

Los Angeles Unified School District Advisory Task Force

The LA Unified Advisory Task Force was created to help the Superintendent and leadership team implement change. While it is the role of the LAUSD Board to set strategy and establish policy, there is much work to be done at the operating level to accelerate the pace of change.

The Task Force is co-chaired by Austin Beutner, Founder, Vision to Learn, and Laphonza Butler, President, SEIU Local 2015 and is comprised of volunteers with experience in education, not-for-profit, government, business, and labor.

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Summary

Research shows that students who attend school more often do better in school and students who are chronically absent, meaning they miss at least 15 days of school in a year, fall behind.¹

Reducing absenteeism is a significant challenge for which there are no simple solutions. Many LAUSD students and their families face real and significant barriers which prevent students from making it to school including inadequate transportation, health issues, and other conditions related to living near or below the poverty line.

In School Year 2016–2017 (SY16-17), over 80,000 LAUSD students, 14.3 percent, were chronically absent. That percentage increases to almost one-third of LAUSD students missing significant amounts of school if one adds the 17.9 percent of students who missed 8-14 days.

The financial impact of student absence is significant as well. The vast majority of revenue the District receives is tied to daily student attendance. For SY16-17, the District's budget target for chronically absent students was 11% and the impact of not achieving this target was approximately \$20 million in foregone revenue. Further, if every child in LAUSD attended one more day of school, the District would have approximately \$30 million more to invest in the classroom.

The District recognizes the importance of this issue and is working to reduce absenteeism. In fact, some schools in the most disadvantaged parts of the District have managed to reduce chronic absenteeism to below 10 percent. These successes show that more can and should be done.

We are recommending a multi-faceted approach, which includes the improvement of current District efforts, broad based outreach to parents, students, and the community, and targeted approaches that support the unique needs of individual students and families. Our recommendations fall into two categories: improving on current efforts and implementing new approaches.

First, LAUSD needs to improve the effectiveness of its current efforts. The District operates 27 programs which it believes impacts student attendance and spends approximately \$40 million on eight programs which are specifically designed to reduce student absenteeism. The District, however, is not able to measure the efficacy of many of these programs. The District needs to better understand the effectiveness of all 27 programs and create an environment of accountability for meeting the goals it sets. Further, the District needs to better understand the data it collects on student attendance and develop processes to use its data on a real time basis to meet its goals.

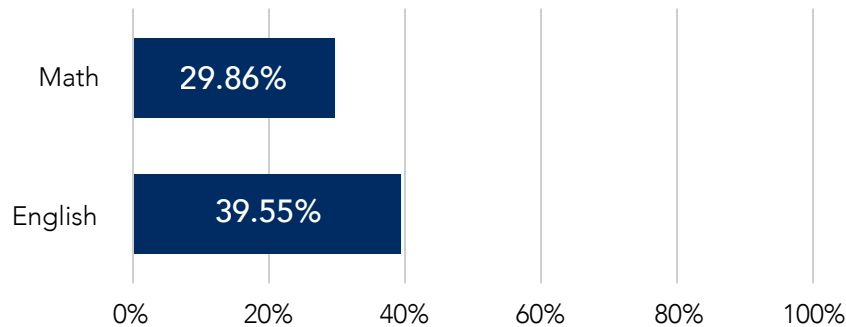
Second, the District needs to implement new approaches by replicating programs that have been successful in other school districts across the country. These approaches include broad based outreach, targeted outreach, and direct intervention. LAUSD should launch a broad, District-wide awareness effort to educate parents, students, and everyone in the community about the importance of attending school. It should also conduct targeted outreach to at-risk students and their parents through direct mail, text messages, phone banks, and canvassing; and implement a cash reward program for schools to incentivize them to achieve better results. Finally, the District should expand school-site, direct intervention programs to provide meaningful, one-on-one counseling to students and families most in need.

These efforts will need to be carefully coordinated, measured for effectiveness, and focused on the students and families most in need. The pilot programs which prove successful in their test phase during early 2018 should be adopted District wide by August 2018.

Introduction

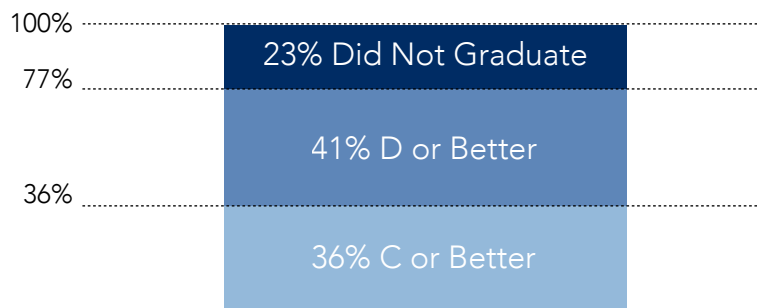
Quality public education is the right of every child and the foundation of every community. A good education is the best path out of poverty and will provide every child with a chance to succeed in life. While some progress has been made, LAUSD has a long way to go before it achieves this objective.

LAUSD student scores on the California standardized tests show that less than 30 percent of students met or exceeded standards in math, and less than 40 percent of students met or exceeded standards in English.



LAUSD Students who Met or Exceeded State Standards SY16-17

A little more than one-third of LAUSD's SY15-16 graduating-cohort were eligible for California's public universities. Of the 34,364 students, 36 percent earned a C or better in all of the A-G courses, which is the minimum requirement for entrance into California's public universities. However, 64 percent were neither eligible for a California public university nor graduated.



LAUSD 2016 Graduation Rates

Further, research analyzing LAUSD graduates from school years 2013 and 2014 shows only 32 percent were eligible for the California State University (CSU) system. CSU eligibility for Latino students was only 30 percent with African American students dropping to 21%.²

The Task Force and the District recognize that we need to do more to bring about meaningful change in our public education system. The status quo is not good enough.

We also recognize the importance of engaging the broader Los Angeles community to invest in the success of our schools. Challenges created by high poverty, crime or homelessness not only affect communities, but also impact schools and block opportunities for our students to learn.

The Task Force will focus its work in several areas: student attendance, student achievement, district transparency, technology, workforce, and overall organization and budget. The Task Force will provide the Superintendent with a series of recommendations to help LAUSD implement change.

The recommendations will be informed by academic research, using information from LAUSD and current research in education, and will draw on strategies and practices that are working in Los Angeles and other cities.

The first set of recommendations, as outlined in this report, focus on the challenge of student attendance and chronic absenteeism.

Attendance Matters

The Task Force's initial focus is school attendance and chronic absenteeism for the simple reason that if kids aren't in school, they can't learn. Additionally, the District is funded by the State of California on a per student formula. If a student is absent, the entire learning environment suffers as funding is reduced.

Research shows that a higher attendance rate by a student improves their chances of success and "students who are chronically absent—meaning they miss at least 15 days of school in a year—are at serious risk of falling behind in school."³

According to the US Department of Education, 2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection analyses:⁴

Children who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are much less likely to read at grade level by the third grade.

Students who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school.

Irregular attendance can be a better predictor of whether students will drop out before graduation than test scores.

High school dropout, which chronically absent students are more likely to experience, has been linked to poor outcomes later in life, from poverty and diminished health to involvement in the criminal justice system.

In Massachusetts, the National Bureau of Economic Research found "poor attendance can account for up to a quarter of the math achievement gap between poor and non-poor students."⁵

A study of Chicago Public Schools shows "course attendance is eight times more predictive of ninth grade failure than eighth grade test scores."⁶

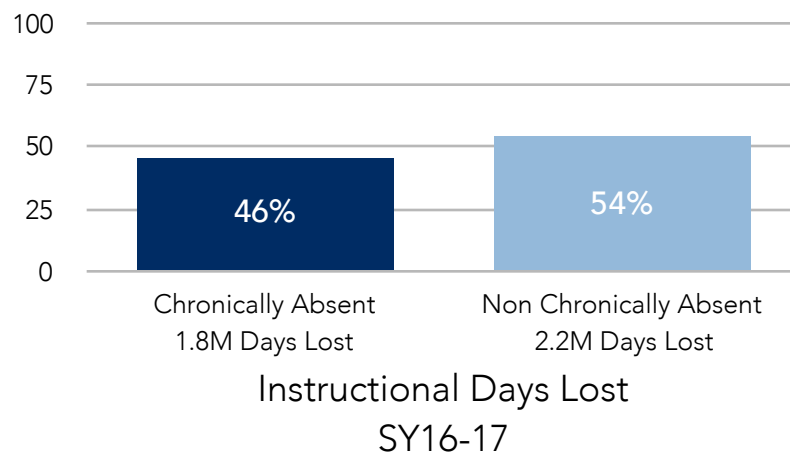
LAUSD Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism

LAUSD recognizes the importance of student attendance and has goals for improving overall attendance and decreasing chronic absenteeism.

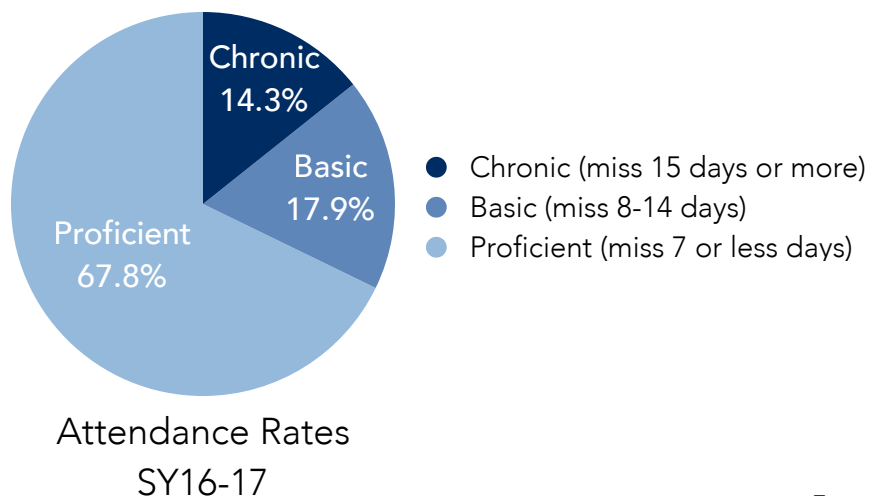
For SY16-17, the District budgeted 73 percent of students to be proficient in attendance. The actual result was 68 percent resulting in foregone revenue of about \$20 million.

Over 80,000 LAUSD students were chronically absent, missing 15 or more days of school in SY16-17, which is 14.3 percent of the student population. The SY16-17 result missed the District's own budget target of 11 percent-by a wide margin. The financial impact of not achieving its target was approximately \$20 million in foregone revenue.

Nearly half of all lost instructional days are due to chronically absent students.



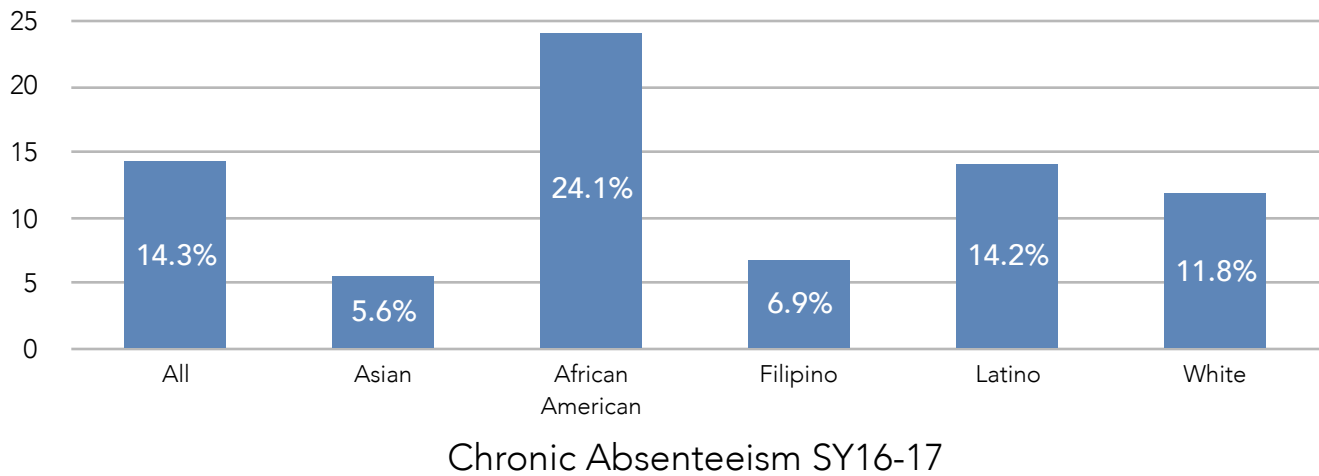
An additional 17.9 percent of students missed 8-14 school days in SY16-17, so almost one-third of LAUSD students are missing significant amounts of school.



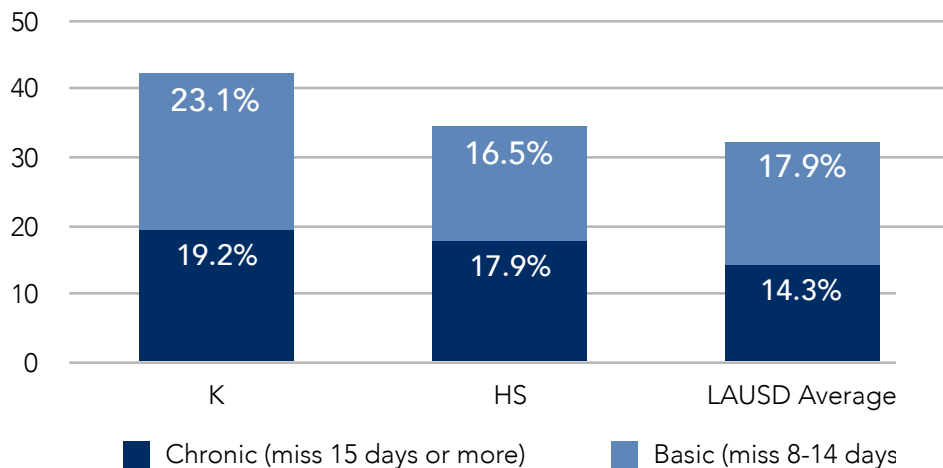
Further, another four million students days in SY16-17 were recorded as “partial day attendance.” At the secondary level—grades 6-12—student attendance is taken during each class period. If a student misses classes but is present for at least one class period, then the student’s attendance for that day is considered a “partial day.”

Currently, students with multiple partial day absences are not identified nor is information kept in a comprehensive manner on the reason for the absence. We do not know if these students are at risk for becoming chronically absent or if their ability to learn is being compromised.

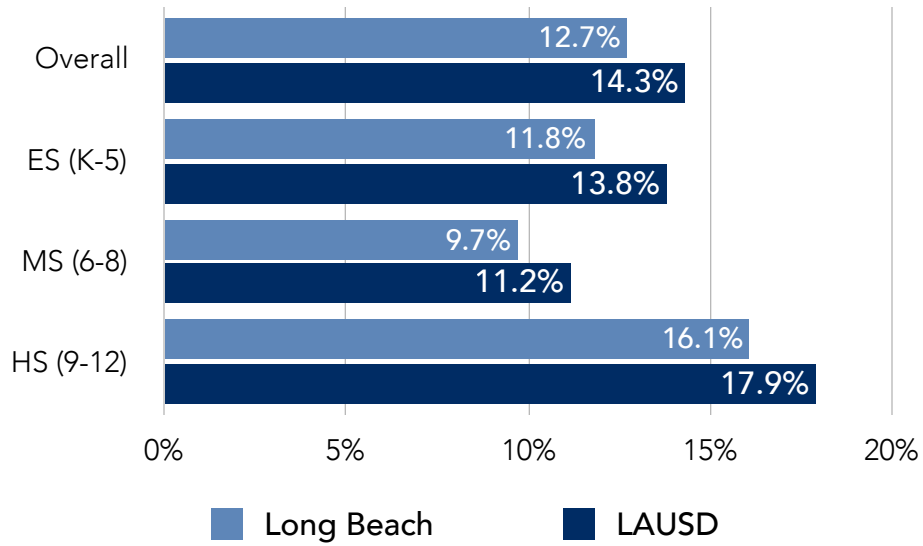
The highest rates of chronic absenteeism were found among African American students.



The highest rates of chronic absenteeism in LAUSD are found in Kindergarten and the high school grade levels.



When comparing the District to Long Beach Unified—a neighboring District with similar student populations—it's clear LAUSD can do better.



Comparison of LAUSD and Long Beach Unified
Rate of Chronic Absenteeism SY16-17

A roughly 20% higher chronic absentee rate exists in the following student populations:

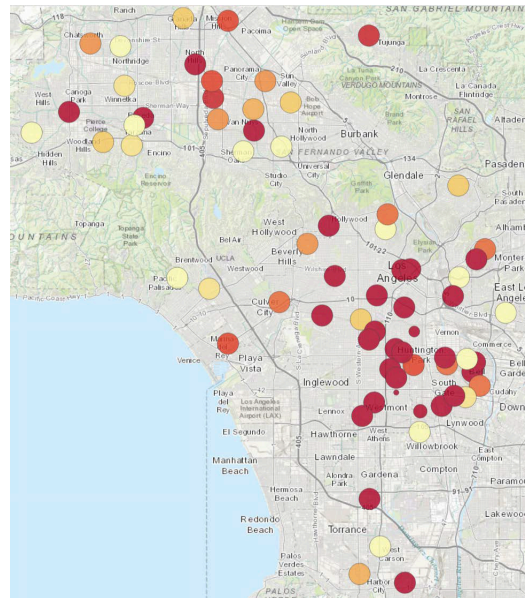
Local Districts
South and West Elementary
Schools

In grades K-5, African American students in poverty miss about 3 more days than non-impooverished African American peers

Local District
Central High Schools

In grades 9-12, English Learner students miss 3-6 more days than their non-English Learner peers

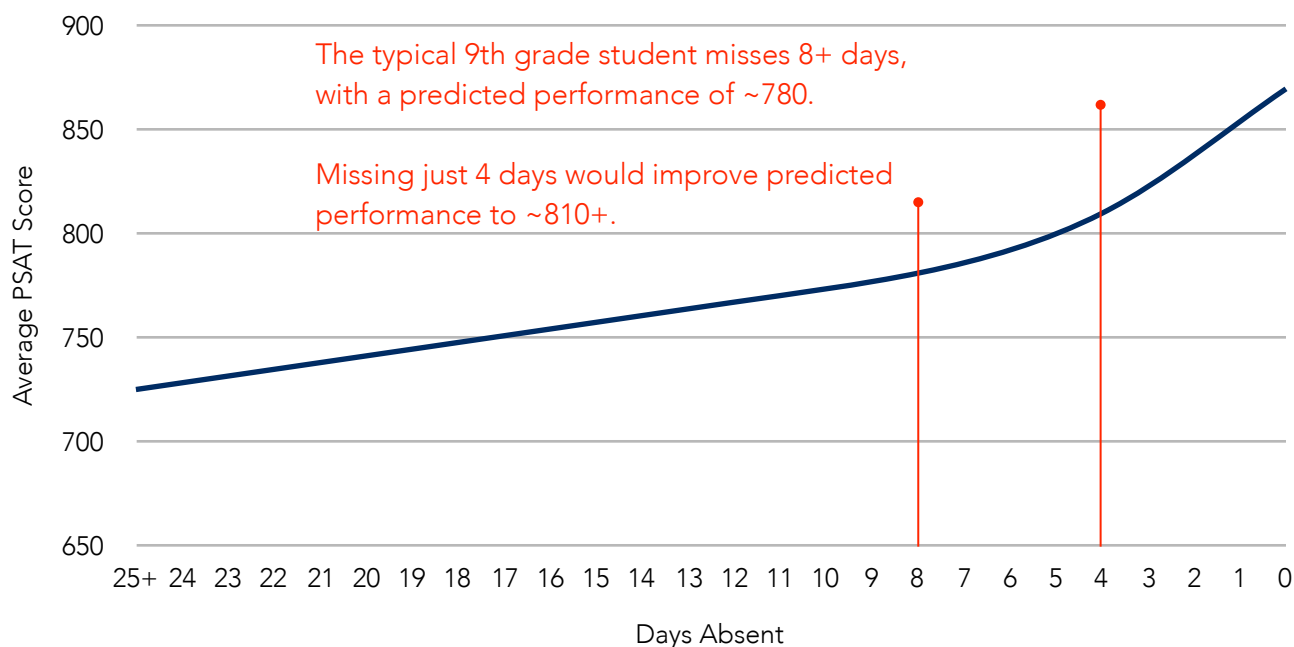
10% of schools—predominantly high schools—are contributing to about 25% of the overall attendance challenge. These schools are found across the district.



Absentee Rate
Shown by Area

- >18% chronically absent
- 14% chronically absent
- <10% chronically absent

Through improvement in attendance, LAUSD students could also see greater academic outcomes.⁷



Average 9th Grade Student Performance by Full Days Missed

LAUSD has set aggressive targets for improvement in student attendance.

School Year	Actuals		Budget Targets			
	15-16	16-17	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20
Proficient (miss 7 or less days)	69%	68%	73%	75%	77%	79%
Chronic (miss 15 or more days)	14.3%	14.3%	11%	9%	7%	5%

Current LAUSD Efforts

Attendance Programs

The District operates 27 programs which it believes impacts student attendance and spends approximately \$40 million on eight programs which are specifically designed to reduce student absenteeism and three programs described as “systems conditions to support prevention or intervention” (support systems).

The largest portion, 57 percent or \$23M, of the \$40M is spent on Pupil Services and Attendance Counselors (PSAs). PSAs serve as counselors to students for issues related to foster care, homelessness, attendance, and other issues.

A full list of these programs can be found on page 14. It is important to note that the District does not currently measure the efficacy of most of these programs.

What is Working

Leadership

Schools with the greatest success at keeping students in school share in common strong principal leadership.

Data Systems

LAUSD's student data system, MiSiS (My Integrated Student Information System), contains academic information, attendance records and more. This data system is consistent with national best practices.

Teachers are required to enter attendance information into MiSiS every day during the first 15 minutes of class. Attendance data is then available immediately after it is entered, which provides the ability to generate information needed to identify and track students, and act accordingly.

Attendance Improvement Program

The Attendance Improvement Program (AIP), launched in September of 2011, specifically targets schools most in need with a focus on Kindergarten and Grade 9 levels. AIP has contributed to increases in cumulative attendance and decreases in chronic absence rates that strongly outpace the District overall in 9th Grade and Transitional-K/Kindergarten.

LAUSD has seen good outcomes with its investment in AIP and should seek to better understand the efficacy of this program to build upon what is working and to find further opportunities for improvement.

Opportunities for Improvement

Overall Accountability

There is a lack of accountability across the eight attendance programs. There is an opportunity for the District to identify specific performance goals and detailed metrics for each program to measure the effectiveness of the programs and generate more accountability. Better informed decision making will help LAUSD use its resources to achieve better results.

Use of Data Systems

While the student data system (MiSIS) matches best practices observed in other school districts, use of the data varies in levels of consistency and effectiveness across the District.

Said differently, the District can and should be using the information in real time at the school site level to improve results. Instead, much effort is spent on compiling reports well after the fact, too late to change the outcome.

Efficacy of PSAs

Research shows inconsistent results from the \$23 million spent on PSA counselors, which may be due to differences in program participation, training, or support. Considering these counselors represent more than half the cost of the attendance programs, LAUSD needs to improve the measurement, efficacy, and accountability of the PSAs.

Information on Partial Day Absences

LAUSD has no comprehensive effort to analyze this data or these students, and is therefore not able to identify how the 'partial day attendance' is impacting the students' learning or putting them at risk for being chronically absent.

Change is Needed to Meet Goals

LAUSD's *Strategic Plan 2016-2019*, set aggressive targets that will require significant numbers of students to attend school more regularly. Currently, the District does not have an adequate plan in place to achieve the 11 percent target or its SY17-18 target of 9 percent.

LAUSD Attendance Programs and Initiatives

Program Type	Program Name	PSA FTEs*	Total Spend (incl. FTEs*)
Systems conditions to support prevention or intervention	Local District Attendance Data Performance Dialogue and Monthly Data Reports	7	~\$60K in SY16-17
	SHHS Integration Staff Meetings Per Local District		
	Resource Fair		
Prevention	Attendance Improvement Training Modules		~\$40M in SY16-17
	School Attendance Month		
Early & Targeted Intervention	School-Purchased Pupil Services	176	
	Attendance Improvement Program	32	
Targeted Intervention	Foster Youth Achievement Program	103	
	School Attendance Review Board Services	6	
	Student Recovery Day	3	
Legal Intervention	Notification of Truancy (NOT) Letters		
Not currently focusing on attendance	A-G Diploma Program	136	
	Group Home Scholars Program	22	
	Juvenile Hall/Camp Returnee Program	21	
	Homeless Education Program	20	
	YouthSourceCity Partnership	15	
	FamilySourcePartnership Program	13	
	6th Grade T dap	3	
	Foreign Student Admissions Office	2	
	Oral Health		
	Children's Health & Disability Prevention Program		
	Communicable Disease		
	Asthma Program		
	Nurse Family Partnership		
	Trauma Screening and Support (TSS)		
	Academic Support and Achievement Program		
	Permits and Student Transfers		

*FTE (full time equivalent) is a measurement of how many full-time employees, or a combination of part-time employees, are allocated to perform the work.

Recommendations

Reducing absenteeism is a significant challenge for which there are no simple solutions. Many LAUSD students and families face real and significant barriers which prevent students from making it to school including inadequate transportation, health issues, and other conditions related to living near or below the poverty line.

We are recommending a multi-faceted approach, which includes the improvement of current District efforts, broad based outreach to parents, students, and the community, and targeted approaches that support the unique needs of individual students and families.

These efforts will need to be carefully coordinated, measured for effectiveness, and focused on the students most at risk. The pilot programs which prove successful in their test phase during early 2018, should be adopted district wide by August 2018.

Broad Based Outreach

Launch in January 2018 and repeat in August 2018

District-Wide Awareness Effort

Communications and outreach effort to educate parents and communities on the importance of attending school

Targeted Outreach

Launch in January 2018

Direct Mail Program

Communicate directly with parents by sending direct mail to the homes of students

Neighborhood Canvass Program

Using the materials developed for the District-wide awareness effort, canvass neighborhoods and businesses to surround the schools experiencing high rates of absences

Phone Bank and Texting

Phone bank and texting program that contacts parents early and often to prevent students from becoming chronically absent

Cash Incentive Program

Reward schools with a cash bonus for reaching their attendance goals

Direct Intervention

Launch in August 2018

School Site Intervention and Mentoring Pilot Programs

School-based programs to provide one-on-one outreach to students and families most at risk of becoming chronically absent or students who are already chronically absent

Funding

Broad Based Outreach

There will be a minimal cost in creating and administering the public awareness campaign. It is expected that the costs and media will be donated.

Targeted Outreach

There will be a minimal investment to create and test each of the pilot programs. It is expected most, in not all, of the pilots will be self-funding as any positive impact on attendance will generate Average Daily Attendance (ADA) revenue which will offset the investment.

Direct Intervention

This intervention effort will rely on meaningful, one-on-one intervention and counseling, which will require advanced planning and may require additional resources. However, with the District spending over \$40 million dollars annually on attendance support systems and programs, it may be possible to fund a portion of the intervention efforts from more effective use of these monies.

It is also expected that the Targeted Outreach programs will help to identify the best opportunities to invest in Targeted Intervention.

Recommendation 1 | Broad Based Outreach

Awareness Campaign (Jan 2018)

Launch a District-wide public awareness campaign to communicate the importance of daily school attendance.

January to End of School Year

- Comprehensive communications and outreach effort to surround parents and communities with a drumbeat of information to help raise awareness
- Multi-media communications effort to include community leaders, sports, and entertainment figures
- Organize community and civic groups, engaging them as partners to help reach parents in every community
- Engage business organizations to help educate employers on the benefits of supporting employees who are parents
- Use social media content to reach both parents and students

Recommendation 2 | Targeted Outreach

Direct Mail Program (Jan 2018, Target 20,000 students)

Launch a pilot program that sends positive, direct mail to the parents of students most at risk of becoming chronically absent.

This strategy is based on research by Dr. Todd Rogers of Harvard University and leverages behavioral economics to encourage parents by correcting misbeliefs. Survey research shows parents of chronically absent students underestimate both the total number of days their child has missed and how much school they've missed relative to their peers.

In Philadelphia, the program reduced chronic absenteeism by 10 percent among at-risk students compared to a control group.

- LAUSD would engage with *In Class Today*, an outside vendor, to design and implement the program. *In Class Today* would also be responsible for tracking student data and providing data analyses and reports on the results of the program
- Framework of the program would include sending personalized mail, five-to-six times per year to parents of students at risk of chronic absenteeism
 - Mail would include up to date information on how many classes a student has missed
 - Mail would also inform parents of the importance of their children's' attendance, their ability to influence it, and how their children's' absences compare to their classmates'

Neighborhood Canvass Program (Jan 2018, Target 20,000 students)

Using the materials developed for the District-wide awareness effort, canvass neighborhoods and businesses to surround the schools experiencing high rates of chronic absentee rates.

The Long Beach All In Campaign noted that a large part of the success of their awareness efforts relied on the support and participation of local businesses, parents, and residents.⁸

- Canvases will include not only homes and apartment buildings, but local businesses
- Materials will include information about the benefits of attending school and contact information for business owners and neighbors if they know of a student in need
- Partner with organizations to provide the volunteers needed for the canvass

Phone Bank and Texting (Jan 2018, Target 20,000 students)

Phone bank and texting programs to contact parents early and often to prevent students from becoming chronically absent.

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District launched a program that included a centrally-coordinated phone bank, positive incentives for students, and a district-wide awareness campaign. This three-prong approach saw an 11 percentage-point decrease in students missing 10 days or more.

In its first year, the phone bank was staffed by volunteers. Now in its second year, Cleveland's re-assigned employees call students across the District.

- Phone bank could be centrally-coordinated to give an added level of support for schools
- Phone lists would be generated using daily attendance data

Research from Columbia University cited a 17 percent increase in class attendance with a program that sent simple, automated text messages to parents about their child's missed assignments, grades, and class absences.⁹

School Incentive Program (Jan 2018, 20,000 students)

A pilot program that rewards schools with a cash bonus for reaching their attendance goals. The bonus can be used at the school by principals on a discretionary basis.

Long Beach Unified made this a part of their "All In" campaign not only to recognize schools, but also to underscore that raising attendance rates was a District wide priority.

- Use data to set target goals for each school
 - District goal determined by Superintendent
 - School goal determined by highest percent in last 3 years, + .1% percentage-point
 - Goals presented before pilot begins
 - At year-end, list attendance rates achieved by each school
 - Beginning of the following school year, set new goals based on new data
- Cash Bonus Structure
 - Bonus determined by the District and based on estimated increases in ADA revenue
 - Size of school could be relevant when determining bonus amounts
 - Schools can earn a bonus two ways:
 - If the school is high-performing and meets the District goal, it receives a bonus
 - If a school meets their own goal, it receives a bonus
 - If a school meets both, it receives both bonuses
- Bonuses given to schools as an unrestricted resource, giving the school the ability to determine how it spends the funds

Recommendation 3 | Direct Intervention

School Site Intervention Pilot Programs (SY18-19, Target TBD students)

Programs to provide meaningful, one-on-one counseling to students and families most at risk of becoming chronically absent. Counselors and mentors work with the students and families to identify and remove the barriers preventing them from attending school. Peer-to-peer and parent-to-parent counseling programs to help work with students and families that may be out of reach of the District.

New York City's attendance program effectively used what they call Success Mentors to work with students and families to remove the underlying causes of absenteeism.

"Success Mentors, and their supporting infrastructure, were the most effective component of the [NYC] task force's effort across all school types. Previously chronically absent students who had mentors gained almost two additional weeks (9 days) of school per student, per year."¹⁰

The District's aim should be to provide a framework for a targeted intervention program and to provide the tools, resources, and support that each school needs. The school's aim should be to build a program that best fits their student population, coupled with leadership and dedication to the program.

These customized school site pilot programs will take time and resources to design. The District should focus on a small number of schools to get it right. The District should begin designing the programs now and be able to implement the programs at the start of school year 2018-19.

- Build school site plans to organize the school team, identify the resources needed, and map the prevention and intervention methods to be used
 - Build school site teams with one individual, either the principal or another person, accountable for program. Leadership is key
 - Develop systems and protocols for data use
 - Develop protocols for student contact—when it will happen
 - Identify the intervention methods—mentoring, parent meetings, social workers
 - Identify the resources needed from the District, social services or law enforcement
- At the beginning of the school year, mentors will be assigned to students who were chronically absent the previous school year
 - Mentors will work with students to determine the root causes or barriers preventing them from attending school

References

Information was provided by LAUSD and the California CORE Districts and we thank them both for their cooperation. We would also like to thank the schools districts of New York City and Long Beach who generously gave their time to help inform our efforts.

All data analyses in this report were conducted by Education Resource Strategies (ERS), unless otherwise footnoted. ERS is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping urban school systems use resources most effectively. Further analyses on LAUSD's school attendance rates can be found in the *"ERS Report to the LAUSD Task Force: Attendance Analyses, October 31, 2017"* which is available at lausdtaskforce.com. The Task Force thanks ERS for the analysis and research that informed this work. The conclusions and recommendations included in this report are solely the work of the Task Force.

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