Chronic Absence in California: What New Dashboard Data Reveals About School Performance

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In this policy brief, we describe the chronic absence performance levels of California's districts, schools, and student groups using newly released data from California's School Dashboard. We also examine the role that chronic absence plays in determining differentiated assistance. For schools with very high chronic absence rates (above 20 percent), nearly two thirds reported increases while about a third reported declines from the previous year. Also, about 1 in 4 districts had African American as well as American Indian or Alaska Native student populations who were classified in the lowest performance level. Finally, a majority of districts that qualified for differentiated assistance did so due to chronic absence. Districts and schools should use the continuous improvement process to examine and evaluate the underlying reasons for their performance.

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Policy Analysis for California Education

Introduction

In 2016, California adopted chronic absence in Grades K–8 as an indicator for student engagement. Pupil engagement is the state's fifth priority that districts must address in their annual Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP). Like many states, California uses a chronic absence metric that defines students as chronically absent if they miss 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason.[1] Chronic absenteeism has been linked to negative schooling outcomes, including lower achievement and higher dropout rates.[2]

The addition of this indicator has critical implications for accountability and school improvement. To shed light on how the introduction of this indicator into the California School Dashboard changes the portrait of school performance, this brief describes performance levels in chronic absence in California based on data from the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. We also examine how the addition of chronic absence to California's student performance measurement system changes which districts are identified for differentiated assistance, a support program that districts have access to when one or more of their student groups perform the lowest on two or more performance indicators. The data we analyze come from the California Department of Education on chronic absence and differentiated assistance.[3]

Performance Levels in Chronic Absenteeism

In order to understand how chronic absenteeism fits into California's multiple measures accountability system, we first need to describe how the metric itself is functioning. To describe chronic absence, we use categories established by the state regarding status, change, and performance levels on the chronic absence indicator.

Status is the chronic absenteeism rate for the 2017–2018 school year. This rate is the percentage of students who were absent 10 percent or more of the school year. The state categorizes a district, school, or student group into five status categories:

Table 1. Status Categories and Cut Scores for Chronic Absence in Grades K–8

Status Categories	Cut Scores
Very low	2.5% or less
Low	2.6% to 5.0%
Medium	5.1% to 10.0%
High	10.1% to 20.0%
Very high	20.1% or more

Change is the difference between the chronic absence rates for the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. The state classifies a district, school, or student group into five change categories.

Table 2. Change Categories and Cut Scores for Chronic Absence in Grades K–8

Change Categories	Cut Scores[4]
Increased significantly from prior year	By 3.0 percentage points or more
Increased from prior year	By 0.5 to 2.9 percentage points
Maintained from prior year	Declined or increased by less than 0.5 percentage points
Declined from prior year	By 0.5 to 2.9 percentage points
Declined significantly from prior year	By 3.0 or more percentage points

Note: If a school has fewer than 150 students, *increased significantly* and *declined significantly* are not used.

The state uses combinations of these status and change categories to establish the performance level. As shown in Table 3, the state uses a 5-by-5 table of the status and change categories to classify a district, school, or student group into color-coded performance levels.

Red represents the lowest performance category, followed by orange, yellow, green, and finally blue (the highest performance level). For example, a school with 9 percent chronic absence (medium) and an increase in 0.3 percentage points (maintained) is color-coded as yellow. The status and change data are then used to assign a color code to schools and districts based on their overall performance and the performance of student subgroups.

Table 3. Five-by-Five Color Table and Performance Levels for Chronic Absence

	Increased significantly from prior year (by 3.0 percentage points or more)	**Increased** from prior year (by 0.5 to less than 3.0 percentage points)	**Maintained** from prior year (declined or increased by less than 0.5 percentage points)	**Declined** from prior year (by 0.5 to less than 3.0 percentage points)	**Declined significantly** from prior year (by 3.0 or more percentage points)
Very low 2.5% or less in current year	Yellow	Green	Blue	Blue	Blue
Low 2.6% to 5.0% in current year	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green	Blue
Medium 5.1% to 10.0% in current year	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green
High 10.1% to 20.0% in current year	Red	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow
Very high 20.1% or greater in current year	Red	Red	Red	Orange	Yellow

Note: Adapted from the 2018 California School Dashboard Technical Guide (p. 167)

Chronic Absence Performance Levels for Districts and Schools[5]

As shown in Tables 4 and 5, about 10 percent of districts and 12 percent of schools were in the Red performance category, while close to 4 percent of districts and 6 percent of schools were in the Blue category. Of the 99 districts with "very high" chronic absenteeism status, nearly 55 percent experienced increases and 38 percent had declines from the previous year. Of the 630 schools with "very high" status, 65 percent reported increases and about 30 percent reported declines.

Table 4. Proportion of Districts by Chronic Absence Performance Levels

	Increased significantly from prior year (by 3.0 percentage points or more)	**Increased** from prior year (by 0.5 to less than 3.0 percentage points)	**Maintained** from prior year (declined or increased by less than 0.5 percentage points)	**Declined** from prior year (by 0.5 to less than 3.0 percentage points)	**Declined significantly** from prior year (by 3.0 or more percentage points)
Very low 2.5% or less in current year	0 (0.0%)	3 (0.3%)	13 (1.5%)	9 (1.0%)	8 (0.9%)
Low 2.6% to 5.0% in current year	0 (0.0%)	25 (2.9%)	35 (4.0%)	31 (3.5%)	7 (0.8%)
Medium 5.1% to 10.0% in current year	11 (1.3%)	100 (11.4%)	123 (14.1%)	93 (10.6%)	13 (1.5%)
High 10.1% to 20.0% in current year	25 (2.9%)	141 (16.1%)	47 (5.4%)	67 (7.7%)	24 (2.7%)
Very high 20.1% or greater in current year	20 (2.3%)	34 (3.9%)	7 (0.8%)	31 (3.5%)	7 (0.8%)

Total reported = 874 (100%); No color = 55

Table 5. Proportion of Schools by Chronic Absence Performance Levels

	Increased significantly from prior year (by 3.0 percentage points or more)	**Increased** from prior year (by 0.5 to less than 3.0 percentage points)	**Maintained** from prior year (declined or increased by less than 0.5 percentage points)	**Declined** from prior year (by 0.5 to less than 3.0 percentage points)	**Declined significantly** from prior year (by 3.0 or more percentage points)
Very low 2.5% or less in current year	0 (0.0%)	62 (0.8%)	168 (2.2%)	186 (2.4%)	52 (0.7%)
Low 2.6% to 5.0% in current year	18 (0.2%)	361 (4.7%)	311 (4.1%)	386 (5.0%)	61 (0.8%)
Medium 5.1% to 10.0% in current year	139 (1.8%)	1107 (14.5%)	520 (6.8%)	859 (11.2%)	210 (2.7%)
High 10.1% to 20.0% in current year	454 (5.9%)	964 (12.6%)	331 (4.3%)	592 (7.7%)	240 (3.1%)
Very high 20.1% or greater in current year	177 (2.3%)	234 (3.1%)	36 (0.5%)	141 (1.8%)	42 (0.5%)

Total reported = 7651 (100%); No color = 545

Chronic Absence Performance Levels for Student Groups

At the district and school levels, disparities in performance levels remained between racial/ethnic groups and targeted student groups. This is shown in Figures 1 and 2 showing color-coded performance levels at the district and school levels disaggregated by student groups.[6] We highlight key findings for student groups who continue to remain highly vulnerable to chronic absence:

American Indian or Alaska Native students

- Nearly 25 percent of districts and 33 percent of schools were in the Red performance level for their American Indian or Alaska Native student populations. Only about 1 percent of districts and 3 percent of schools were classified as Blue for these student groups.

African American students

- About 24 percent of districts' African American student populations were in the Red performance level and 39 percent in the Orange performance level. Among racial groups, this represents one of the highest combined proportions in the Red and Orange performance levels (63 percent), just behind Pacific Islanders at 69 percent.

Homeless and foster youth

- Just over 43 percent of districts serving homeless youth fell into the Red performance level, the highest relative to all other reported student groups. Only 10 percent of districts had homeless youth populations who were in the Blue and Green performance levels.
- Nearly a third (28 percent) of districts had foster youth who were classified as Red, while 15 percent of districts were Blue or Green for these youth.

Figure 1. Student Groups by Chronic Absence Performance Levels (Districts)

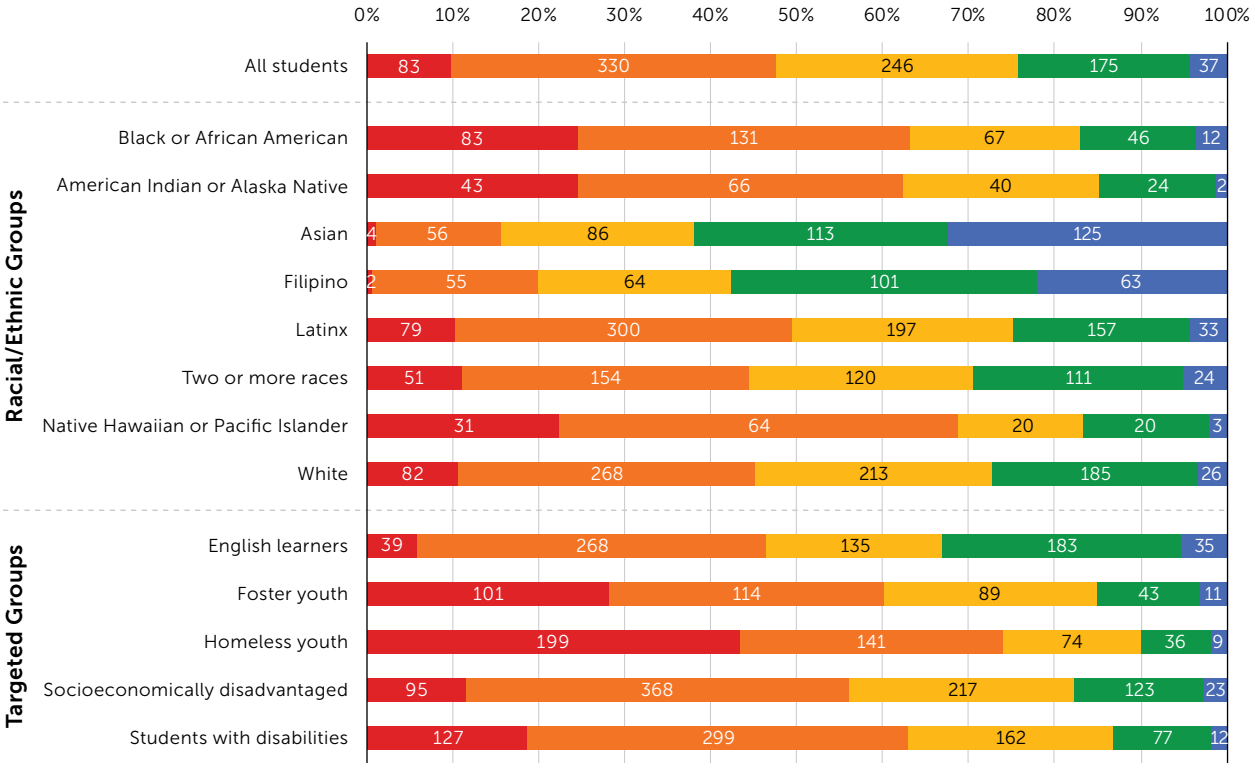
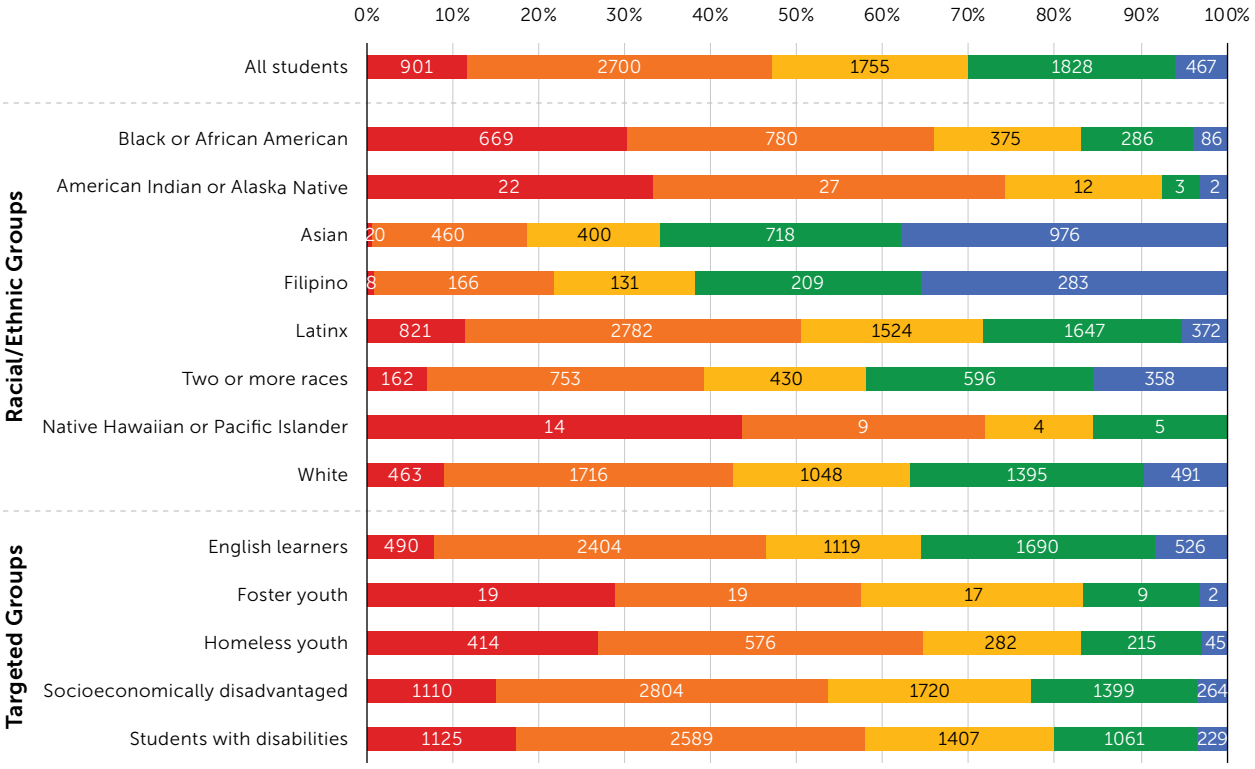


Figure 2. Student Groups by Chronic Absence Performance Levels (Schools)

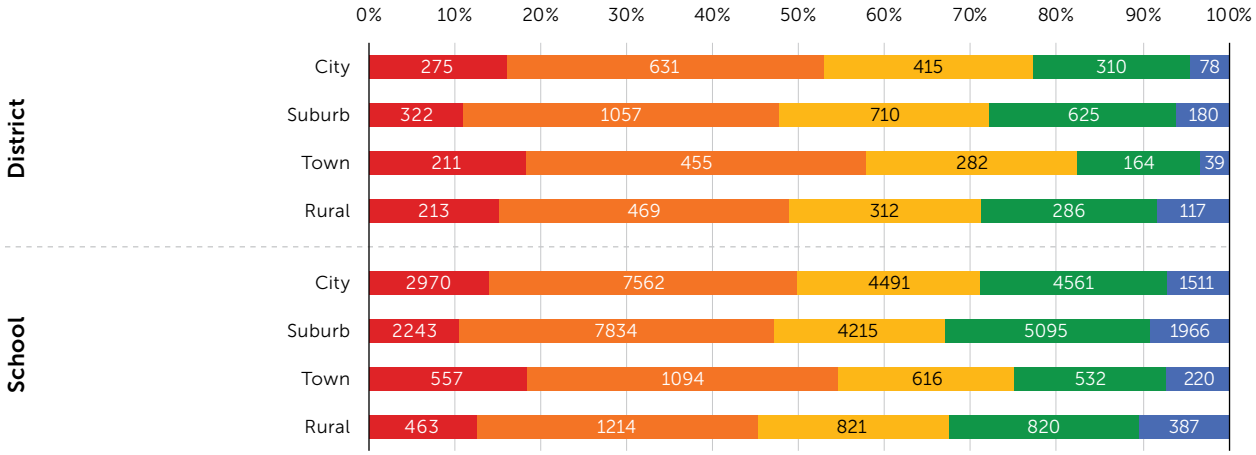


Chronic Absence Performance Levels by Locale

We matched California's chronic absenteeism dashboard data to the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data (CCD) geographic data files[7] to classify the locale of each district, local education agency (LEA), and school.[8] Our findings show that:

- Most schools and districts within each locale group were in the Orange performance level.
- The largest proportion of schools and districts in the Red performance level were located in towns.
- The highest proportion of schools and districts with a Blue performance level were in rural areas.

Figure 3. Chronic Absence Performance Levels by Locale



While we can describe performance levels across districts and schools, identifying the underlying reasons for those performance levels is much more complex. The underlying factors are multifaceted and can involve issues surrounding individual students, schools, districts, and the broader community. For purposes of continuous improvement, districts and schools with medium to high rates and large declines may want to focus on specific practices and policies that they implemented that underlie these declines. Also, declines related to particular schools and student groups in those schools may be driving the overall district decline. On the other hand, for districts with high chronic absence rates combined with large increases, they may want to examine underlying conditions, both in and out of school, that could have contributed to those increases.

Chronic Absence and Differentiated Assistance

As part of its accountability system, the state uses a district's performance on multiple indicators, including chronic absence, to determine whether it is eligible for differentiated assistance. Assistance to each district is unique. It can include help identifying evidence-based practices as well as support via academic experts.[9]

Differentiated support specifically targets districts whose performance level is Red (the lowest performance level) in two or more state priority areas[10] for at least one student group. There are total of 10 priority areas and 13 student groups. Chronic absence is part of State Priority Area 5, Pupil Engagement.

Currently, chronic absence is only reported and used to determine eligibility for differentiated assistance based on data from K–8 (e.g., elementary and middle) schools. For our analyses, we use state data on districts that were classified for differentiated assistance using four out of the 10 priority areas. These four priority areas and their state indicators are explained in Table 6.

Table 6. State Priority Areas and Indicators Used to Determine Differentiated Assistance

State Priority Area	Indicators
Priority 4: Pupil Achievement	Red on both English language arts and math; or Red on English language arts or math and Orange on the other test (Grades 3–8, 11)
Priority 5: Pupil Engagement	Red on graduate rate indicator (Grades 9–12) Red on chronic absence (Grades K–8)
Priority 6: School Climate	Red on suspension rate indicator (Grades K–12)
Priority 8: Outcomes in a Broad Course of Study	Red on college/career indicator (Grades 9–12)

For example, if a district's socioeconomically disadvantaged student population had lowest performance (Red) on both its chronic absence (K–8) and suspension rate (K–12) indicators, it would qualify for differentiated assistance.

Here we investigate the number of districts identified for differentiated assistance based on chronic absenteeism and what other problems of performance they experienced that led to identification. We answer three questions:

1. Among districts identified for differentiated assistance, what proportion were identified based on chronic absence as one of the indicators?

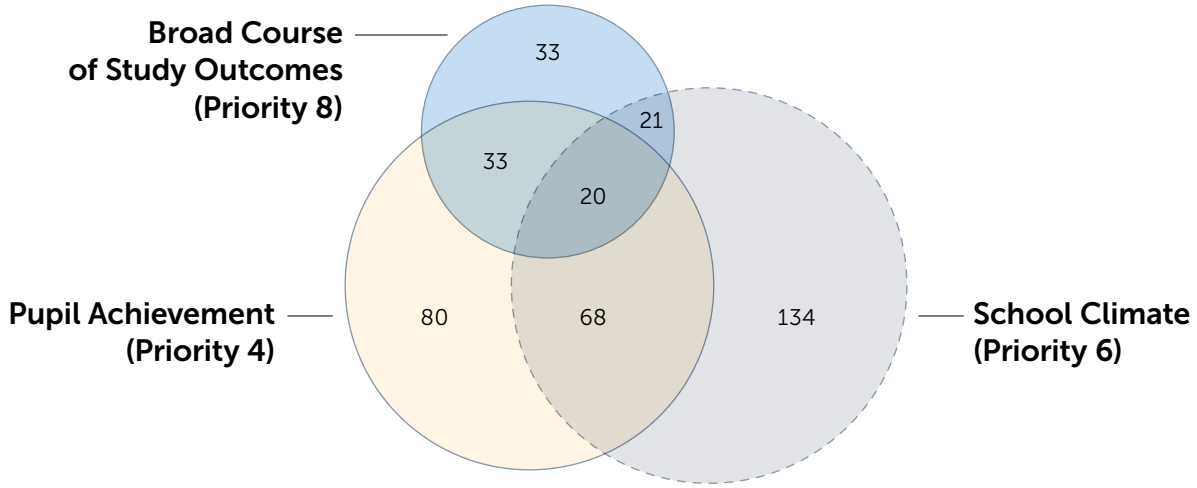
Of the 374 districts eligible for differentiated assistance in 2018, 250 (67 percent) were identified for assistance because one or more of their student groups received a Red performance level in chronic absence.

2. For districts eligible for differentiated assistance because of chronic absence, what additional state Priority Areas qualified them for assistance?

Figure 4 shows the number of districts where at least one of their student groups (e.g., foster youth) had a Red performance level on one or more of three additional Priority Areas besides chronic absence. The three additional Priority Areas are:

a. Pupil Achievement (Priority 4), based on math and English language arts tests for Grades 3–8 and 11;
b. School Climate (Priority 6), based on suspension rates for Grades K–12; and
c. Broad Course of Study Outcomes (Priority 8), based on college/career readiness for Grades 9–12.

Figure 4. Number of Districts Where a Student Group Had Lowest Performance on Another Priority Area (4, 6, and/or 8) Besides Chronic Absence

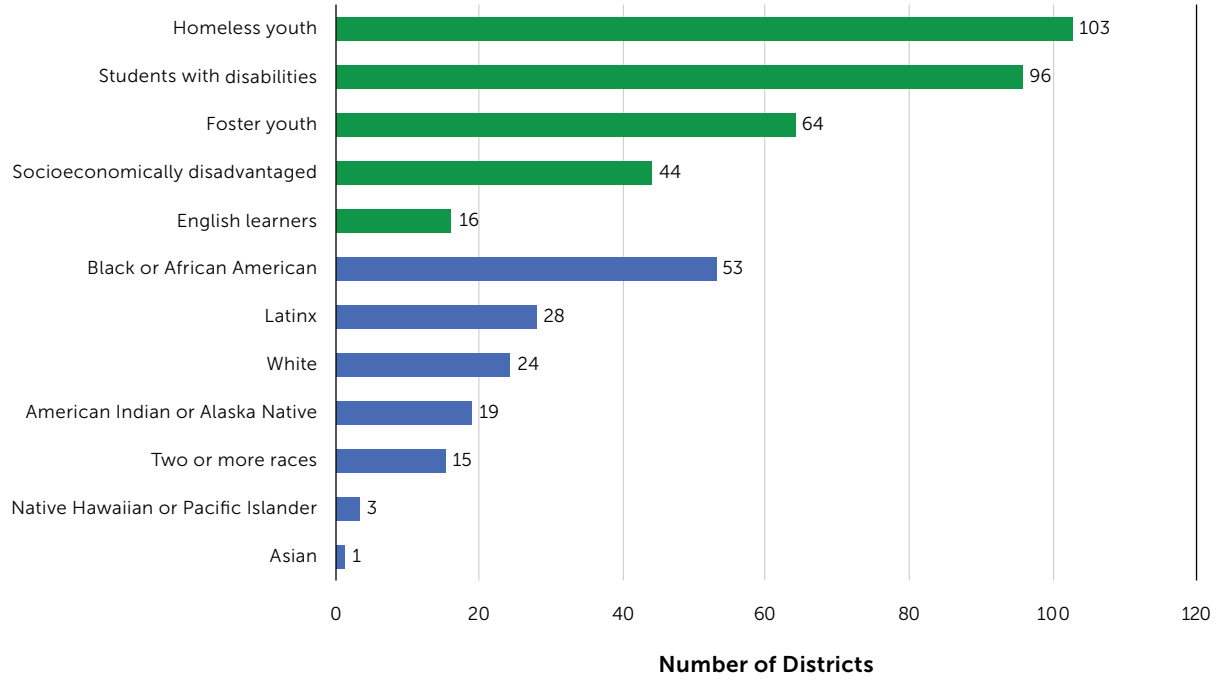


Lowest performance in chronic absence goes hand in hand most often with lowest performance in School Climate (Priority 6). For instance, 243 districts had at least one student group who performed the lowest in both chronic absence alongside School Climate (alone or in combination with the two other areas). The next most common priority area that coincided with chronic absence was Pupil Achievement (Priority 4), which was relevant for a total of 201 districts. Finally, for 107 districts, a student group had lowest performance on both chronic absence and in Broad Course of Study Outcomes (Priority 8), alone or alongside lowest performance in either of the two other priority areas.

3. Whose chronic absence performance contributed more frequently to a district's eligibility for differentiated assistance?

Figure 5 shows the number of districts where a student group had the lowest performance on chronic absence (alongside another indicator) thereby qualifying a district for differentiated assistance. This tells us whose chronic absence more frequently contributed to differentiated assistance.

Figure 5. Student Groups Whose Chronic Absence Performance Contributed to a District's Eligibility for Differentiated Assistance



Note: If a district had multiple subgroups (e.g., students with disabilities and foster youth) that were Red on two or more indicators (one of them which is chronic absence), they are included in both subgroup counts.

Chronic absence among homeless youth, students with disabilities, and foster youth more frequently contributed to a district's eligibility for assistance. For example, for 103 districts, chronic absenteeism among their homeless students (alongside one or more other indicators) qualified the district for differentiated assistance. By racial and ethnic categories, chronic absence rates of African American and Latinx students also contributed more frequently to a district's assistance status. In fact, 53 districts qualified for assistance due, in part, to chronic absence in their African American student populations in K–8. Also, 28 districts qualified for assistance due, in part, to the chronic absence performance of their Latinx students.

Conclusion

In summary, our analyses on chronic absence and differentiated assistance show that low performance on chronic absence is a primary determinate underlying a district's eligibility for differentiated assistance. At the same time, low performance on chronic absence often coincides with low performance in academic achievement and suspension rates. Finally, chronic absence among two highly vulnerable groups—homeless youth and youth with disabilities—most often drives a district's need for assistance. Taken together,

these findings suggest that a majority of districts will need to strike a balance in selecting improvement strategies focused squarely on chronic absence, but at the same time finding strategies that address its intersectionality with other complex academic and school engagement issues. As noted in a related PACE brief, *Addressing Absenteeism: Lessons for Policy and Practice*, such strategies will need to leverage the support of not just schools but parents and the broader social service sector to solve chronic absence.

Endnotes

[1] The California Education code §60901(c)(1); https://www.future-ed.org/whos-in-chronic-absenteeism-under-the-every-student-succeeds-act/

[2] See the related PACE brief by Gottfried and Hutt for a further discussion on the negative consequences of chronic absenteeism.

[3] Chronic absence dashboard data: http://www3.cde.ca.gov/researchfiles/cadashboard/chronicdownload2018.xlsx; Differentiated assistance data: https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/documents/assistancestatus18.xlsx

[4] The cut scores presented in this table are reproduced from the 2018 California School Dashboard Technical Guide (p. 166). Note however, the cut scores from the Technical Guide are presented as percentages. In fact, these scores should be in percentage points as presented in this table.

[5] These analyses are based on a total of N = 929 districts and N = 8,196 schools that were included in the dashboard data. Performance levels are based only on data for elementary and middle school (K-8) students. As not all districts/LEAs and schools serve students in the subgroups analyzed, the proportions presented reflect only that of districts/schools that reported data for that group.

[6] As not all districts/LEAs and schools serve students in the subgroups analyzed, the proportions presented reflect only that of districts/schools that reported data for that group.

[7] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/SchoolLocations

[8] City refers to territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city; Suburb refers to territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area; Town refers to territory inside an urban cluster but outside urbanized area; Rural refers to census-defined rural territory.

[9] The California Education code §52071.

[10] For Priority 4 (Pupil Achievement) a district can receive a Red on ELA or math and Orange on the other test.

Author Biographies

Dr. Kevin Gee is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis. He examines the impact of a broad array of adverse experiences on children's school outcomes, including children who are vulnerable to truancy, bullying, food insecurity, and abuse and neglect. He asks policy-relevant questions critical to understanding: (1) how their experiences of adversity influence their schooling-related outcomes; and (2) how school policies and programs can enhance their well-being and educational outcomes. His research deepens our knowledge of the plight of these children, many who often lie on the periphery of education systems both in the US and abroad. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Scientific American*, and *Education Week*.

Christopher Kim, MD/MPH is a general pediatrician and post-doctoral fellow with the UC Davis Department of Pediatrics and the Center for Healthcare Policy and Research. His research focuses on the relationship between health conditions and school absenteeism, and he is partnering with the Sacramento City Unified School District on interventions to reduce asthma-related chronic absenteeism. Under the mentorship of Dr. Kevin Gee, he is exploring ways to leverage California's chronic absenteeism data to inform school-based health interventions and policies.

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Related Publications

Michael Gottfried & Ethan Hutt. ***Addressing Absenteeism: Lessons for Policy and Practice.*** Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. 2019

Heather Hough, Emily Penner, & Joe Witte. ***Identity Crisis: Multiple Measures and the Identification of Schools Under ESSA.*** Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. 2016.

Heather Hough. ***Using Chronic Absence in a Multi-Metric Accountability System.*** Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. 2016.

Heather Hough, Erika Byun, & Laura Mulfinger. **Using Data for Improvement: Learning from the CORE Data Collaborative.** *Getting Down to Facts II.* 2018.

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