

A REPORT BY  
THE 2015-2016 CONTRA COSTA COUNTY GRAND JURY  
725 Court Street  
Martinez, California 94553

Report 1615

**TRUANCY AND CHRONIC ABSENCE  
IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY  
SCHOOLS**

**Empty Desks = Empty Futures + Full Prisons + Big Dollar Losses**

APPROVED BY THE GRAND JURY:

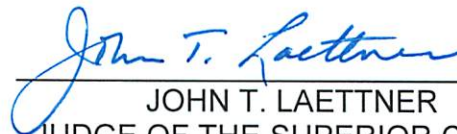
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MICHAEL SIMMONS  
GRAND JURY FOREPERSON

ACCEPTED FOR FILING:

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JOHN T. LAETTNER  
JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 1615

**Truancy and Chronic Absence in Contra Costa County Schools**

**Empty Desks = Empty Futures + Full Prisons + Big Dollar Losses**

**TO: Contra Costa County Office of Education; District School Boards for Acalanes Union High, Antioch Unified, Brentwood Union, Byron Union, Canyon, John Swett Unified, Knightsen Elementary, Lafayette, Liberty Union High, Martinez Unified, Moraga, Mt. Diablo Unified, Oakley Union Elementary, Orinda Union, Pittsburg Unified, San Ramon Valley Unified, Walnut Creek, and West Contra Costa Unified; City Councils of Antioch, Brentwood, Clayton, Concord, Danville, El Cerrito, Hercules, Lafayette, Martinez, Moraga, Oakley, Orinda, Pinole, Pleasant Hill, Pittsburg, Richmond, San Pablo, San Ramon, Walnut Creek**

**SUMMARY**

Every school day, thousands of students across Contra Costa County (County) are absent from school. Based on truancy rates in the 2014-2015 school year, the public schools in Contra Costa County were ranked among the worst, 46<sup>th</sup> of 58 California counties. Out of 180,000 students in the County, 10,000 of them had at least three unexcused absences during the school year—the definition of “truancy”. Those who were “chronically absent”—that is, absent for any reason 10 percent or more of the school year, were an even larger number.

Elementary schools in the County also ranked last out of nine local counties in the truancy rate, with a truancy rate of 28.6 percent. This bodes poorly for our future correction of the problem as most of these elementary truants develop poor attendance habits for the rest of their school lives.

These empty school desks have deep social and fiscal impacts on Contra Costa County. For example, 83 percent of chronically absent students in kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade are unable to read at grade level by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and are four times more likely to drop out before high school graduation. Furthermore, 80 percent of the young adults in the justice system were truant or chronically absent students. Their detention in the legal system now costs the County millions of dollars.

Additionally, chronic absenteeism causes a severe loss of funding to the schools. The State reimburses schools based on a formula heavily weighted to the attendance of each student. The County lost over \$36 million in school funding in the 2014-2015 school year due to students absent from school. This funding loss not only affects those students who are absent, but also reduces funding for the rest of the students, and deprives the County of needed money for deserving school programs.

Students missing from school not only miss gaining an education, they also miss learning important life/work skills. Chronic absence from school has links to other negative consequences for the County, including increased daytime crime, unemployment, higher prison populations, and increased social service costs that drain County resources. Young people lacking a high school diploma face much higher odds of life as a County dependent rather than as a positive contributor to the community.

This report discusses the fundamental reasons for truancy and chronic absenteeism from school. We outline current anti-truancy programs and what needs to be done in the future to better address the problem.

Simply put, the missing student is both the problem and the answer. Solve why the student is absent and find the means and resources to help them stay in school. Increased student attendance means more funding to the district so any modest improvement pays the district back with increased revenue and student achievement.

In short, this report emphasizes the need to invest in our children now and help give them a future, or pay for it later with lower graduation rates, higher prison populations, and social service costs to last a lifetime. If we fail these students, we also fail ourselves.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Grand Jury conducted an eight-month investigation, consisting of interviews, individual school district surveys, and research.

Those interviewed included the following:

- County School officials;
- School District administrators;
- Law enforcement officials;
- Local family counseling agencies who assist students with attendance issues
- Nationwide Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) that work on attendance initiatives and grant funding;
- Local NGOs, who are in partnership with the County to improve attendance rates in our schools and provide educational programs for struggling students;

Research materials included the following:

- California Attorney General’s 2013, 2014 & 2015 Report on California’s Elementary School Truancy & Absenteeism Crisis – “In School + On Track 2015”
- California Department of Education (CDE) data
- Review of current attendance programs and successful attendance tracking tools
- Past Grand Jury reports from other counties
- “Truancy and Schools” by Ken Reid
- 1999 KidsData.com (a national resource for information and statistics about kids in the County)
- Program materials from “Attendance Works”, a nationwide initiative to promote best practices for increasing school attendance

The Grand Jury also attended truancy and parent court proceedings.

## **BACKGROUND**

Nationwide studies show that as many as 7.5 million students are chronically absent from school each year. In California, one in five elementary school students are truant based on data from the California Department of Education. Furthermore, a report published by the California State Attorney General, Kamala Harris, *In School + On Track 2015*, estimates that statewide, 8 percent of elementary school students are chronically absent.

There is an important difference between “truancy,” which is an unexcused absence covering more than three days in a school year, and “chronically absent,” which means any absence, whatever the reason, that covers more than 10 percent of the school year, or roughly two days a month. Students who are chronically absent from school endanger their futures and sow seeds of future costs and problems for the County.

Time away from the classroom hurts a student’s chances to succeed in life. Students who miss school may face lifelong economic consequences. Studies show that chronically absent students feed the school to prison pipeline. Over 80 percent of prison inmates were truant or chronically absent when they were students.

While success in school is dependent upon many factors, being present every day is critical, particularly for low-income students and minority students, who face a variety of educational barriers. Truancy and chronic absences is a distinct predictor of low student achievement and high school dropout rates.

Important warning signs can be seen as early as pre-K and kindergarten-age children who show a pattern of chronic absences. Studies show that this pattern predicts poor attendance and academic performance in later grades. Over 80 percent of chronically absent students in kindergarten and 1st grade are unable to read at grade level by the

3rd grade and are four times more likely to drop out than children who can read at grade level. By 6th grade, chronic absence is a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school. By 9th grade, chronic absence is even a better predictor of dropout rates than 8th grade test scores.

Consequently, keeping children in school and learning at the earliest grade levels is key to creating good attendance habits and keeping students on pace with their classmates. Yet, many elementary students miss valuable learning time due to chronic absenteeism, and develop a damaging pattern that continues through later years.

## **DISCUSSION**

The County school system consists of 18 school districts located from Richmond to San Ramon to Byron. Including, special education, charter schools, and continuation schools, there are approximately 180,000 students from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Each year approximately 60,000 of these students are chronically absent and/or truant.

The County's school districts have a diverse economic and ethnic makeup. This diversity is reflected in truancy and student absentee rates. For example, the Richmond School District has the lowest per capita income levels in the County and the lowest attendance rate: approximately 62 percent. On the other hand, the San Ramon Valley School District has one of the highest per capita incomes and the highest attendance rate at 97 percent.

Not surprisingly, the State has given special financial assistance to low-income districts through the "Local Control Funding Formula" (LCFF) program. Most funds for school operations are no longer supplied from local property and sale taxes. Instead, the State funds education district-by-district using a system of identifying and funding triggers with a base funding level. There are funding boosts if the students live in a low-income school district or in a district with high numbers of English as second language (ESL) learners versus a more affluent district with relatively few ESL students. A key part of the funding formula for all districts, however, is average daily attendance (ADA) that must be tracked and reported to the State.

Given how schools are funded, financial loss to a school from chronic student absences can be severe. The cost of running a school is fixed. Teachers, administrators, janitors, maintenance workers, bus drivers must be paid regardless of the number of students that show up. Other fixed costs include building utilities and maintenance.

Consequently, for both educational and fiscal reasons school administrators say, "Our goal is to make sure every student is in class and getting the education they deserve."

### Weaknesses in the Current System for Improving Student Attendance

Despite the importance of tracking and promoting higher school attendance, complete and accurate data about schools' rates of chronic absenteeism does not exist. In the

absence of this information, other indicators, including truancy rates (which are reported), are used as proxies for the chronically absent rates. The focus of this report is “chronically absent” students who are missing more than 10 percent of the school year. Various studies show that in the County, similar to the state and nation, the students who are chronically absent from school are those most likely to fail to graduate, to enter the welfare rolls, or to wind up in prison. High “chronically absent” rates also have a severe financial impact on the County and its school districts. In 2015, Contra Costa County school districts lost an aggregate \$36,029,637 of State ADA funding solely because of the number of students absent from class.

Comparative data on truancy rates also reveal a disturbing picture for the County. The truancy rate for the County’s students exceeds the statewide truancy average and the average for nearby Alameda County. In fact, Contra Costa County ranked one of the worst, 46 out of 58 total counties in the State for their truancy rate in the 2014-2015 school year.

Truancy Rates 2014-2015 School Year	Percent of student population
California	31.1
Alameda County	27.0
Contra Costa County	38.9

There are many causes for truancy and chronic absences. Diverse and complex reasons make it difficult to create a one size fits all solution. Each student has a unique history and some need very personalized support or incentives to improve their attendance patterns. The most effective programs are those that take an early intervention and holistic approach that includes careful evaluation of each individual student, including his or her family circumstances, ethnic background, English language skills, physical or mental challenges and individual aptitude levels.

Personalized student programs of this kind and the needed support to facilitate them cost money and require passionate individuals who make attendance their priority. Personalized programs show the most promise of yielding results that can put a student on a better path to success in school, thereby lessening the probability that the student will one day become a future burden on the community.

However, implementing and maintaining successful programs to improve attendance is not easy. As one administrator put it, “there are so many tasks required of our teachers each day already” and another explained, “For decades a student’s attendance was taken, not tracked and evaluated.” In general, schools are dealing with many issues. Focusing on daily attendance patterns, prevention and awareness often competes with other priorities for funding and attention by school administrators. Such competing



priorities and limited resources are the biggest challenges to overcome in programs to improve student attendance rates.

### Information Gaps Exist

While individual school districts in the County collect some data on chronically absent students, the districts are not required to report this data to a central office in a consistent format. That means the collected data is not aggregated and shared countywide. California is one of only four states in the nation that does not have a statewide attendance tracking system.

With the passage of the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), California Education Code section 15497, in 2013, each school district is now required to develop a goal-oriented local plan to improve district schools in eight priority areas, one of which is to promote student engagement to improve attendance rates. The plans are to be developed by teachers, parents, and others in the community. Although the introduction of the LCAP requirements appears to have led to some modest attendance improvements in the County, gaps still exist in the processes and infrastructure used by the school districts to improve student attendance rates. One of the key gaps is a lack of centralized and detailed data collection on chronic absence rates.

Without good data to reveal the depth of the problem, other key data indicators must be used to get a better understanding of the chronic absence problem. Each of these indicators has been linked, either positively or negatively, to chronic absence rates. These indicators are the following:

- High school graduation rates;
- Economically disadvantaged/advantaged locations;
- Students' academic achievement at grade level;
- Truancy and parent court statistics; and
- Existing programs- impact and success rates of improving attendance.

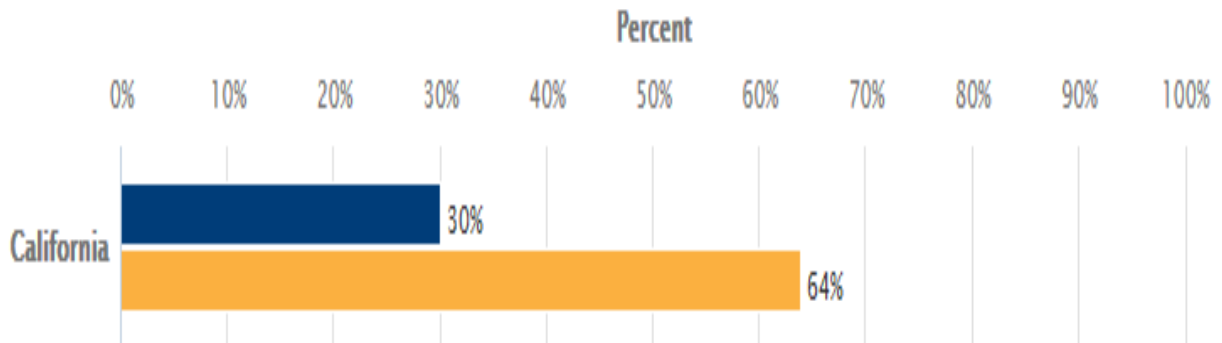
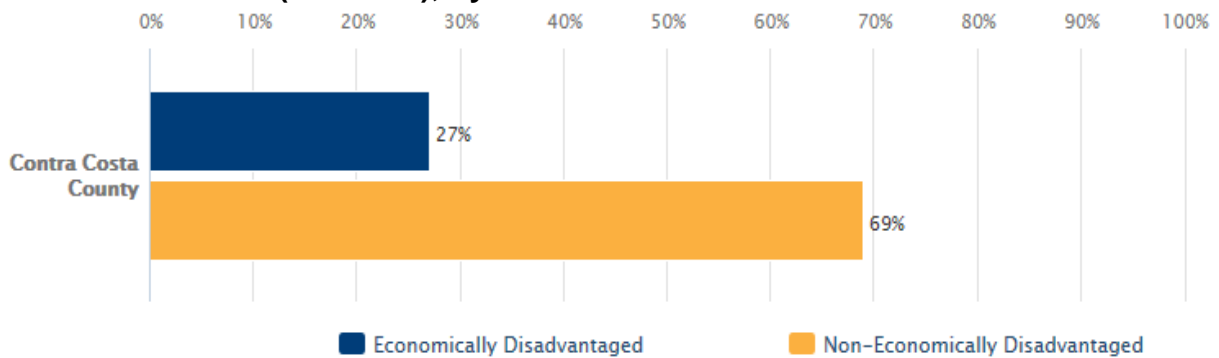
High school graduation is the benchmark, not only for an individual's future prosperity, but also for the prosperity of a county. In the County over 8 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders did not graduate last year. Data is not currently available to know how many of those non-graduates were chronically absent or truant. However, the law now requires school districts to collect and report this data.

### Economically Disadvantaged Students

In certain school districts within the County, there are a significant number of families and students who struggle financially and are considered economically disadvantaged. The available data suggest that economically disadvantaged students are more likely to struggle with attendance since they face more challenges in getting their basic needs met. These students are at greater risk of being absent and not reading at their grade level in the early years.

The bar graph below shows that 73 percent of the economically disadvantaged students in the County are below the standard achievement rank for their grade level in English and Language Arts and are at risk for becoming dropouts. On the other hand, only 31 percent of the County’s *non-economically disadvantaged* youth fail to meet the standard. In fact, the County’s non-economically disadvantaged youth exceeded the state average for their peers in these same proficiency tests.

**Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level Standard in English Language Arts (CAASPP), by Socioeconomic Status: 2015**



Chronic absences among economically- disadvantaged students are of particular concern because the patterns show they are likely to be struggling academically compared to their peers.

To address problems affecting students in economically disadvantaged districts, the State is now requiring school districts to report designated at-risk-student groups along with their ADA (Average Daily Attendance) reports. The State provides additional funding to districts based on the percentage of disadvantaged students who fall into the specified subgroups. Districts may use such additional funds for additional teachers, health programs, counseling, campus security, resource officers, and even meal assistance. This additional funding is provided through LCFF. More funding, of course, does not alone assure a solution to the chronic absence problem in the economically



disadvantaged districts. The key to improving the matter is applying such funds to the needs of each district. For example:

1. The school district may need to address real and urgent social issue in a child's life, such as family abuse or neglect.
2. The student may have an urgent need for food and shelter.
3. The student may have medical or other health issues that need attention.
4. The student may need bus passes if the family has no transportation options readily available.
5. The student may need counseling or other special services.

Child Services is called in severe cases. At times, the chronic absence of a student is the only sign that something is wrong in the student's home, although there are many more underlying problems.

Even with additional funding under the LCFF formula, the economically disadvantaged districts have distinct challenges. The chronically absent rates in these districts are still higher than in the more affluent districts like San Ramon Valley and Orinda Union that receive little to no special LCFF revenues. The data suggest that family and demographic factors play a larger role than simply school funding in contributing to student absentee rates.

All of this underscores the importance of setting the right priorities for funding programs to improve school attendance. The key to any program's success is focus and effectiveness. To help get a student back on track and to "beat the odds" arising from chronic absence from school will depend heavily on tailoring programs that address the particular needs of the student--whether the barrier is family problems, financial barriers, psychological issues or language challenges.

#### Inconsistencies among School Districts' Attendance Programs

The County's school districts do not have compatible systems to track student attendance nor do they have a common protocol to analyze the attendance of each student. Thus, it is difficult for County education leaders to identify those students who are chronically absent. Without such information, education leaders have difficulty pinpointing students who need assistance.

The problem is not unique to Contra Costa County. There is no standard attendance tracking system for the County or the State. Instead, each district has an independent tracking system for the students in their districts. This attendance information is only shared if requested, at which time it is uploaded or, in some cases, hand entered into another system.

The lack of standard tracking tools has particular impact on foster youth and homeless students since they are more transient and harder to track. School districts such as Mt.

Diablo Unified School District have an administrative team to help foster youth with their school placement and the subsequent adjustment to the new school. However, other districts do not have such a team in place. As districts do not have standard graduation requirements and do not assign the same credit value for classes, it is more challenging to assist foster youth to plan for graduation as these youth often transfer between districts.

If each school district had an effective tracking system to identify the chronic absence problem and strong infrastructure in place, it would help those students most in need. If data from the system were accessible at a central County office, trends and particular problems identified could be shared with other districts as appropriate. Through better data collection, each school should be able to more quickly identify a student struggling with attendance and step in before they are too far off track.

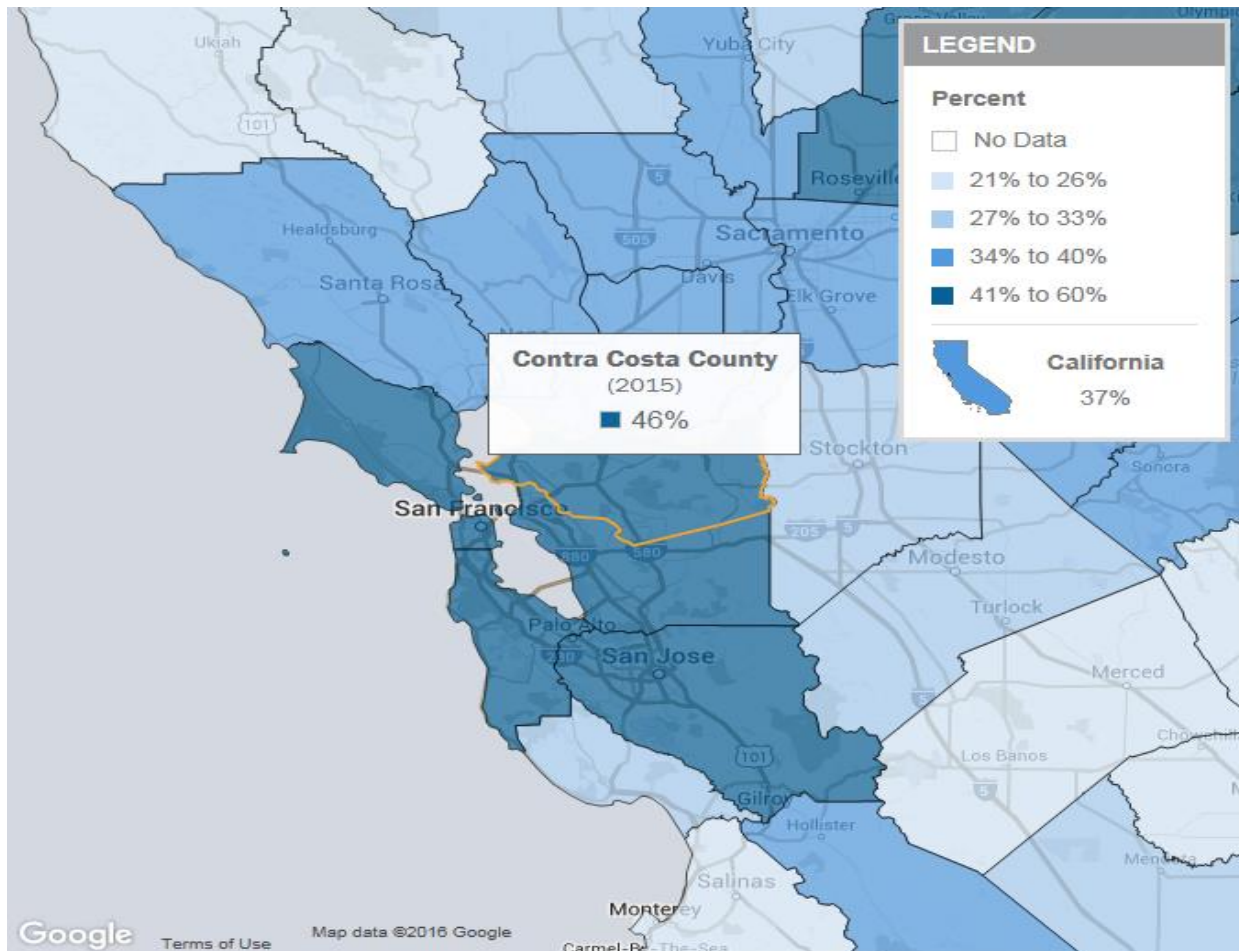
### The Special Problem of Elementary School Absences

Studies have shown that a pattern of absences at an early age in school can set a downward path that a student may not be able to make up later. Despite these findings, many parents believe that elementary school absences are not as serious a matter as absences in later school years. The most common parental misconceptions are the following:

1. Regular attendance in grades K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade is not as important as in later years.
2. Students will catch up in school before they get to high school.
3. Missing consecutive days is more harmful than just a few days here or there.
4. As long as the parent approves of the reason for the absence, it should not be as serious a concern.

These misconceptions may have contributed to less than 50 percent of the County's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students achieving a grade-level reading score. The map on the following page shows that only 46 percent of all public school students in the County are reading at grade level by the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

## Students in Contra Costa County reading at grade level by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade



*Data Source: California Dept. of Education, California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) results (Nov. 2015)*

The studies show that students not reading at grade level by third grade are four times more likely to drop out later and fail to graduate from high school.

School officials and educators agree, “When students are truant or chronically absent from elementary school, they fall behind academically.” They are less likely to graduate from high school, and are more likely to be unemployed, on public assistance, and victims or perpetrators of crime.

Elementary school truancy is a serious problem in the County; the County ranked at the bottom of the nine Bay Area counties with an elementary school truancy rate just over 28 percent. The chart on the following page shows the truancy rates for all Bay Area counties compared to Contra Costa County.

County	Elementary school truancy rate
Alameda	23.8%
Contra Costa	28.6
Marin	10.7%
Napa	6.2%
San Francisco	22.7%
San Mateo	12.9%
Santa Clara	14.4%
Solano	18.6%
Sonoma	11.9%

Source: California attorney general

An important case study reached the following conclusions about high school student dropout rates in relation to chronic absences in early school years:

- Recognizing poor attendance patterns early and finding a way to solve the problem helps more students graduate. <sup>1</sup>
- Students with regular elementary and middle school attendance graduated 95 percent of the time and had less than a 5 percent dropout rate.
- Students with a good attendance rate in the early years of school, but who begin to disengage in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades became chronically absent in later years and drop out of high school at about a 25 percent rate.
- Students who start out with poor attendance, take two paths:
  - Those who improve their attendance significantly by 8<sup>th</sup> grade drop-out 10 percent of the time.
  - Those whose attendance become worse by 8<sup>th</sup> grade drop-out 20 percent of the time.

### What Programs and Tools Work to Improve School Attendance?

An effective plan to improve school attendance and reduce the chronically absent rate in the County's schools must include the following:

1. Individual Improvement Plans: Tailor attendance improvement plans for each individual chronically absent student, recognizing that each case is unique.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jason Schoeneberger's 2012 study, "Longitudinal Attendance Patterns Developing High School Dropouts" This study shows the importance of building good attendance habits in the early grades and continuing to attend school regularly through middle school. While emphasizing the dangers for the student of the odds of graduating dropping dramatically in cases of chronic absence in the elementary years, it did offer some hope for those who achieve an attendance turnaround by the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Students have different problems depending on their family’s financial circumstances; their English language skills; conflicts that may exist in their homes; the parenting skills and encouragement provided by their parents or caregiver; mental or physical challenges; and medical issues.

2. Emphasize Importance of Attendance in Elementary School: As noted, patterns and habits of regular attendance—and their disturbing counterpart, chronic absence—start in elementary school with consequences that can be far-reaching.
3. Make Regular School Attendance a Priority Goal in School and District Budget Plans: Schools and the school districts need to focus attention and resources on improving regular attendance. Higher attendance rates lead directly to higher state education grants that are tied to ADA rates. Districts should recognize that the “return on investment” for spending on programs to improve school attendance reaps rewards financially, as well as in better futures for the students and the community.
4. Improved Absence Tracking Systems: To measure improved attendance results and to help verify which programs work, the districts need accurate and easily accessible data in order to track attendance patterns by school. Each district also needs details on how each school used their LCCF funding to improve attendance.
5. Build Community and Parent Support: The County, cities, and districts should take initiatives to educate and inform the public of the importance of improving school attendance—for better student futures, for better and stronger communities, and for the increased financial support that will flow to their community schools from state funding.

This report explores below in more detail the programs that have worked to improve school attendance.

### Individual Improvement Plans - SART and SARB

There are state laws in place that provide some frameworks to meet the special needs of students with school attendance problems or school behavior problems. The key components of this framework are the “School Attendance Review Team (SART) and the “Student Attendance Review Board” (SARB) processes. The SART and SARB process is set forth in the State Education Code sections 48320 through 48325. The law was enacted to enhance the enforcement of compulsory education laws and to divert students with school attendance or behavior problems from the juvenile justice system until all available resources have been exhausted.

Education Code Section 48321 provides several organizational structures for School Attendance Review Boards (SARBs) at the local and county level to create a safety net for students with persistent attendance or behavior problems. Although the goal of SARBs is to keep students in school and provide them with a meaningful educational experience, SARBs do have the power, when necessary, to refer students and their

parents to court, the county probation department, or to a district attorney mediation program.

Elements of the SART and SARB processes have shown promise in reducing chronic absenteeism rates. The SART process is an early intervention process for cases of chronic school absences that takes effect before the SARB process begins. During the SART process the student and his family (parents) meet with school representatives (typically a counselor, the Child Welfare and Attendance representative, the principal and/or vice principal, and anyone else at the school who may be relevant to the case) to discuss the reasons for the chronic absenteeism of the student.

The family and student are then assessed by the SART team to determine the root cause of the attendance issues. The team compiles an individual action plan to make improvements. The plan may include special tutoring, or even basics such as providing a bus pass for transportation to and from school. The SART team typically asks for a contract of commitment to attend school, which is signed by the student and his or her parents.

If a student's attendance does not improve after the SART process has completed, he or she is designated a "habitual truant". The student and his or her parent/guardian may then be required to attend a SARB hearing. The SARB's function is to act as the last step before schools engage with prosecuting authorities to deal with the truancy issue.

At a hearing, SARB committee members identify the core problem and its contributing factors through discussion with the parents of the truant student and the student. The objective is to tailor strategies to improve the student's attendance. By doing so, the SARB members can determine if available community resources – such as County health care services, County welfare services, nutritional counseling or alternative transportation options – can resolve the truancy problem.

If a SARB determines that available community resources can resolve the attendance problem, the SARB will refer the student and parent to the relevant service providers and may require proof of participation in those services.

In practice, the parents also enter into a SARB "contract;" its main goal being to improve student attendance. If a parent fails to respond to the directives of a SARB, either by failing to attend the SARB hearing in the first instance or failing to comply with the SARB contract, the SARB will generally refer the matter for criminal prosecution.

Students and parents in the County who disregard or ignore the SARB process and are still chronically absent are then directed to the County's "new parent" court or, for high school students, teen truancy court.

Truancy court meets twice a month in downtown Martinez. The tools the judge employs to encourage school attendance are limited to the resources available in the County.



These include a delay in obtaining a driver's license, 25 hours of tutoring, sessions with a mental health counselor, drug education and cognitive behavior modification classes on Saturdays (Stay Alive at 25).

Some students still resist and the Court, in extreme cases, may require ankle monitors attached to the high school age student to track them during the school day. The DA's Office has an investigator who then monitors the student's whereabouts during school hours. These tracking methods appear to have had some success as they provide the student a ready excuse to avoid hanging out with the wrong crowd, and instead, attend class.

The elements of the SART, SARB and truancy court processes that have been the most effective in combating truancy are those that focus individually on the problems faced by each student, and then are reinforced by intervention from the school representatives or, in the extreme cases, by a superior court judge through the truancy or new parent court.

West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) once had a teen truancy court in Richmond. This court facilitated attendance by parents and students in the district who are struggling with regular attendance. Without having a local teen truancy court, fewer referrals come in to Martinez from WCCUSD. The new parent court in Martinez has a high caseload that could be better managed if there were additional court locations and staff available to facilitate the program.

#### Engage at Elementary School Level

As noted above, the importance of good attendance habits during the student's elementary school years is often overlooked. Emphasizing individual action plans to address the early stages of truancy at county school districts can be part of the solution. Elementary-aged students are generally relatively willing to cooperate in initiatives to encourage school attendance, provided they have family support. The districts, in turn, can take the steps necessary to focus family attention on the importance of early school attendance and assist families in overcoming any financial or logistical hurdles that may prevent their child from getting to school on a regular basis.

#### Make Regular School Attendance a District Budget Priority.

As previously emphasized, the missing student is the answer to the missing funds. Solve why the student is absent and find the money to help them stay in school. Increased student attendance means more funding to the district so any modest improvement pays the district back with increased revenue and student achievement.

While 100 percent attendance is virtually impossible according to school administrators, achieving an incremental improvement of one percent can be a difficult (but achievable) task. Even a one percent increase in a school's ADA rate could add substantially to that school's funding. Most school districts that report spending less than \$50,000 on truancy

and chronic absence programs, recouped between \$500,000 and \$1 million dollars in ADA funding because of modest investments in awareness and prevention programs. Accordingly, making improved school attendance a budget priority should pay for itself. It may well, if successful, even result in additional much needed funds for the school district budget—a “win-win” for all concerned.

Despite the very attractive return on investment (or multiplier effect) from investing in programs to improve school attendance rates, most of the school districts have little to no general fund budget for attendance tracking, truancy prevention tools or truancy awareness programs. Districts that qualify through LCFF funding criteria for millions of dollars to help support students in improving their attendance are the rare exceptions.

These funds target specific subgroups and provide critical resources and programs for those students most at risk. However, even those LCFF funded districts do not appear to have systems in place that accurately track chronic absenteeism or that analyze what aspects of their programs are most effective in improving attendance and the annual cost of these programs.

School districts that do not qualify for special LCFF or federal funding to combat chronic absenteeism have to fund and implement their own support programs. The number of students in need in the latter districts is generally less, reflecting the smaller number of economically disadvantaged students. However, these students are at risk of being left behind if the districts do not fund such support programs.

Most truancy programs have factors in common. They identify the family as the primary source of a student’s attendance problem and operate on the assumption that the sole effective solution to getting the student back on track is uncovering and then removing the barriers preventing regular attendance.

Some programs are effective in helping students get back on track and stay there. However, since the COE has few programs and limited funding, it is up to the school districts and the COE to prioritize their spending on the most effective programs.

The truancy court run by the Contra Costa County Superior Court has an effective partnership with the Lincoln Child Center. The Center provides hands-on family counseling services that have been highly effective in reducing chronic absenteeism. They provide everything from help in finding housing to mental health care for the student. However, these types of programs are expensive because of the depth of care and resources needed to assist the families. For some students, Medi-Cal benefits fund half of Lincoln Child Center fees. However, this leaves these vital programs vulnerable with only short term funding and a complete dependence on non-profit contributions to sustain temporarily these vital programs.

There is no long-term plan to guarantee ongoing funding for NGOs like the Lincoln Child Center. Yet funding of these NGOs by school districts would be a very wise investment

if they in fact increase school attendance. Such funding would ultimately pay for itself by lowering rates of chronic absenteeism, and by increasing ADA funding.

These programs provide a valuable service to the students who are most in need, yet they could help even more students if they were expanded. Without these types of programs, the County is likely to lose ADA funding and without assistance, many of these children are not likely to graduate.

### Effective Data Collection and Software

All of the school districts in the County use a computer based attendance-tracking system. Each teacher records whether a student is present or absent on a desktop computer screen. The information is uploaded into the master computer in the school front office. If the teacher forgets to collect attendance, the front office notifies the teacher before the end of the day to do so.

Some of the school districts use the “Aries Attendance Tracking” system. Other districts such as WCCUSD use “Power School” and San Ramon Unified School District uses “Infinite Compass”. Each system has its pros and cons, and the cost of the systems varies.

Regardless of the system used, an effective anti-truancy program relies on prompt analysis of attendance data to discern problems and trends. Ideally, the analysis should be performed at the school and individual student level. One such initiative—the “Attendance Works” initiative—offers just such analysis and data tracking.

“Attendance Works” is a nationwide nonprofit initiative that offers assistance, best practices, and attendance tools to help school districts improve attendance in their districts. They work with large governmental agencies such as the US Department of Education, the State Department, and even the White House to get grant funding for improving attendance. They help school districts across the country write grant applications to secure funding for attendance programs, counselor’s tools, materials to prevent absenteeism, and awareness about the importance of school attendance.

With the help of Applied Survey Research, “Attendance Works” uses self-calculating spreadsheets for school districts called the “District Attendance Tracking Tools” (DATTs). The companion tools are the “School Attendance Tracking Tools” (SATTs), which provide school-level analysis down to the individual student level.

DATTs and SATTs are Excel files embedded with formulas, tables, and charts, designed to work with a school’s student information system. School districts can upload attendance data and receive analysis of chronic absence rates by school, grade and racial/ethnic breakdowns, as well as a list of absentee students. While they do not replace a district’s regular data system, the Attendance Works tools are helpful for

providing a snapshot of the levels of chronic absenteeism in the school or district and the ability to view information in real time to address the issues quickly.

The DATT and SATT software is available free of charge from Attendance Works. While Attendance Works requests that users share their summary data for research purposes, it is only shared externally either with permission from the school district or on an anonymous basis.

Only 5 of the County's 18 school districts participate in the Attendance Works Pilot Program started by the COE, which began during the 2015 school year. The school districts that did not participate in this program were either not invited or did not accept an invitation to join.

To share best practices in reducing chronic absences, Attendance Works holds regular meetings with the following five (5) school districts: Martinez, Mt. Diablo, WCCUSD, John Swett, and Pittsburg. The school districts that participate report receiving great benefit from each meeting and say the opportunity to speak with other school districts is welcome and always helpful.

"Sharing best practices and common challenges just makes sense," said a top-level school official. Another administrator related that they never leave a meeting without learning something or sharing something new with the group. The administrators who attend these workshops vary but usually are school leaders and support staff directly involved with the attendance process, student services, or counselors who work directly with students needing support.

The keys to effective data collection as reported by Attendance Works are as follows:

1. Actionable Data- needs to be accurate, accessible, and regularly reported.
2. Capacity Building- expands ability to interpret data and work together to adopt best practices.
3. Shared Accountability- ensures monitoring and incentives to address chronic absence.

Attendance Works has all the features needed to track and trend individual attendance and is widely accepted by those that have used it.

### Community Engagement and Awareness

School districts participate in the Attendance Awareness month, facilitated by the COE, each September. However, the COE does little to promote this as a countywide event. It mainly provides handouts and banners to school districts to place up around their schools.

Some elementary schools have been more creative, such as those in the John Swett school district. That district recently had attendance competitions between classrooms. In another awareness raising activity, the County recently had an art contest around the theme of attendance saying “Every School Day Counts”. San Ramon Valley Unified School District encourages the parents to notify the school if they take their children on week or longer vacations. The school district can then have the teacher prepare a week or longer lesson for the student while they are gone.

The State pays the school district if the student completes the vacation plan and in turn, the student is not counted as absent. Countywide, more can be done to make an impact with the month long attendance program campaign and to make parents more aware of common misconceptions about attendance and what role they play in the education of their children.

The countywide attendance slogan is “Every Day Counts”. This should be a well-known phrase that is drilled into parents and children as they try to ensure that their children have good attendance. Community reinforcement and peer pressure can have positive results on school attendance rates.

### Other Program Ideas

#### 1. Daytime Curfews

A daytime curfew is another promising idea for reducing truancy and chronic absenteeism in the County’s schools. Cities that have a daytime curfew see a reduction of juvenile daytime crime. In Contra Costa County, police report that 60 percent of juvenile crime occurs between 8 am and 3 pm on weekdays, during school hours. Some of the local cities now have curfews imposed between 8 am and 1 pm. The curfew deters “hangout” sites, decreasing the incentives for the children to leave school. The only cities the Grand Jury was able to confirm having daytime curfew ordinances were eight of Contra Costa’s 19 cities including Pittsburg, Richmond, El Cerrito, San Pablo, Hercules, Pinole, Martinez and Concord.

Few school administrators, and fewer students, are aware of whether cities in their district have a daytime curfew. However, many school administrators believe that a daytime curfew would be helpful and a logical policy to have in effect to encourage school attendance.

For cities that do not have a daytime curfew it often has to do with setting legal priorities for officers who spot truant students out during school hours. In some cases, officers report that their priorities are directed elsewhere than to lower priority truancy issues. Where there is no daytime curfew then there is no legal obligation for the police officer to intervene. Imposing a daytime curfew for

students should be seriously considered in view of the positive impact it may have on school attendance rates.

## 2. County Office of Education (COE) Involvement

The COE meets monthly with district superintendents; however, truancy and attendance is not usually an agenda item for these meetings. Monthly COE meetings could be a useful forum for school superintendents to discuss chronic absenteeism and those programs and initiatives that have been most effective in their districts in addressing this issue.

## 3. Designated Staff for Improving School Attendance

The information collected by each district, how often it is shared, and to what extent it is discussed within each district varies tremendously. Some districts produce and regularly distribute attendance reports to their schools containing rates of chronic absenteeism, which helps to quickly identify the students most in need of support. However, other districts in the County do not have the tools or infrastructure in place to collect, track and monitor this information on a regular basis.

Many do not have designated staff or comprehensive data collection in place to gather and provide administrators current data. Those districts that have a well-staffed and dedicated team to manage, track and respond to data, are able to better identify those students in need and provide support more quickly. Having dedicated staff in each district focused on improving school attendance is essential to an effective anti-truancy effort and successful plan to reduce chronic absenteeism.

## Conclusion

An empty seat in the classroom means a child is not getting the education they deserve and need to succeed in life. The reason a child does not attend school regularly can vary, be complex and require significant support, or be as simple as needing a bus pass. If we never find out what the barrier is then we have failed to help that child receive the education they deserve. And if we do find out, but then lack the infrastructure or ability to help, then we have failed.

The County has caring and competent school administrators who understand the importance of a child being in school. District superintendents and staff understand what is required of them. With the new LCAP, which requires more structure and purpose around taking attendance, many struggle with a lack of a well-developed strategy and infrastructure. Districts with certain (State designated) student populations qualify for LCFF funding and have an opportunity to use those funds to significantly reduce their chronically absent rates.



The COE could provide strong leadership to train, facilitate and assist school districts in working more closely with each other to improve the County's ADA. A higher ADA rate is a "win-win" result that deserves greater resources and attention by the districts and the COE.

With a modest investment, and strong leadership the County can help the school districts improve their overall attendance. Attendance is not just something we should do but rather an indicator of how a child is doing in life. In this fast-paced modern society, there is little time to catch up once you fall behind.

Early focus on elementary school attendance is a cost effective way to improve long-term educational outcomes, and in turn, improve lives. With a concerted effort and a designed plan, student attendance can improve. The County's school districts should make sure they have done all they can to provide its children with the educational skills needed to compete and succeed in today's rapidly changing world.

## FINDINGS

- F1. Based on truancy rates, during the 2014 – 2015 school year the County ranked among the worst in the State, 46<sup>th</sup> out of 58 counties.
- F2. Based on chronic absences during elementary school, during the 2014 – 2015 school year the County ranked last out of the nine Bay Area counties.
- F3. The SART and SARB programs help maintain and improve attendance rates, thereby increasing ADA funding for each school in the district and in the COE.
- F4. Not all County school districts comply with the requirement found in California Education Code section 15497 that each district collect, track and report its chronically absent rates in an annual LCAP.
- F5. The COE does not currently know the chronically absent rates for all of the County's school districts because the COE lacks relevant data needed to perform the analysis.
- F6. To identify students with attendance issues and quickly address these issues, the school district needs complete and accurate data about attendance and a well-developed support infrastructure.
- F7. The school district has its own software system for collecting attendance information and its own process and standards for collecting, storing and utilizing the truancy attendance information gathered, which are not necessarily the same as other districts in the County.
- F8. Without a centralized attendance system or compatible software among school districts, it is challenging to get a complete picture of a student's attendance profile and patterns over multiple years or across districts.
- F9. Some school districts have little communication with other school districts and the COE about best practices, common achievement goals, and best data systems regarding attendance.
- F10. The California Attorney General, Kamala Harris 2015 report, "*In-School and on Track*", indicates that over 80 percent of chronically absent students in kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade are unable to read at grade level by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. These students are four times more likely to drop out than children who can read at grade level.
- F11. The city does not have a daytime curfew.

- F12. The city that has and enforces a daytime curfew sees less daytime and juvenile crime.
- F13 Chronically absent or truant students, who do not get back on track before age 18, are more likely to drop out of high school before graduation.
- F14 Parent and Truancy Courts offer attendance support and are one of the last opportunities to alter a student's attendance behavior.
- F15 Attendance improvement programs used by the County's Juvenile Courts, such as the Lincoln Child Center, ankle monitors, drug and mental health counselors and tutoring classes lack long-term funding.
- F16 The school districts that have Truancy or Resource Officers who connect directly with students, help get chronically absent or truant students back on track.
- F17 There is currently no teen truancy court in the WCCUSD area.
- F18 The WCCUSD does not provide sufficient staff to process chronically absent students through the Parent or Truancy Court in Martinez.
- F19 The amount and allocation of funds provided by the State and spent by the COE for LCFF oversight activities and instructional programs is not reported in detail by the COE, making it difficult for the public to discern the size of the programs targeting attendance improvement and their impact on attendance rates.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The COE should consider developing a comprehensive multi-year plan for improving attendance rates that has annual goals.
- R2. The COE should consider assessing each school district's capacity to collect, track and improve attendance, and identifying funds to do so. As part of this assessment, the COE should:
- a. Define the unique make up of each school district's student population.
  - b. Analyze which attendance systems are used in the County.
    - i. How many different ones are there?
    - ii. Are they compatible and able to share data?
    - iii. Do they all provide the critical information needed to track chronically absent rates and attendance patterns in their schools?
  - c. Determine what additional training and support school districts need to meet their goals and improve their attendance.
  - d. Determine which school districts lack effective programs to ensure improvement in attendance.
  - e. Provide an overview of the SART and SARB programs, and delineate the partners with whom they work in the County, and the services provided to the students in need.
- R3. The COE and the BOS should consider providing financial support to the Parent and Truancy Courts in Martinez by providing a multi-year funding plan for critical tools and programs to help struggling families most in need: e.g., funding of Lincoln Child Center, counseling programs, ankle monitors, drug use prevention and treatment, and identifying funds to do so.
- R4. The COE should consider helping WCCUSD reinstate a local parent and truancy court by providing the juvenile courts in Richmond information on the need for these programs and support for best practices and programs.
- R5. The COE should encourage all school districts to participate in the Attendance Works program and to use the free tools provided.
- R6. All school districts should consider participating in the Attendance Works program.
- R7. If a school district declines to participate in Attendance Works, the COE should consider asking for a written explanation as to why the district declined to participate and what programs the district is currently using that would be comparable.
- R8. The COE's office should consider placing attendance as a standing agenda item at its monthly meeting with school district superintendents.

- R9. School districts should raise parent awareness concerning how to prevent a student's school absence from affecting ADA funding or the student's truancy rate.
- R10. COE should consider creating a centralized attendance data system for the County that would include regularly uploaded information from school districts about school absences and ADA data, and identifying funds to do so.
- R11. COE should provide training in advanced tracking techniques with free tracking tools that would be compatible across schools and districts in the County, such as Attendance Works and Aries attendance tracking software, and identifying funds to do so.
- R12. Each school district should consider designating staff to collect, track, and analyze, attendance data in order to follow up on students that appear to be at risk, and identifying funds to do so.
- R13. The COE should help to close the communication gaps among the districts by creating an atmosphere of dedication and communication that encourages districts to freely share highlights and best practices at monthly meetings.
- R14. The school district should consider incentivizing schools to seek increased ADA funding by means such as splitting the additional ADA money between the district and the school for achieving increased ADA funding.
- R15. The COE should consider identifying funds to produce an annual County attendance report that would be publically available countywide, both online and in hardcopy, which includes:
- a. Data on measurable goals. (who achieved, who fell short)
  - b. Highlighted area for both teachers and students, telling their success stories.
  - c. Description of the increased funding from improved ADA countywide and what new programs help to contribute to the result.
  - d. Information about district graduation rates, college enrollment, English learners and economically disadvantaged students.
  - e. Information about programs available and encourage families to seek help before their child falls behind.
- R16. The COE should consider encouraging city councils that do not have a daytime curfew to pass and enforce one.
- R17. The City should consider adopting a policy to promulgate, enforce, and promote a daytime curfew.

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

	<u>Findings</u>	<u>Recommendations</u>
County Office of Education	F1 – F10, F12 – F19	R1 – R11, R13, R15 - R16
Acalanes Union High School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Antioch Unified School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Brentwood Union School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Byron Union School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Canyon School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
John Swett Unified School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Knightsen Elementary School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Lafayette School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Liberty Union High School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14



Martinez Unified School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Moraga School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Mt. Diablo Unified School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Oakley Union Elementary School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Orinda Union School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Pittsburg Unified School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
San Ramon Valley Unified School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
Walnut Creek School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F16	R6, R9, R12, R14
West Contra Costa Unified School District	F3-F4, F6 – F10, F13-F18	R6, R9, R12, R14
City Council of Antioch	F11-F12	R17
City Council of Brentwood	F11-F12	R17
City Council of Clayton	F11-F12	R17
City Council of Concord	F12	R17

City Council of Danville	F11-F12	R17
City Council of El Cerrito	F12	R17
City Council of Hercules	F12	R17
City Council of Lafayette	F11-F12	R17
City Council of Martinez	F12	R17
City Council of Moraga	F11-F12	R17
City Council of Oakley	F11-F12	R17
City Council of Orinda	F11-F12	R17
City Council of Pinole	F12	R17
City Council of Pleasant Hill	F11-F12	R17
City Council of Pittsburg	F12	R17
City Council of Richmond	F12	R17
City Council of San Pablo	F12	R17
City Council of San Ramon	F11-F12	R17
City Council of Walnut Creek	F11-F12	R17

These responses must be provided in the format and by the date set forth in the cover letter that accompanies this report. An electronic copy of these responses in the form of a Word document should be sent by e-mail to [epant@contracosta.courts.ca.gov](mailto:epant@contracosta.courts.ca.gov) and a hard (paper) copy should be sent to:

Civil Grand Jury – Foreperson  
725 Court Street  
P.O. Box 431  
Martinez, CA 94553-0091

## Glossary of Terms

The following definitions from the “In School + On Track 2015” report are listed below:

Truancy	In California, a student is truant if he/she is absent or tardy by more than 30 minutes without a valid excuse on 3 occasions in a school year.
Habitual Truancy	A student is habitually truant if he/she is absent without a valid excuse for 5 days during a school year.
Chronic Truancy	A student is chronically truant if he/she is absent without a valid excuse for at least 10 percent of the school year.
Chronic Absence	In California, chronic absence is defined as being absent for any reason (excused or unexcused) for at least 10 percent of the school year. Thus, in a 175 or 180-day school year, a student who misses 18 days of school or more is chronically absent.
Excused Absence	Valid excuses may include illnesses, doctor or dentist appointments, personal reasons justified by a parent or guardian and other reasons within the discretion of school administrators.

## Appendix

### LOCAL CONTROL FUNDING FORMULA:

The enabling legislation was signed into law in 2013 and implemented in 2014. It allocates funding grants based on average daily attendance for students in each school district. The additional resources are allocated to districts based on the following, disadvantaged subgroups-low income, ethnically at risk, English learners, foster youth and homeless youth.

These funds are used to provide critical infrastructure for those students most at risk and replaced the previous K–12 finance system, which had been in existence for roughly 40 years.

For the COE, the LCFF establishes separate funding streams for oversight activities and instructional programs.

As part of the LCFF, school districts, COE's, and charter schools are required to develop, adopt, and annually update a three-year Local Control and Accountability Plan.

### LOCAL CONTROL AND ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN:

Original estimates provided by the State Department of Finance in 2013–14 indicated there would be an additional state cost of approximately \$18 billion available for the school districts and take eight years to phase in completely. There would be \$58 million for COEs and it would take two years to phase in completely.

In 2013, the State of California also put in place the LCAP, which requires each school district, charter school and county office of education to:

- Complete an annual report for the State addressing their school district's eight state priorities.
- Address "Pupil Engagement" – A state priority measured by reporting school and high school dropout rates
- Set improvement goals and an action plan to achieve them.

### The SARB process

It begins when the school sends out their first letter to the family indicating that child has missed too much school. This is usually three to five unexcused absences. Some school districts have a centralized letter process that verifies this child does not have extenuating circumstances that would make sending a letter insensitive, such as loss of a relative or a severe injury. However a centralized letter process (while more sensitive) also requires additional dedicated staff that have real-time-data-tracking of all students in the system. Some districts only use an automated service, which makes it more difficult to intercept any letter that should not go out. Next, they send out two subsequent letters,

if the child continues to be absent. Then they invite the parent(s) to the SART meeting, which is followed by the SARB panel. Finally, if none of this works, the case is referred to court.

#### The COE's LCFF funding

The COE instructional programs are funded through an alternative education grant as follows:

- Provides a uniform base grant per ADA for certain pupils served by county offices (on probation, probation referred, and expelled pursuant to EC Section 48915 (a) or (c)).
- Targeted pupils are those classified as English learners (EL), meet income requirements to receive a free or reduced-price meal (FRPM), foster youth, or any combination of these factors (unduplicated count).
- COEs also receive a concentration grant equal to 35 percent of the base grant multiplied by ADA and the unduplicated percentage of targeted students exceeding 50 percent of enrollment.
- Provides a uniform base grant per ADA for juvenile court school pupils. Additionally, all juvenile court school pupils are deemed to be eligible for the supplemental and concentration grants provided for unduplicated pupils.
- Other pupils served by COEs are funded based on the LCFF funding of their home school district.