, OUSD 2010-2011*, May 2012, [http://www.urbanstrategies.org/aamai/images/docs/AAMA\\_OUSD\\_SuspensionAnalysis.pdf](http://www.urbanstrategies.org/aamai/images/docs/AAMA_OUSD_SuspensionAnalysis.pdf). Accessed 1.29.13.

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<sup>xvii</sup> A-M. Iselin, *Research on School Suspension*, North Carolina Family Impact Seminar, April 27, 2010, [http://www.childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/familyimpact/2010/Suspension\\_Research\\_Brief\\_2010-04-27.pdf](http://www.childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/familyimpact/2010/Suspension_Research_Brief_2010-04-27.pdf). Accessed 11.16.12.

<sup>xviii</sup> <http://www.elev8baltimore.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Absenteeism-and-School-Health-Report.pdf>. Accessed 11.16.12.

<sup>xix</sup> *Does Our School-Based Health Program Help to Reduce Chronic Absence and Improve School Attendance?* Attendance Works, <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/School-Health-Center-Self-Assessment-Tool-Revised-2-25-2011t.pdf>. Accessed 11.16.12.

<sup>xx</sup> <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/providence/>. Accessed 11.16.12.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Pathways to School Success*, Office of Child Development, University of Pittsburgh School of Education, n.d., <http://www.ocd.pitt.edu/Files/PDF/principlesguide.pdf>. Accessed 11.16.12.

<sup>xxii</sup> <http://dothan.troy.edu/ed/rdavis/PDF%20files/EDU%206629/Present%20and%20Accounted%20For%20Improving%20Student%20Attendance%20Through%20Family%20and%20Community%20Involvement.pdf>. Accessed 11.16.12.

<sup>xxiii</sup> A-M. Iselin, *Research on School Suspension*, North Carolina Family Impact Seminar, April 27, 2010, [http://www.childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/familyimpact/2010/Suspension\\_Research\\_Brief\\_2010-04-27.pdf](http://www.childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/familyimpact/2010/Suspension_Research_Brief_2010-04-27.pdf). Accessed 11.16.12.

<sup>xxiv</sup> <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/baltimore/data-sharing-with-child-welfare-system/>. Accessed 11.16.12.

The Race Matters Institute (RMI) assists partners and clients to have the framework, knowledge, and tools they need to advance racial equity within their spheres of influence. Learn more about us at <http://racemattersinstitute.org> or contact us at <http://www.racemattersinstitute.org/contact/>. This product was prepared for RMI by JustPartners, Inc. Thanks to Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Works and Phyllis Jordan of The Hatcher Group for their assistance. The research was funded by the Annie E Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented here are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.