

Kindergarten absences: Some Bay Area school districts are uncovering a hidden problem

By Katy Murphy Oakland Tribune Contra Costa Times
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School districts have long wrestled with high school truancy. Now, some are beginning to notice how frequently some of their youngest students are staying home, falling further behind their classmates with every lesson they miss.

Counting excused and unexcused absences, about one in 10 kindergartners nationwide is out of school for at least 10 percent of the year, making them chronically absent, according to an estimate based on data from the Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. For the average district, that's 18 days.

"With almost no exception, it's the pattern I see everywhere," said Hedy Chang, director of Attendance Works, an initiative to bring attention to the role of attendance in student achievement.

Chronic absenteeism, while surely not new, is still largely a hidden problem. California school districts aren't required to track how many of their students are missing large amounts of school -- only to report daily, schoolwide attendance averages and unexcused absences.

That might soon change. The state's School Attendance Review Board recommended this year that districts identify and help students who are missing 10 percent of school days. And in the past few years, a small number of California school systems -- from the large districts of Los Angeles, Fresno, San Francisco and Oakland to the suburban districts of San Rafael, Redwood City and Albany -- have taken up that analysis on their own, looking at the total number of days each student is out of school for any reason.

As they do, Chang said, kindergartners rise to the top, along with high school students.

Kindergarten's image problem appears largely to blame for the trend. It doesn't have compulsory attendance, and families don't always take it as seriously as they do the other elementary grades. But it's not the carefree land of songs, Play-Doh and nap time that has made its way into popular consciousness. Before they start first grade, children are expected to write basic sentences and read words such as "what," "said," and "are." They need to be able to add and subtract numbers up to 10 and to know all of the phonetic sounds and upper- and lowercase letters.

A report published in 2008 by Columbia University's National Center for Children in Poverty found that children who missed 10 percent or more of their kindergarten year were the lowest-achieving group in first grade. A 2011 Applied Survey Research study of 600 children in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties found that poor attendance in kindergarten and first grade may erase many of the benefits of preschool, even among those who started kindergarten with strong skills. Only 13 percent of children with poor attendance in kindergarten and first grade tested at grade level in reading as third-graders, compared with 77 percent of those with good attendance in those early grades.

"By the end of kindergarten, kids are expected to be reading at a basic level," said Phil Lind, director of assessment and student services for the Redwood City School District. "It's pretty risky to keep a kid out of school."

Still, many do.

Oakland's civic leaders launched an early-grades attendance campaign this fall after a report showed 14 percent of

the city's kindergartners and 11 percent of its first-graders were out of school for 18 or more days in 2011-12, making them chronically absent. The rate of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten was far higher than in the other elementary school grades, rivaling that of high school students -- the age group most associated with skipping school.

In Redwood City, 12 percent of kindergartners were chronically absent during the 2010-11 school year, the highest percentage of any grade, according to a study of Redwood City School District and Sequoia Union High School District that was published in April by Stanford University's John W. Gardner Center.

"I think that there is a misperception among parents that kindergarten is not that important -- that it's like day care that they can use or choose not to use," said Teresa Drenick, an Alameda County deputy district attorney who runs truancy court and is helping to coordinate Oakland's new "Every Day Counts" attendance campaign.

In addition to the welfare of their students, school districts have a financial incentive to reduce chronic absenteeism: They are funded based on the average number of children who come to school each day. To that end, the Oakland school district this year made sure every school had an attendance clerk -- a basic position that has sometimes gone unfilled because of budget cuts.

This month, Drenick stopped by Piedmont Avenue Elementary, a diverse school in North Oakland whose principal, Zarina Ahmad, is a former kindergarten teacher. Drenick handed Ahmad a packet that contained talking points about the importance of good attendance and ways to help families get their children to school.

"This is perfect," Ahmad said.

Piedmont Avenue Elementary was planning to address the problem this year, and the campaign materials would help their cause, Ahmad told Drenick. The school has recruited a group of "buddy families" to call each home (not only those of children with poor attendance) every month to impress the importance of sending their children to school on time -- and, if transportation is a problem, to coordinate carpools, she said. Classrooms will compete for the best attendance, and students with perfect attendance at the end of each marking period will be entered into a bicycle raffle.

Miya Partido, a kindergarten teacher at Piedmont Avenue, said she hopes the initiative resonates with families who might not otherwise think twice about keeping a child home because his older sibling is sick, for instance, or about coming to school hours late.

Students who weren't around to learn the letter of the day, she said, "weren't able to follow along with the curriculum as easily."

While their classmates are learning their ABCs, absentee kindergartners are at risk of soaking in a different lesson: that going to school is optional.

"It's a really hard lesson to unlearn," Drenick said.

Read Katy Murphy's Oakland schools blog at IBAbuzz.com/education. Follow her at [Twitter.com/katymurphy](https://twitter.com/katymurphy).

Kindergarten lessons

By the time children finish kindergarten, they are expected to be able to:

Add and subtract numbers up to 10 (example: $10-9=1$)

Recognize all uppercase and lowercase letters and corresponding sounds

Sound out simple vowel-consonant words and recognize commonly used words such as "like," "see," and "you"

Know dozens of "sight words" -- those that can't be easily sounded out -- such as "what," "said," "are," and "same"

Write a simple sentence that begins with a capital letter and ends with a period, such as "I like school."

Be able to count money, adding together the values of pennies, nickels and dimes

Write numbers (digits) up to 31

Know three-dimensional shapes: spheres, cones and cubes

Know the difference between fact and fiction, or real and make-believe