Tackling Chronic Absence Starting in the
Early Grades
What Cities Can Do to Ensure
Every Child Has a Fighting Chance
to Succeed

BY HEDY N. CHANG
AND PHYLLIS W. JORDAN

In Baltimore, the mayor's office, school officials, community partners, and philanthropic leaders worked together on a key educational strategy: improving school attendance. In New York, the mayor catalyzed a comprehensive citywide response by establishing an interagency task force to develop a comprehensive set of strategies to reduce absenteeism, analyzing data, launching interventions in an initial pilot round of twenty-five schools and tapping community resources, celebrities, mentors, and businesses to encourage students, as early as kindergarten, to go to school more regularly. And in Oakland, California, city leaders, educators, and foundations are using a detailed analysis of attendance patterns to begin building a citywide approach to reducing chronic absenteeism.

These cities, like others across the country, are recognizing the power of attendance to improve student achievement. Often overlooked amid the emphasis on standardized test scores, attendance numbers can reveal which students—and schools—are headed off track academically. When properly analyzed, the data can tip off city leaders to deeper community problems and suggest where the city should focus its resources to help students and families overcome common barriers to getting to school.

Improving school attendance is one of three locally owned solutions embraced by the National Civic League and the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading to ensure that all children learn to read well by the end of third grade. Too many absences can keep a student from reaching that milestone, signaling academic trouble ahead and a greater likelihood that the student will drop out. Cities have a vested interest in ensuring that all students succeed in school. Excellent schools, low dropout rates, and a more

educated citizenry are all critical to maintaining a robust local economy, high property values, as well as safe and secure neighborhoods. This article explains the imperative for cities to pay heed to school attendance, suggests strategies for community leaders, and offers three case studies of cities that are tackling chronic absence.

The Imperative

We often think of absenteeism and truancy as secondary school problems, but they begin to affect performance long before that. In fact, in many school districts, the absentee rate in kindergarten is nearly as high as it is in ninth grade. These early absences take their toll on our youngest students, especially those from low-income families, and can leave them ill prepared to read by third grade. The problem often is not truancy, which typically refers only to unexcused absences. Rather, it is "chronic absence," or children missing 10 percent of school (or about eighteen to nineteen days over the course of an academic year) for any reason—excused or unexcused.

The report "Present, Engaged & Accounted For" documented for the first time that one in ten kindergarten students nationwide misses 10 percent or more of school every year. It also found that chronic absence in kindergarten can translate into poor academic performance throughout elementary school, especially for children in poverty whose families lack the resources to make up for time lost in the classroom. Even students who arrive at kindergarten ready to learn can lose out academically if they do not show up for school, according to a new study commissioned by our national initiative, Attendance Works. The study, "Attendance in the Early Grades," examined 640 California children

in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, comparing their school readiness scores in kindergarten with their third-grade reading scores on standardized tests. Generally, there was a strong correlation between kindergarten readiness and third-grade proficiency. However, students who arrived at school academically ready to learn but then missed 10 percent of their kindergarten and first grade years scored, on average, 60 points below similar students with good attendance on a 450-point scale. Only 17 percent of the children who were chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade were proficient readers by the end of third grade as compared to two-thirds of their peers who attended regularly during those crucial years. The problems only get worse as children grow older. By sixth grade, chronic absence becomes one of the key early warning signals that a student will eventually drop out of high school. By ninth grade, missing excessive amounts of school can predict dropout rates with more accuracy than eighth grade test scores. In summary, all the data suggest that chronic absence is a key indicator of academic success and dropout.

Chronic absence is a particular problem for poor children, who are both more likely than other kids to miss school and more likely to suffer academically for those absences. In "Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development," Douglas Ready reported that the negative impact of these early absences was 75 percent greater for a low-income child than for one from an average-income family. Unfortunately, poor children are four times more likely to be chronically absent than their peers. This fact reflects the tangle of problems that can stand in the way of good school attendance, such as inadequate transportation, unstable housing, lack of health care, high incidence of chronic disease, and poor nutrition and safety concerns. On top of all this, schools in high-poverty neighborhoods are often not as educationally engaging as other campuses.

The good news is that communities can turn around chronic absenteeism when city leaders know the extent of the problem, recognize the barriers facing students, and marshal community resources to address them. Unfortunately, many city and school district leaders are in the dark because they do not look at the right numbers. They look at average, schoolwide attendance figures, and they look at truancy, not at the full range of excused and unexcused absences. Thus, they do not know how many students are missing 10 percent of the school year or, in other words, how many students are chronically absent. Even a school with 95 percent average daily attendance can have 15 to 20 percent of its students registering high levels of absenteeism.

Chronic absence is a problem we can fix, if we look at the right data and start early enough. Schools and communities are seeing attendance rates improve within months when they monitor chronic absence data, identify barriers to attendance, and reach out to children and families to help them overcome barriers to getting to school. People everywhere understand the value of school attendance, which makes it easy for city leaders to rally support for their campaigns.

> Chronic absence is a problem we can fix, if we look at the right data and start early enough.

The Strategies

While the primary responsibility for tracking attendance falls to the school district, city leaders can play a key role by promoting public awareness and galvanizing public and nonprofit resources to address the root causes of student absenteeism. Here are five strategies:

1. *Get, share, and monitor chronic absence data.* Without the right information, city leaders often do not know whether they have an attendance problem or how best to address it. Mayors and city council members can encourage school districts to analyze their data or offer city tech support to crunch the data.
2. *Make attendance a community priority.* City agencies, volunteer organizations, church groups, foundations, and parents can all help schools improve attendance. Mayors can convene task forces that bring together these partners to reach out to parents and students.
3. *Partner with school and city-funded agencies to nurture a "culture of attendance."* City leaders

can use the bully pulpit to rally support for improving school attendance. That can include launching a public awareness campaign, creating attendance incentives to engage students and parents, and tapping community-based organizations to mentor at-risk students.

4. *Identify and address barriers to attendance.* City resources, from social service agencies to transit authorities, can help break down barriers keeping children from school. That could mean police officers working with neighbors to create safe walking routes to school, health clinics ensuring access to basic medical care or housing authorities, and homeless shelters providing coordinators to ensure children living there get to school every day.

5. *Advocate for stronger policies and public investments.* Local officials can lead the charge for policies that adopt a standard definition of chronic absence, require districts to report and calculate data, establish attendance teams to target at-risk students, and address attendance in school achievement plans.

Consider these three cities at different stages in addressing chronic absence. Baltimore began five years ago and has already seen some dramatic results. New York launched a full campaign in 2010 and has developed innovative approaches to mentoring students and engaging the full community. Oakland is just starting the work. In each case, local leaders are using their leverage, position, and resources to improve school attendance and, with it, academic achievement.

Baltimore

Baltimore was uniquely positioned for the first step in an attendance campaign, since it has both easy access to the right data and research resources to draw on. Maryland is one the few states that requires schools and districts to report on how many students are chronically absent each year. The state sets the standard for chronic absence at twenty days, slightly higher than the 10 percent mark. Baltimore is also home to a set of Johns Hopkins University researchers who have explored the role of chronic absence in high school dropout prevention. In 2008, the Open Society Institute-Baltimore (OSI-Baltimore) commissioned the Baltimore Education Research Consortium (a partnership of Johns Hopkins, Morgan State University, and Baltimore City Public Schools) to extend the data into the early grades. The results showed an alarming situation: One in six elementary students was missing at least twenty days of class, as were 34 percent of middle schoolers and 44 percent of high school students.

Early efforts to improve attendance came in tandem with steps to reform the school district's strict discipline code, which resulted in more than 100,000 missed days of school in the 2006–2007 school year. A steep reduction in suspensions for minor disciplinary infractions, along with efforts to replace struggling middle schools with kindergarten-to-eighth-grade schools and sixth-to-twelfth-grade campuses, helped cut middle school absences in half.

The mayor's office, OSI-Baltimore, and Baltimore City Public Schools made attendance a community priority by pulling together a work group of diverse community stakeholders. OSI-Baltimore also provided funding to the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland and the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard University Law School to research best practices, identify barriers to school attendance, and coordinate the work group, which is now known as the Baltimore Student Attendance Initiative.

Across the school district, teachers, students, parents, and community members are involved in building this culture of attendance. Students made videos and posters to highlight the importance of attendance. Experience Corps members and church group volunteers contact chronically absent students and their families to find and help address barriers to attendance.

Through strategic grants and investments, the attendance initiative is steadily addressing the causes of absenteeism. The Family League of Baltimore City, which administers the city's investment in after-school programs, requires the programs to work to target chronically absent students, to take attendance, and to set attendance goals for their student population. OSI-Baltimore's grants target foster children and homeless children, two populations with high absentee rates. The city's transit agency is partnering with the Central Maryland Transportation Alliance and other advocacy organizations

through the Rate Your Ride texting campaign to track real-time data about students' experiences using public transportation and then address those issues.

Individually, Baltimore principals are working to build the type of school culture that encourages children to attend school regularly. One of these schools—Franklin Square Elementary and Middle School—offers an inspiring model of success. Despite the fact that 91 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced lunch and classes often have as many as forty students, Franklin boasts one of the highest attendance rates in Baltimore. Its personal outreach holds students accountable and creates an environment where students want to go to school. The school provides clean uniforms, dental care, engaging after-school activities, and even free haircuts to help build good attendance. Baltimore's efforts show how targeted approaches by city leaders working in conjunction with schools, communities, and organizations can drastically reduce chronic absence rates.

New York City

Like Baltimore, New York City was fortunate to have a good set of data to inform its attendance initiative. In 2008, the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School released a report outlining the chronic absence situation in New York. It was dire: 20 percent of elementary students were chronically absent, with even higher rates for low-income students. The city's Department of Education began working on attendance in some elementary schools and has seen some decline in chronic absence rates. The city's efforts really took off in 2010 when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg made attendance a citywide priority and created the Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, & School Engagement. The heads of all city agencies serving youth sit on the task force, which seeks to address the factors that contribute to absenteeism and develop multisector strategies to improve outcomes.

In August 2010, the task force launched the Every Student Every Day campaign, which targeted

twenty-five schools with high levels of absenteeism. In the first half of the school year, twenty-two of the twenty-five schools had reduced their absentee rates. The ten elementary schools saw the best results, with a collective 24 percent decline in the percentage of students who were chronically absent.

The campaign was quick to partner with schools and city agencies to create a culture of attendance. An electronic data dashboard helps school leadership and key school partners track trends in absenteeism. Principals led weekly meetings to discuss at-risk students. A public awareness campaign included parent summits at each school in the fall and celebrity wake-up calls, in which sports heroes and rap stars recorded inspirational robo-calls urging chronically absent students to attend every day. Business partners—from the New York Yankees, to Old Navy, and Starbucks—joined in to provide incentives for good attendance, including donated backpacks, winter coats, tickets, and gift cards.

The city also tapped several community-based organizations for volunteers to create a new in school mentoring model, called the NYC Success Mentor Corp.

Each of these Success Mentors came to the school with direct access to the school leadership and community partners as well as to data about the chronically absent students they were mentoring. Each made a full-year commitment to the project, pledging to serve at least fifteen hours a week and participate in trainings throughout the year. Success Mentors typically worked with fifteen to twenty chronically absent students. The Children's Aid Society served as a technical advisor, conducting site visits and regular data reviews, as well as checking in with the mentors' supervisors. The mentors' responsibilities included greeting the students by name in the morning, calling students' homes or cell phones if they did not show up for school, identifying the causes of absenteeism, and helping to develop and track interventions. If kids were struggling with class work or social dynamics at schools, the mentor was there to help. Mentors also focused on parent outreach, and 20 percent of their time was devoted to schoolwide community building. The mayor's task force is studying various models of mentoring to determine which worked best and can be easily

taken to scale. Some schools used City Year's young AmeriCorps workers while others tapped the older retired professionals working through the ReServe program. Social work interns earned field credit for their work, and college students received course credit. While available data are preliminary, chronically absent students with Success Mentors have outperformed those who had none.

New York's task force has worked to identify as many barriers as possible to attendance and created targeted solutions to those issues. For example, in response to the extraordinary difficulties facing homeless students, fifteen homeless shelters have an academic point person whose job is to see that children attend school, and all homeless shelters now have homework help centers. The chronic absence program was to expand to fifty schools in the 2011–2012 school year. In addition, the mayor's task force is partnering with the school chancellor and the city health commission to address one of the city's leading causes of absenteeism: asthma. The NYC Asthma Friendly Schools campaign will train community members and physical education teachers to support students with asthma. It will also tap the expertise of the American Lung Association and the New York Sports Club, which will send trainers to selected schools to promote health and wellness. This approach and other targeted strategies New York has implemented can serve as models of the impact that city leaders can have on this important issue.

Oakland

In Oakland, the push for attendance tracking started with the school district, where the leadership was concerned about high absentee rates. The Attendance Works initiative, with philanthropic support from the San Francisco Foundation, commissioned a thorough analysis of Oakland attendance data, breaking down absences by grade level, racial and ethnic group, school population, and census tract. The analysis showed that nearly one in seven students in the Oakland Unified School District missed 10 percent of the school year. In elementary school, the rates were highest among kindergartners and African American students and in neighborhoods already challenged by poverty and environmental health hazards (see Figure 1).

DOI: 10.1002/ncr

Figure 1. Percentage Chronically Absent in Oakland Elementary Schools
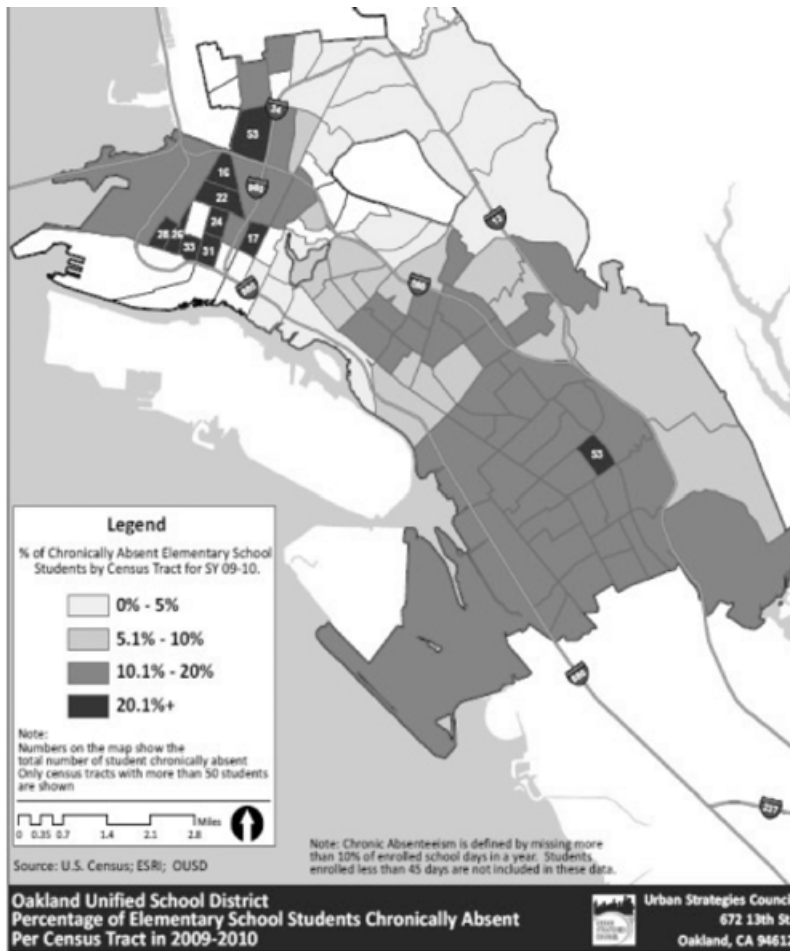
The school district leadership presented the numbers to the mayor's Education Cabinet, which brings together education, business, and labor leaders; social service agencies; higher education leaders; workforce development providers; and foundations to address Oakland's critical education needs. Recognizing that addressing the city's chronic absence problem, starting in the early grades, could help reduce the achievement gaps dividing students by race and socioeconomic status and improve graduation rates, the cabinet agreed to launch a task force. Addressing the problem of absenteeism also dovetailed with a citywide health initiative.

Although the Oakland campaign is in its early stages, it has already taken the important step of identifying and learning from the schools where attendance is good, despite large number of low-income students. One model is Brookfield Elementary School, where the chronic absence rate has

dropped from 20 percent to 5 percent in the past five years. Principal Adam Taylor's approach reads like a checklist of best practices: careful attention to individual student data starting in the early grades, student incentives to create a culture of attendance, and on-site case managers and community outreach to students and families with significant barriers to surmount.

The work going on in each of these cities, as well as in schools and communities nationwide, is laying the groundwork for better monitoring and reporting of student attendance. We hope to deploy policy levers—including reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act and state legislation and regulation—to encourage more consistent approaches. Certainly, some communities will find their absenteeism problem limited to a few schools or a handful of students. In those instances, a case management approach could address

the problem. But any city with deep poverty will likely find systemic barriers to getting to school that require programmatic or even policy solutions in order to reduce chronic absence. By monitoring the data, making attendance a priority, creating a culture of attendance, tackling the barriers, and, when possible, advocating for policy change, city leaders can help turn around attendance and put our youngest students on a path toward academic success.

References

"Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes." Watsonville, Calif.: Applied Survey Research, May 2011.

Chang, H., and Romero, M. "Present, Engaged & Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades." New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, September 2008.

Ready, D. D. "Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development: The Differential Effects of School Exposure." *Sociology of Education*, 2010, *83*(4), 271–286.

Hedy N. Chang is the director of Attendance Works, a national and state initiative that aims to ensure that every district and community in every state not only tracks chronic absence data for individual students but also intervenes to help those children and schools.

Phyllis W. Jordan is the communications lead of Attendance Works and a vice president at the Hatcher Group communications firm.