SACRAMENTO CITY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
BOARD OF EDUCATION

Agenda Item# 10.1

Meeting Date: April 4, 2013

Subject: Chronic Absence Study Project

- ☒ Information Item Only
- ☐ Approval on Consent Agenda
- ☐ Conference (for discussion only)
- ☐ Conference/First Reading (Action Anticipated: _____)
- ☐ Conference/Action
- ☐ Action
- ☐ Public Hearing

Division: Family and Community Engagement

Recommendation: Information only

Background/Rationale:

SCUSD is focusing on the issue of chronic student absence with the help of community partners such as Attendance Works, UC Davis Center for Regional Change and Community Link. Data on chronic absence for the district has been compiled and is being shared with the Board, Cabinet and school administrators. Following this Board presentation, data will be shared broadly to gather feedback and enlist the support of school and community stakeholders. A work plan is being developed to address the issue of chronic absence systematically and throughout the district.

Financial Considerations:

SCUSD's work on chronic absence has been generously funded by The California Endowment and the Sierra Health Foundation.

Documents Attached:

1. Executive Summary
2. Policy briefs prepared by UC Davis

Estimated Time of Presentation: 15 minutes

Submitted by: Barbara Kronick, Interim Co-Chief F.A.C.E Officer and Lawrence Shweky, Coordinator II

Approved by: Jonathan P. Raymond, Superintendent

Board of Education Executive Summary

Family and Community Engagement Office

Chronic Absence Study Project

April 4, 2013

I. Overview/History of Department or Program

The issue of chronic student absence first came to the attention of SCUSD in 2011 through a collaborative partnership organized by The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative. The Integrated Support Services Department (ISS) subsequently convened a working group to study the issue that included Attendance Works, UC Davis faculty, Community Link, as well as administrators from the SCUSD Assessment, Research and Evaluation Department and the SCUSD Attendance Office. Shortly thereafter, ISS received grants from The California Endowment and Sierra Health Foundation to research the issue of chronic absence at SCUSD and begin developing a plan to address the issue systemically.

As the result of this work, school level data reports were prepared last year that analyzed the issue of chronic absence using 2010-11 data. In addition, policy briefs were prepared that analyzed district-wide trends using the same data. A second phase of work is set to begin in April 2013 to analyze 2011-12 and 2012-13 data.

II. Driving Governance:

Pillar I: Career and College Ready
Chronically absent students have lower graduation rates at all economic levels. Addressing the issue of chronic absence directly supports the goal of having career and college ready students.

Pillar II: Family and Community Engagement
Children who are chronically absent need strong family and community support to change this pattern. Addressing this issue with families and communities is critical in making a difference.

Pillar III: Organizational Transformation
With more than 10% of students chronically absent at SCUSD, the issue affects the district both in terms of student achievement and revenue. Reducing chronic student absence at SCUSD offers the possibility of transforming the entire district.

III. Budget:

Because the district receives extensive support from its community partners, the current cost of this program is less than $50,000. Currently, the $50,000 is funded through grants from The California Endowment and Sierra Health Foundation.

IV. Goals, Objectives and Measures:

The overall goal of the chronic absence program is to increase student attendance and reduce chronic absence as a means to increasing academic achievement and student success. To achieve this long-term goal, many intermediary steps must be taken including:

- Developing a work plan to address the issue of chronic absence from multiple levels
- Distribute chronic absence issue briefs and share research widely
- Launch second phase of data analysis focused on 11-12 and 12-13 data
- Focusing on populations with high rates of chronic absence including foster and homeless youth
- Implementing work plan beginning in August 2013

V. Major Initiatives:

The chronic absence project dovetails with existing work in the District's Attendance Office to review policies and procedures regarding student attendance, as well as the district's work on Social and Emotional Learning.

VI. Results:

Data analysis has been conducted for 2010-11 data and has been provided to principals for their sites. A plan is in place to extend this work to include 2011-12 and 2012-13 data. A work plan is being developed and will be implemented starting in August 2013.

VII. Lessons Learned/Next Steps:

- SCUSD has a significant population of chronically absent students
- The reasons for chronic student absence are numerous
- The district needs to address chronic absence on multiple levels to make an impact on this issue
- Schools and communities working together can make a difference in student attendance

Overview

This set of briefs highlights the issue of chronic absence in Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD). Chronically absent students are those missing at least 10% of school days in a school year. Unlike truancy, which is based only on "unexcused" absence, chronic absence rates account for all school absenteeism. We calculate chronic absence rates and describe their consequences for both chronically absent students and the district as a whole. In addition, we offer information about the chronically absent student population to inform critical next steps towards identifying and eliminating attendance barriers. The briefs were generated through the UC Davis Center for Regional Change[1] as part of a collaboration with SCUSD and Community Link, with the generous support of The California Endowment and Sierra Health Foundation.

SCUSD schools, students and community members are paying a high price for chronic absence. As a result of chronic absence, schools miss out on millions of dollars of funding each year, student learning is compromised, and broader social costs accrue. Across the district[2] more than 1 in 10 enrolled students, 5020 young people, were chronically absent or severely chronically absent in the 2010-2011 school year. These rates vary — and in some cases are much higher — across particular populations, schools and neighborhoods. However, focused partnerships amongst schools, families, community organizations and regional institutions hold potential to address this challenge.

SCUSD schools, students and community members are paying a high price for chronic absence. Across the district more than 1 in 10 enrolled students were chronically absent in the 2010-2011 school year. These rates vary — and in some cases are much higher — across particular populations, schools and neighborhoods.

This analysis employs widely-used numerical definitions of attendance patterns:

- ***Satisfactory Attendance:*** absent 0-4.9% time (up to 8.8 days in a 179 day school year)
- ***Unsatisfactory Attendance:*** absent 5.0-9.9% time (8.9-17.7 days in a 179 day school year)
- ***Chronic Absence:*** absent 10-14.9% time (17.9 to 26.7 days in a 179 day school year)
- ***Severe Chronic Absence (or "Severely Absent"):*** absent at least 15% time (at least 26.8 days in a 179 day school year).

Unless otherwise noted, throughout the briefs we report a combined chronic absence rate that reflects students with attendance records that qualify as "chronic" and "severely chronic". Because recent district record-keeping transitions limited our analyses to 2010-2011 student attendance data, moving ahead it will be important to assess whether patterns described in these briefs hold true over time.

This compilation is organized as follows. Brief #1 describes the prevalence of chronic absence in SCUSD. Brief #2 assesses some of the costs of chronic absence. Brief #3 explores the characteristics of SCUSD's chronically absent students, identifying populations, places and schools that appear to be important priorities. Finally Brief #4 recommends next steps that include: (1) get organized to use data effectively, (2) identify barriers to attendance, (3) build partnerships that eliminate attendance barriers, and (4) promote attendance. These steps comprise a framework for action, with detailed plans needing to emerge from a combination of local insights and lessons-learned from other schools and communities.

Endnotes:

[1]Please direct questions about the brief to Dr. Nancy Erbstein, nerbstein@ucdavis.edu, 530-754-6913.

[2]For the purpose of this calculation we excluded attendance data for students in Grade 13 and with School code = "Home/Hospital; we were unable to include data for students attending John Morse Therapeutic Center.

Brief #1: The Prevalence of Chronic Absence in SCUSD

How common is chronic absence in Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD)? Looking across the district[1] we found that 11.7% of enrolled students, more than 1 in 10 young people, were chronically absent or severely chronically absent in the 2010-2011 school year. These 5020 students missed school at least 10% of the days they were enrolled — that is, at least 9 days per semester in a full school year of 179 days.

Chronic absence rates varied by grade level as shown in Figure 1. In particular, kindergarteners and 12th graders had especially high rates of chronic absence: almost 1 in 5 students missed at least 10% of school. This one year of data suggests that chronic absence might decrease during elementary school and again increase through middle school and high school. Additional data analysis would help determine whether this is indeed a pattern.

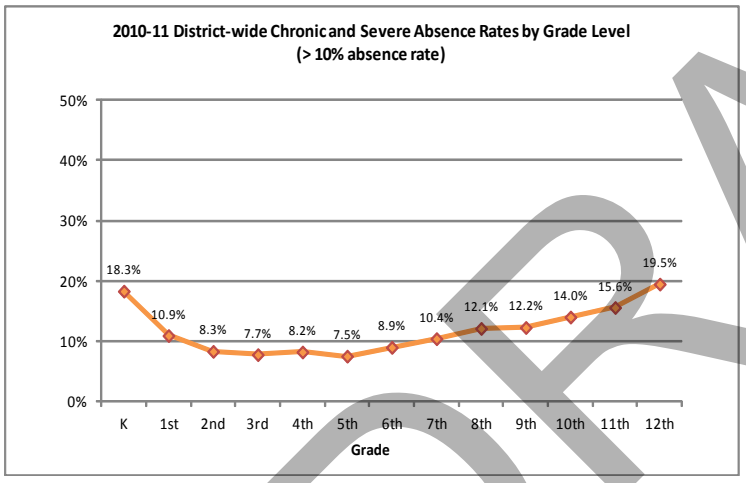

Figure 1. 2010-2011 District-wide Chronic and Severe Absence rates by Grade level

In addition, approximately 24% of students' attendance records are considered "unsatisfactory," meaning they have missed 5-9.9% of their enrolled days of school. As shown in Figure 2, only slightly more than half of kindergarten and 12th grade students have "satisfactory" attendance; this rate increases but remains under 70% in grades 1 through 11.

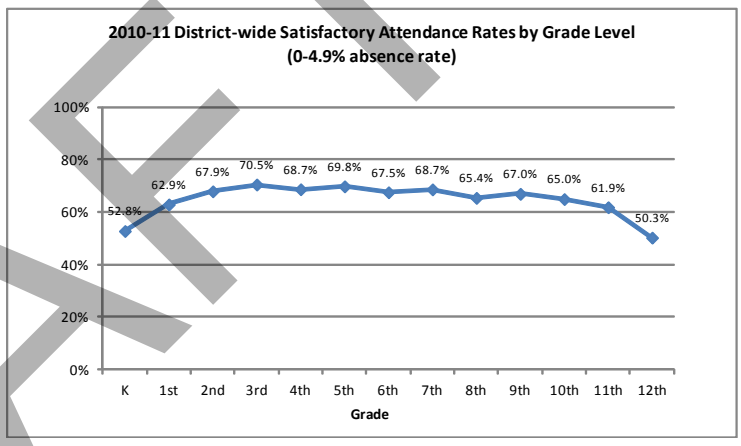

Figure 2. 2010-2011 District-wide Satisfactory Attendance rates by Grade level

While this set of issue briefs focuses on the specific issue of chronic absence, these data suggest that increasing rates of satisfactory attendance is also an important area of work.

Endnotes:

[1]For the purpose of this calculation we excluded attendance data for students in Grade 13 and with School code = "Home/Hospital; we were unable to include data for students attending John Morse Therapeutic Center. Information about school level chronic absence rates for John Morse is included in point maps generated for Brief #3. Students taking an additional year to complete high school have very low rates of chronic absence and the highest rates of satisfactory attendance, at approximately 74%.

The California Endowment
UCDAVIS CENTER FOR REGIONAL CHANGE
http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu
SIERRA HEALTH FOUNDATION
An Endowment for Northern California

Brief #2: The Cost of Chronic Absence

Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) schools, students and community members are paying a price for chronic absence. This brief describes some of these financial, learning and social costs.

Financial Costs

Much of California's public education funding is allocated to school districts based on student attendance. When students do not come to school, school districts lose money. While complex school finance formulas and attendance data make it difficult to assess exact amounts lost, we estimate that during just the 2010-2011 school year SCUSD missed out on receiving approximately 4.3 million dollars due to excess absence— students' absenteeism beyond what is considered "satisfactory attendance."[1]

Of this, approximately 3.1 million dollars— the rough equivalent of fifty classroom teacher salaries[2] — reflects the attendance of chronically absent students. Thus approximately 73% of funding lost due to excessive student absence was associated with the attendance of only about 10% of the student population.

Learning Costs

Studies have demonstrated that school attendance affects academic achievement.[3] Therefore, beyond direct financial costs to the district, chronic absence costs children in terms of learning. An association between chronic absence and academic learning is evident in 2010-2011 tests of English and Math proficiency across all grade levels, as well as pass rates on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).

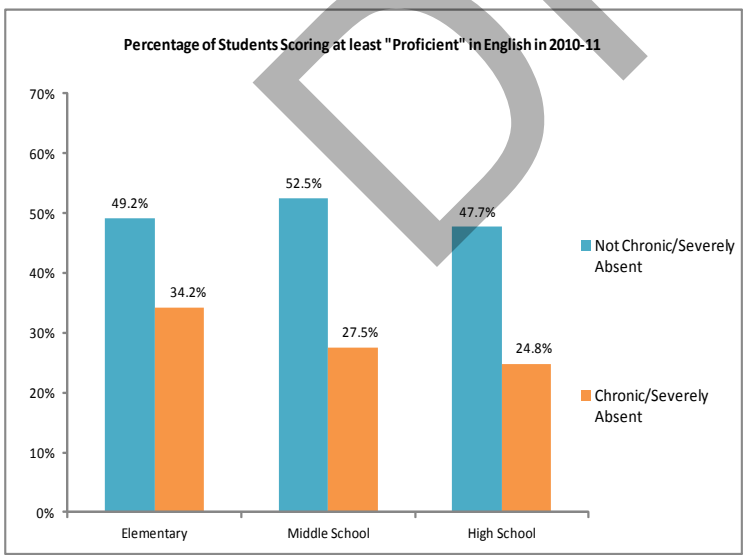

Figure 1. Percentage of students scoring at least "proficient" in English in 2010-2011

On English proficiency tests, chronically absent students scored as "proficient" or "advanced" at much lower rates than their peers across all grade levels (see Figure 1). This proficiency gap is even greater in secondary school. Math proficiency tests reveal a similar pattern (see Figure 2), although the gap in proficiency between chronically absent students and their peers is even greater than in English.

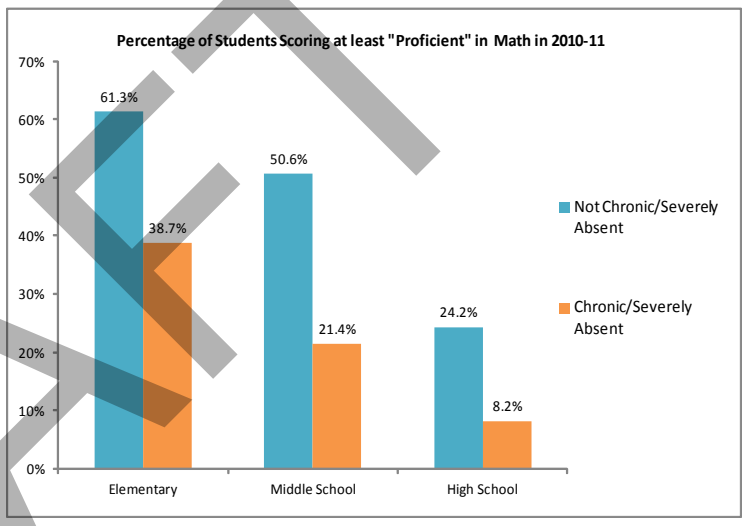

Figure 2. Percentage of students scoring at least "proficient" in Math in 2010-2011

To graduate from high school all California students are required to pass the CAHSEE English Language Arts (ELA) and Math exams or fulfill the requirement with a modification. Students first take these exams in tenth grade, and those who

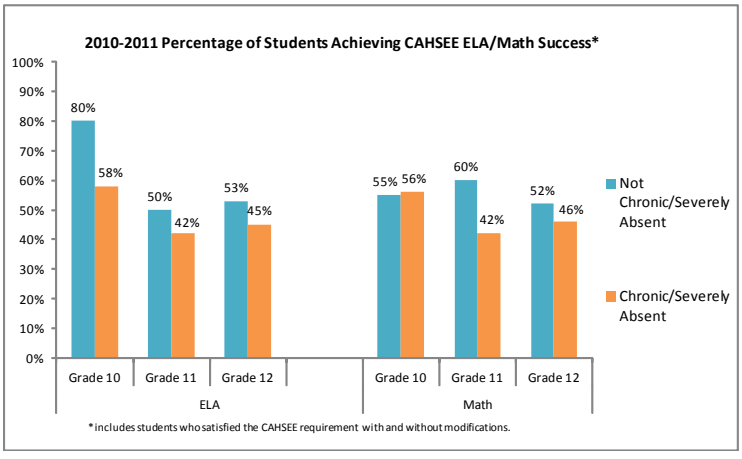

Figure 3. 2010-2011 Percentage of Students Achieving CAHSEE ELA/ Math Success(Chronically/Severely Absent Students vs. Students not Chronically/Severely Absent)[4]

do not pass try again in the eleventh and, if necessary, twelfth grades. Figure 3 shows that in 2010-2011, chronically and severely absent students were typically less likely to achieve success on the CAHSEE exams.

It is important to note that analyses presented here *do not* show that chronic absence causes lower test scores. It is possible, for example, that student absence is caused in part by having low levels of academic proficiency. However, there does appear to be a relationship between attendance and academic test scores, and other research suggests that while this relationship is complicated, some of the score differential is most likely attributable to attendance.[5] These learning gaps likely affect not only students who are chronically absent but their peers as well, as classroom teachers and schools allocate time and resources to remediate the lost learning.

Uncalculated Costs

These readily available data allow us to see some of the immediate costs of chronic absence in terms of financial resources and academic learning. Less visible are the social costs to young people and the community. Although we have not conducted such analyses for Sacramento, other research suggests that decreased attendance is related to an increased sense of disconnection from peers, teachers and schools[6], unhealthy behaviors such as tobacco, alcohol and drug use[7], not graduating from high school[8], and future financial hardships such as unemployment.[9]

All Sacramentans bear the cost of chronic absence. Conversely, all will benefit from investment in identifying and eliminating barriers to school attendance.

References:

Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Horsey, C. S. (1997). From first grade forward: Early foundations of high school dropout. Sociology of Education, 70, 87–107.

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Rumberger, R. W. (1995). Dropping out of middle school: A multilevel analysis of students and schools. American Education Research Journal, 32, 583–625.

Rumberger, R. W., & Thomas, S. L. (2000). The distribution of dropout and turnover rates among urban and suburban high schools. Sociology of Education, 73, 39–67.

Wang, X. et.al. (2005). Comparison of the Educational Deficiencies of Delinquent and Nondelinquent Students. Evaluation Review, 29(4), 291-312

Endnotes:

[1]For the purpose of this analysis, we included students enrolled at least 80% of the year (>143 days). Each student was "allowed" nine absences. Every absence above 9 was included in the analysis. Cost was calculated by multiplying each absence * $41.35, SCUSD's daily revenue allocation for 2010-2011.

[2]Based on the 2010-2011 average teacher salary of $63,345, downloaded from EdData 8/6/12 at http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/App_Resx/EdDataClassic/fsTwoPanel.aspx?#!bottom=/_layouts/EdDataClassic/fiscal/TeacherSalary.asp?tab=0&level=06&ReportNumber=4096&County=34&fyr=1011&District=67439. Does not include the cost of benefits.

[3]for example, see Gottfried 2010

[4]includes all students who satisfied the CAHSEE requirement, including those requiring modifications

[5]see Gottfried 2010

[6]e.g. Eckstrom et. al 1986, Finn 1989, Johnson 2005

[7]e.g. Halfors et. al 2002, Wang et al 2005

[8]e.g. Rumberger 1995, Rumberger and Thomas 2000

[9]e.g. Alexander et. al 1997, Broadhurst et al. 2005, Kane 2006

Brief #3: The Chronically Absent Population

Understanding who comprises the chronically absent student population is a critical step toward finding out why young people are not going to school and how schools and community partners can support improved attendance. The following brief draws upon available student data to describe the population of 5020 students that was chronically absent in 2010-2011 in terms of student background characteristics, special needs, residential locations, and school sites. We also describe some district-wide attendance trends for specific sub-populations, although it is important to note that these trends might differ at the level of individual schools.

3.1 Chronic Absence and Student Demographics

The following section examines the relationship between chronic absence and student demographic characteristics including grade level, gender, household income and race/ethnicity across SCUSD in the 2010-2011 school year.

Chronic Absence Rates are Highest in Kindergarten and 12th Grade

During the 2010-2011 school year chronic absence rates were highest for students in kindergarten (approximately 18% of all kindergarteners) and 12th grade (approximately 20% of all 12th graders) (please see Brief #2 for rates at each grade level). Taking only the 5020 students who were chronically absent in 2010-2011, the greatest numbers were also in kindergarten (14% or 687 students) and 12th grade (11% or 545 students) (See Figure 1 below).

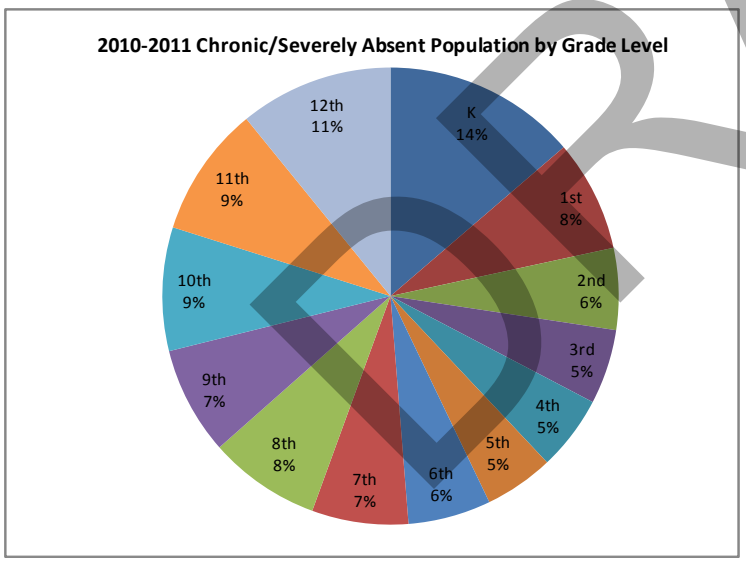

Figure 1. 2010-2011 Chronic/severely absent population by grade level

Girls And Boys Are Chronically Absent at Similar Rates

In 2010-2011, the population of 5020 chronic absentees included fairly even numbers of female and male students. Looking at the overall district population, 11.5% of all female students and 11.9% of all male students were chronically absent. Based on this one year of data, in the district as a whole there does not appear to be a strong association between gender and attendance.

Most Chronically Absent Students Live in Low-Income Households, but Most Low-Income Students are not Chronically Absent

Of the 5020 students who are chronically/severely absent, 77.8% receive free or reduced price meals, meaning they live in homes with low household incomes.

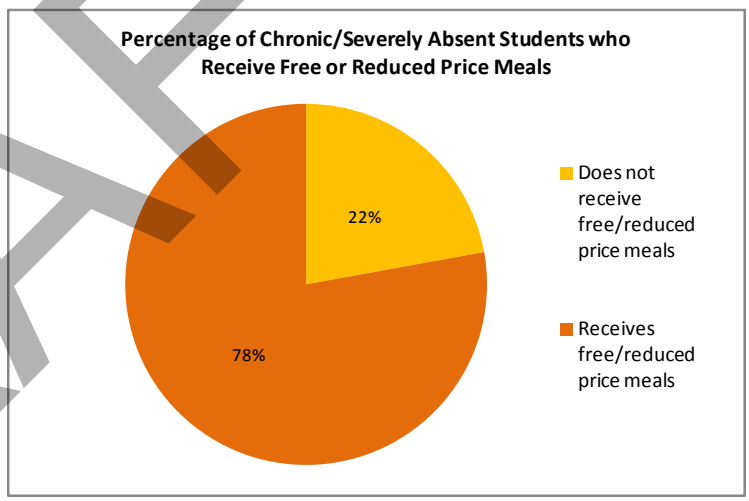

Figure 2. Percentage of chronic/severely absent students receiving free or reduced price meals

Overall, 13.3% of students who receive free/reduced price meals were chronically/severely absent in 2010-2011, in comparison with 8.3% of students who are not enrolled in the program. Because all qualifying families typically do not apply for meal assistance, this analysis might underestimate the association between chronic absence and having inadequate financial resources.

Nonetheless, a great majority (86.7%) of students who receive free/reduced price lunch are not chronically absent. Multiple factors alongside household income are likely contributing to chronic absence.

Chronic Absence Rates Vary Across Racial/Ethnic Groups

Out of the 5020 students that were chronically absent in 2010-2011, the largest numbers were Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American and White, respectively (see Figure 3, uses the racial/ethnic categories employed by SCUSD and the state of

California).

Comparing the racial and ethnic profile of the 2010-2011 chronically absent student population (Figure 3) with the overall district racial and ethnic profile reveals that Native American, African American, and, to a lesser extent, Latino students are over-represented among chronically absent students. Asian/Asian American and, to a lesser extent, White students were represented at somewhat lower rates than they are in the overall student population.

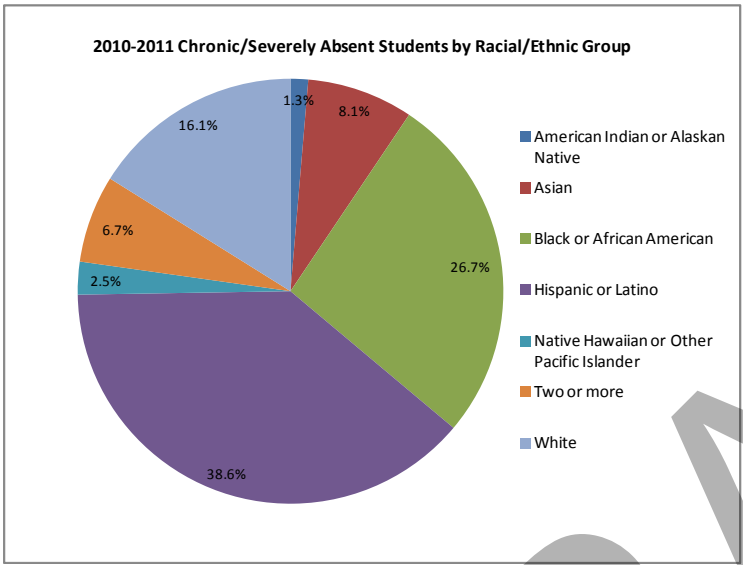

Figure 3. 2010-2011 Chronic/severely absent students by race/ethnicity

Another way to look at this pattern is to consider the rates of chronic/severe absence for each racial/ethnic group (see Table 1). Here we see that the three groups experiencing the highest rates of chronic absence are Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic/Latino.

Race/Ethnicity	% Chronically/Severely Absent	% NOT Chronically/ Severely Absent
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	19.3%	80.7%
Asian	5.2%	94.8%
Black or African American	19.7%	80.3%
Hispanic or Latino	12.3%	87.7%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	10.3%	89.7%
Two or more (bi/ multi-racial)	11.7%	88.3%
White	9.9%	90.1%

Table 1. 2010-2011 Chronic/Severe Absence rates by race/ethnicity

Across all groups at least 80% of students are not chronically absent.

Youth demographic characteristics do not cause chronic absence

None of these demographic analyses suggest that students' demographic backgrounds cause chronic absence. Rather they demonstrate that in the district as a whole specific populations were more or less likely to have been chronically absent in the 2010-2011 school year important background for targeting additional inquiry and support.

3.2 Chronic Absence and Special Needs Populations

This section explores the relationship between chronic absence and four special needs designations: English Learners, Students Classified as "Disabled," Students in Foster Care, and Homeless Students.

Many Chronically Absent Students Are English Learners But English Learners Are Less Likely To Be Chronically Absent

Students who have grown up speaking a language other than English at home and require additional support to test as proficient in academic English are designated as "English Learners." Of the 5020 students who were chronically/severely absent in 2010-2011, approximately 17.5% were English Learners. Efforts to address chronic absence should therefore attend to the language and cultural diversity of students and families.

However, in the district as a whole, English learners are somewhat less likely than their English-speaking peers to be chronically or severely absent. One in four SCUSD students were classified as English Learners in 2010-2011; approximately 8.3% of them were chronically absent, in comparison with 12.8% of students who were not classified as English learners.

Students with "Disabilities" Are Chronically Absent

Almost 1 in 5, approximately 8.2%, of SCUSD students are classified as having a "disability."[1] Of the 5020 students who were chronically/severely absent in 2010-2011, approximately 13.5%, or 680 students, were so classified. Of all students with disabilities, approximately 19.3%-- almost one in five-- were chronically/severely absent in 2010-2011 in comparison with 11% of their peers, suggesting that in the district as a whole they are more likely to be chronically or severely absent.

More Than 1 in 5 Students in Foster Care Are Chronically Absent

In 2010-2011 SCUSD served 344 students enrolled in the foster care system. While they are a small proportion of the student body, special attention to their experience is critical as wards of the state that are often vulnerable to inadequate support and poor educational outcomes.

Approximately 1.5% of all 2010-2011 chronically/severely absent students were enrolled in the foster care system. While youth in foster care make up a relatively small number/per-

centage of the district's chronically absent student population, 21.2% of SCUSD students in foster care-- or more than 1 in 5-- were chronically or severely absent from school. Another way to understand these students' experiences is to compare their chronic absence rate with that of students who are not in foster care. In 2010-2011, 11.6% of students not enrolled in foster care were chronically or severely absent, so students in foster care were chronically/severely absent at almost twice the rate of these peers.

Almost 1 in 3 Homeless Students Are Chronically Absent

In 2010-2011, the school district identified 1228 students as being homeless. Students are considered homeless when they lack a fixed, permanent, and adequate nighttime residence; this may include living in shelters, transitional housing programs, temporary housing, motel/hotels, cars and travel trailers, the street or other public places, or places not suitable for or normally used as a nighttime residence.[2] Homeless students comprised 7% of the chronically/severely absent student population, or 351 students.

Approximately 29% of students classified as homeless-- almost 1 in 3-- were chronically or severely absent in comparison with 11.2% of students not classified as homeless. Homeless students were therefore almost three times more likely to be chronically/severely absent than their peers.

Special Needs and Chronic Absence

In sum, in 2010-2011 English Learners were somewhat less likely than their English-speaking peers to be chronically absent, although substantial numbers of chronically absent students are English learners. Students designated as disabled, students who have been homeless, and students in the foster care system are much more likely to be chronically absent than their counterparts who do not share these experiences.

None of the analyses presented here prove a causal relationship between these student experiences and attendance patterns. However, this relationship is an important area for further inquiry. In addition, the needs of students enrolled in foster care, designated as "disabled," identified as "homeless," and/or learning English require consideration as part of activities to eliminate chronic absence.

3.3 Chronic Absence and School Transfer

Of the 2010-2011 chronically absent student population, approximately 25% switched schools one or more times that academic year. Although the great majority of SCUSD students attend the same school over the course of a school year, 3760 students (approximately 8.8% of all students) attended two or more schools during the 2010-2011 academic year. Students who switched schools during the year were chronically absent at almost twice the rate of their peers who did not (18.4% versus 9.5%).

The more often students transferred within the year, the more likely they were to be chronically/severely absent. While approximately 1 in 10, students attending the same school all year were chronically or severely absent, among students who attended two, three, or four or more schools those rates increased as depicted in Figure 4.

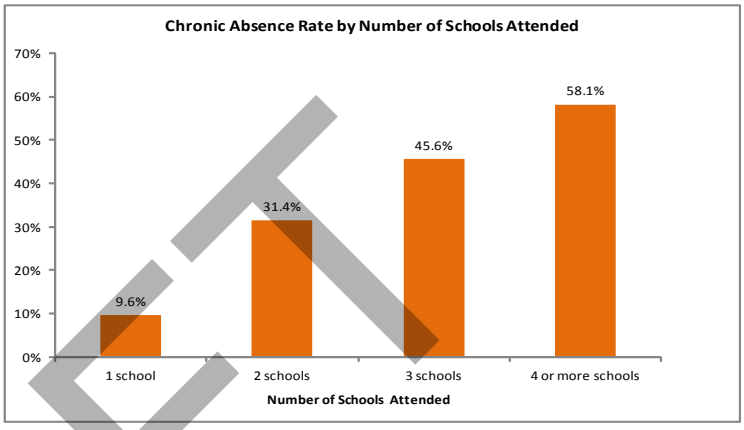

Figure 4. 2010-2011 Chronic absence rates of students attending 1, 2, 3 and 4 or more schools in 2010-2011

This analysis does not show that school transfers cause chronic/severe absence. It is possible, for example, that whatever is causing high transfer rates is also a cause of poor attendance. However, these findings demonstrate an association between school transfer and attendance which suggests that students who change schools multiple times during the year may be more likely to be chronically absent.

3.4 Chronic Absence and Physical Health

In comparison with their peers with better attendance, chronically absent students were more likely to score poorly and less likely to score well on a range of physical fitness measures.[3] The results of California's student physical fitness test, which is administered annually to public school students in 5th, 7th and 9th grade, provide a basis for exploring the relationship between chronic absence and physical health. The test is based on standards representing minimum levels of fitness associated with protection against diseases linked to physical inactivity. Achievement of the fitness standards is based upon scoring in the Healthy Fitness Zone (HFZ) for each of six fitness areas: aerobic capacity, body composition, abdominal strength, trunk extension strength, upper body strength and flexibility. The HFZ reflects minimal levels of satisfactory outcomes, so the goal is for students to achieve the HFZ for all fitness areas.[4] Across the district 5.3% of chronically absent students did not score in the HFZ on any test; conversely, only 12.0% scored in the HFZ for all tests (see Figure 5).

Based on the one year of data, this association between chronic absence and low levels of physical fitness appears at each grade level. This relationship is starkly illustrated

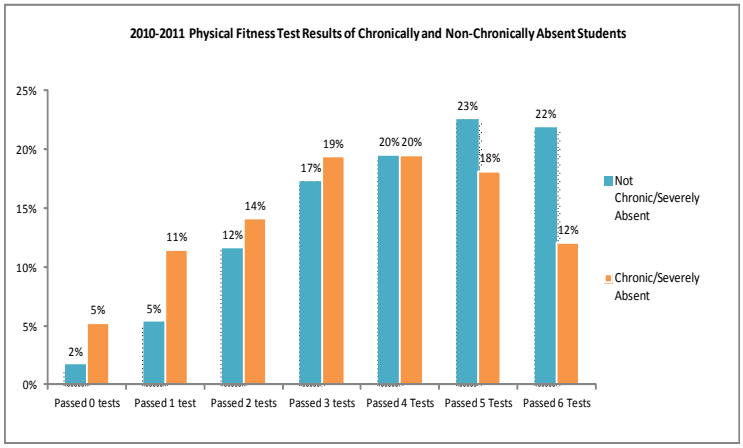

Figure 5. 2010-2011 physical fitness test results of chronically and non-chronically absent students

by Figure 6 charts, which compare for each grade the rates at which chronically absent and non-chronically absent students passed 0 of 6 fitness tests and 6 of 6 fitness tests.

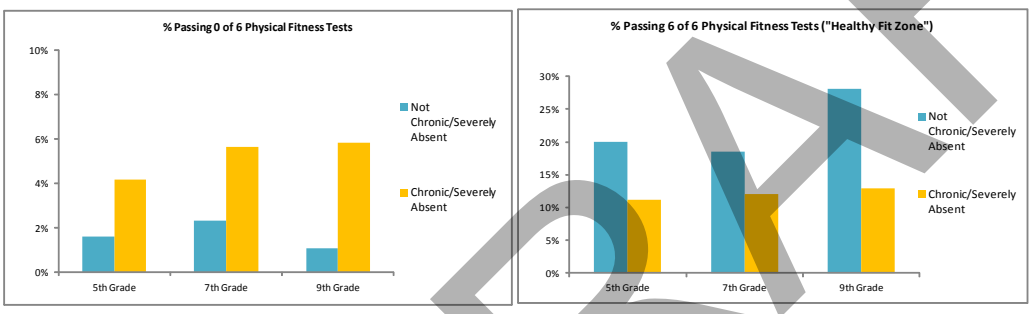

Figure 6. 2010-2011 physical fitness of chronically/non-chronically absent students by grade

These analyses do not establish a causal relationship between physical fitness and chronic absence. However, they do suggest that initiatives focused on improving students' physical health and efforts to reduce chronic absence might benefit from coordination and collaboration.

3.5 Chronic Absence and School Suspension

When students are suspended from school the days that they miss are counted as absences, raising the question of whether suspensions-- and school discipline policies-- affect chronic absence rates.

Chronically Absent Students Are Suspended At Higher Rates

In 2010-2011, approximately 1 in 5 of the district's 5020 chronically absent students were suspended at least once.Chronically absent students were suspended at higher rates (21.1%) than their non-chronically absent peers (6%). Among all students who were suspended in 2010-2011, students that received greater numbers of suspensions were more likely to be chronically absent (see Figure 7). This pattern was similar when considering the numbers of days that students were suspended (see Figure 8).

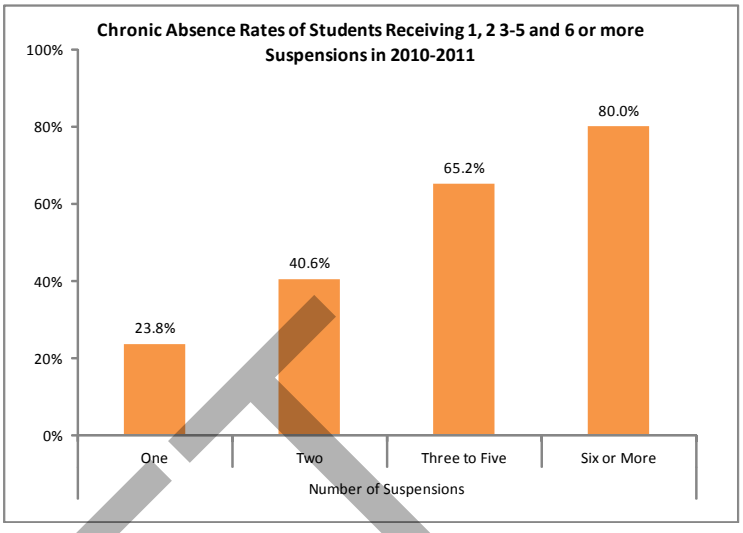

Figure 7. Chronic absence rates of students receiving 1, 2, 3-5, and 6 or more suspensions in 2010-2011

Suspension Days Not the Primary Cause of Chronic Absence

To assess the role of school suspension in chronic absence, for each chronically absent student we added the number of days they were suspended to the number of days they attended school and re-calculated their attendance rate. This analysis revealed that 65% of the chronically absent students would still have been chronically absent even if they had not been suspended. Therefore, while chronically absent students were more likely to miss school due to suspension, suspension days in most cases were not the primary reason their attendance records met the benchmark of chronic absence.

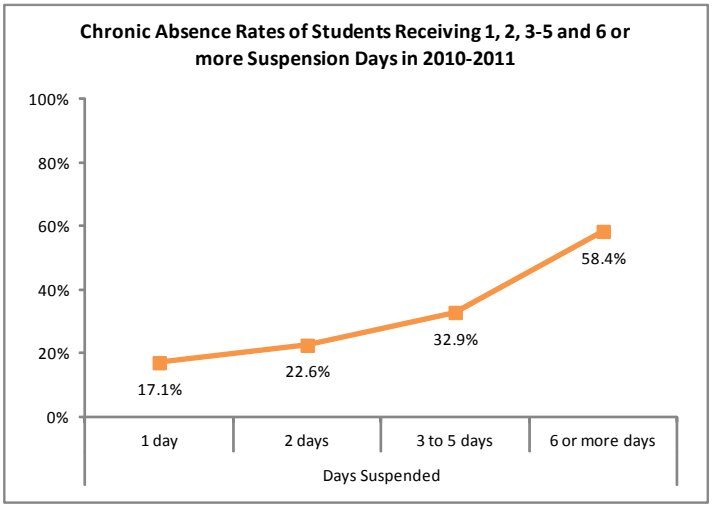

Figure 8. Chronic absence rates of students receiving 1, 2, 3-5, and 6 or more suspension days in 2010-2011

Chronic Absence and Suspension

In the majority of cases suspension days did not cause students' absenteeism to reach the threshold of chronic absence, although chronically absent students do appear to be suspended at higher rates than their peers with better attendance records. A troubling aspect of this pattern is its implication that students suspended at high rates are likely also contending with other factors contributing to their poor school attendance. This suggests the importance of school disciplinary practices that attend to underlying causes of student behaviors.

3.6 Geographic Distribution of Chronic Absence

Efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism and to target resources to the places that most need support require an analysis that illustrates the geographic distribution of chronic absence across the school district. This analysis should highlight both places where there are large numbers of young people and the places where high proportions of students are chronically absent. The following maps depict the geographic distribution of chronic absence based on 2010-2011 student attendance data and residential addresses.

Figure 9 reflects the numbers of chronically absent students living in each census block group[5] where at least 25 young people are enrolled in SCUSD. It is designed to answer questions such as, "where did the greatest numbers of chronically absent students live in 2010-2011?" Locations colored with darker blues were home to the largest numbers of chronically absent students, while locations in lighter blues were home to fewer chronically absent students. Figure 9 shows that while chronically absent students live throughout Sacramento, chronic absence is not evenly distributed across neighborhoods.

Number of Chronically Absent Students in SCUSD by Census Block Group

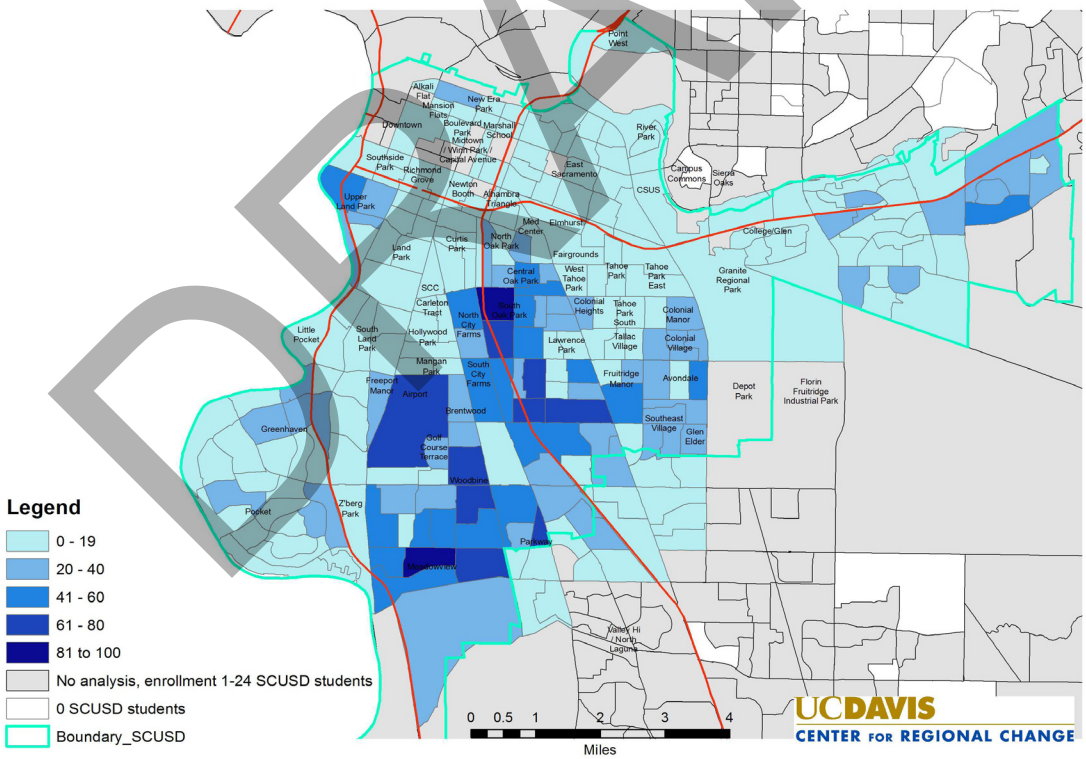

Figure 9. Number of Chronically Absent Students Per Census Block Group, 2010-2011

While Figure 9 provides important information about where chronically absent students are concentrated, it does not provide information about relative chronic absence rates across the district — that is, the places where an especially high or low proportion of enrolled students are chronically absent. This analysis can help focus attention to possible structural factors that are causing such a high proportion of neighborhood students to be chronically absent. Figure 10 describes how the chronic absence rate of each census block group compare with the overall district average chronic absence rate.[6] Each census block group where at least 25 students are enrolled in SCUSD is included in the analysis.

Figure 10 shows that chronic absence rates also vary across SCUSD. Block groups in yellow have chronic absence rates that approximate the district average. Green block groups' chronic absence rates are significantly lower than the district average, while orange and red block groups have significantly higher rates of chronic absence compared with the district average. It is important to note that while some places might not be home to very large numbers of chronically absent students, a large proportion of resident students might be chronically absent, suggesting the need for focused action to identify and address the reasons for these patterns. These maps suggest that several neighborhoods are important places to prioritize in pursuing further investigation, collaboration and intervention focused on reducing chronic absence. Analyzing multiple years of data will help determine whether these are sustained patterns.

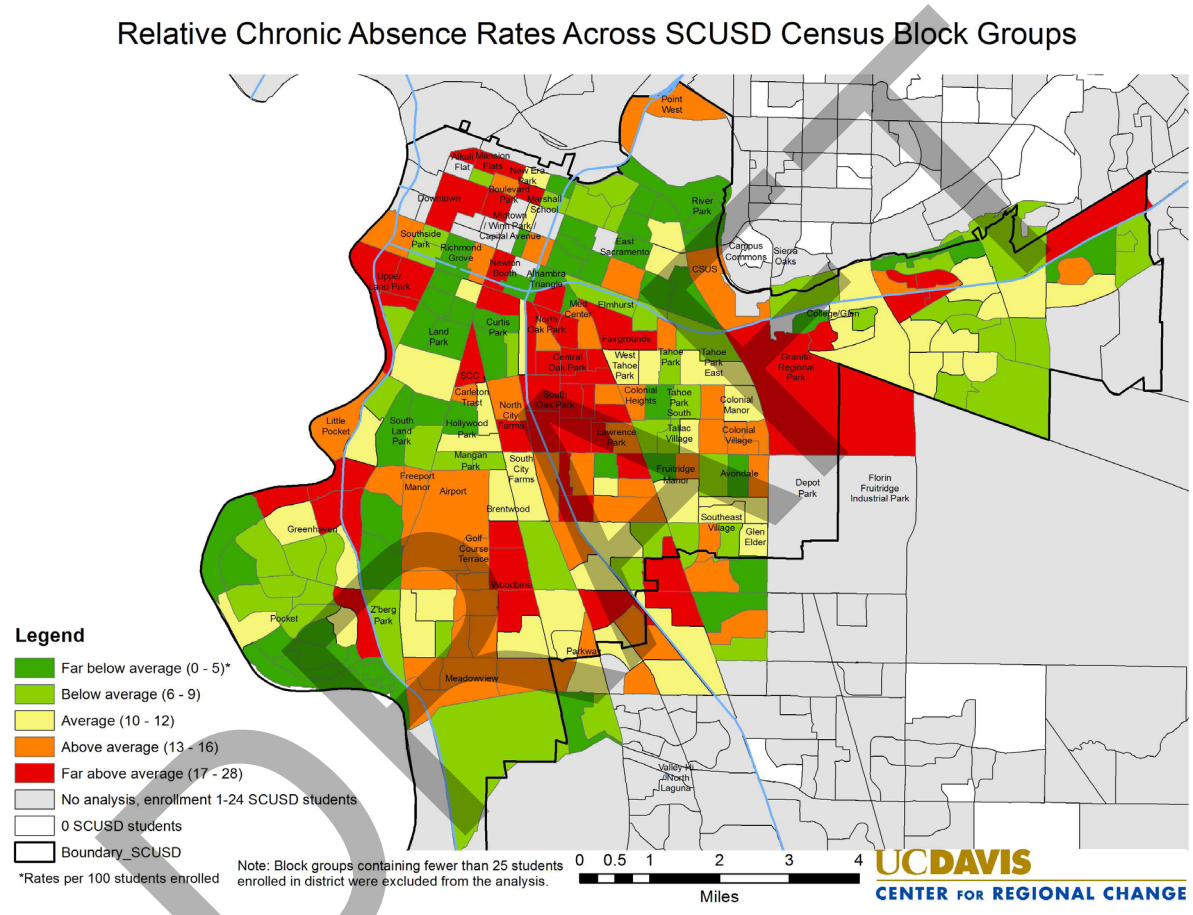

Figure 10. 2010-2011 Chronic Absence Rates Relative to the District Average

3.7 School distribution of chronic absence

Identifying schools serving high concentrations of chronically absent students provides important direction for prioritizing investment in unpacking and addressing attendance barriers. This information also provides a basis for further examining whether/how specific school characteristics might be associated with higher rates of chronic absence. Locating schools with relatively low rates of chronic absence that serve similar student populations may help identify strategies that effectively support school attendance. The following maps offer a foundation for these next steps by showing 2010-2011 chronic absence rates across the district for elementary, middle and high schools; please note that these might differ from current chronic absence rates.

In each map schools are depicted with color-coded dots. Dark green indicates the school's chronic absence rate is less than 5%, light green indicates a rate of 5% to 9.9%, orange is 10%-19.9%, and red indicates 20% or higher. The maps' backgrounds reflect the percentage of children under 18 years old living in households with incomes below the federal poverty line. The shade distinguishes between places with high rates (dark blue, medium rates (medium blue) and low rates (light blue) of economic poverty.

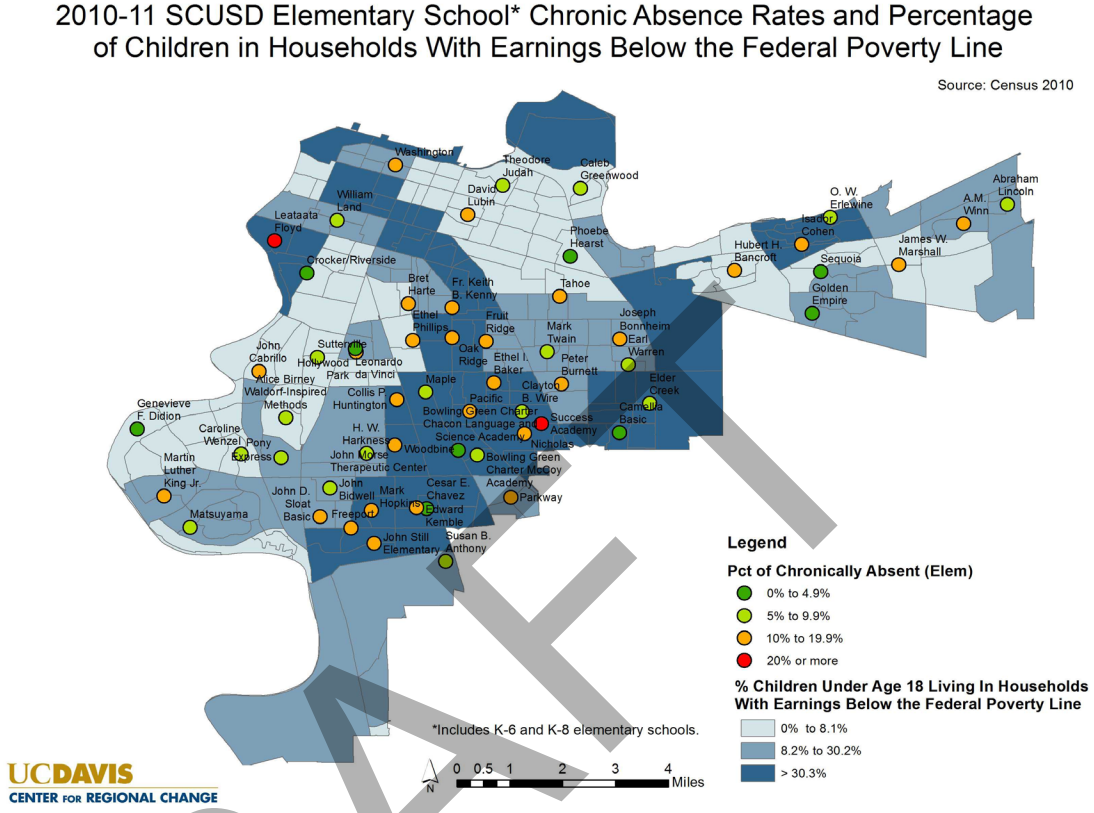

Figure 11. Elementary/K-8 School Chronic Absence Rates and % Children in Households With Earnings Below the Federal Poverty Line

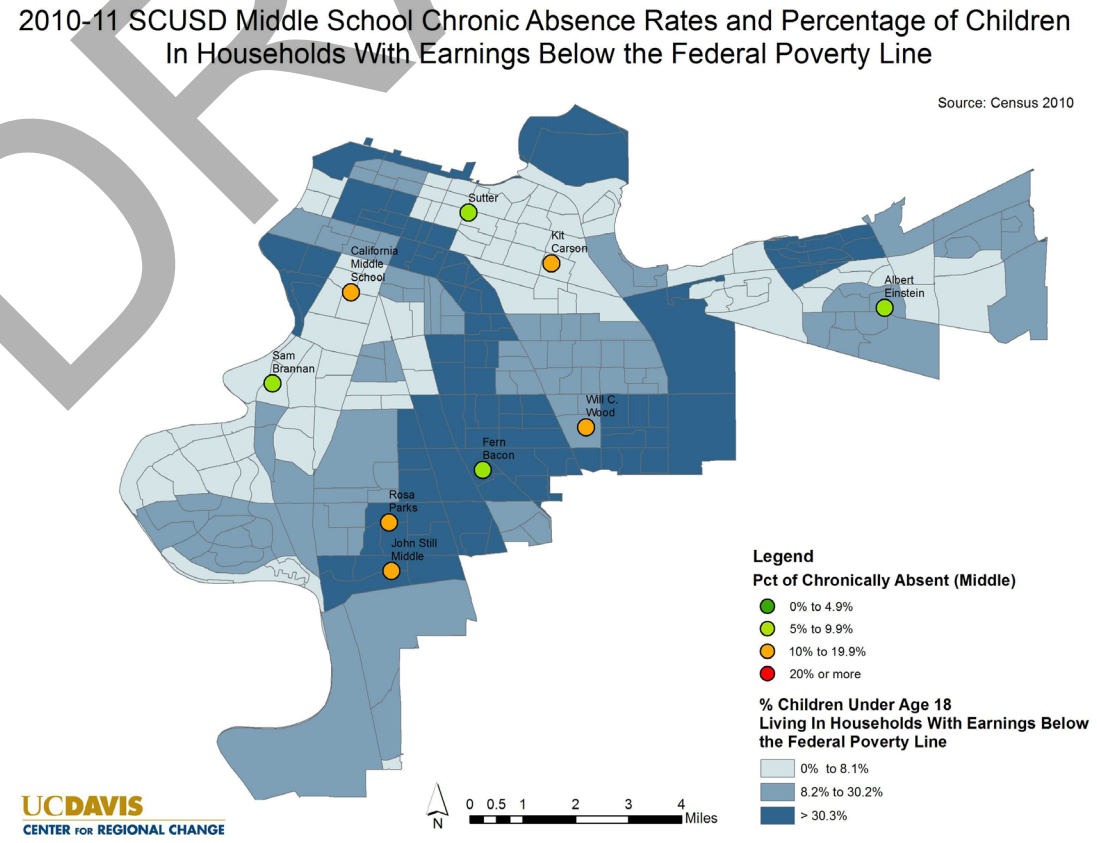

Figure 12. Middle School Chronic Absence Rates and Percentage of Children in Households With Earnings Below the Poverty Line

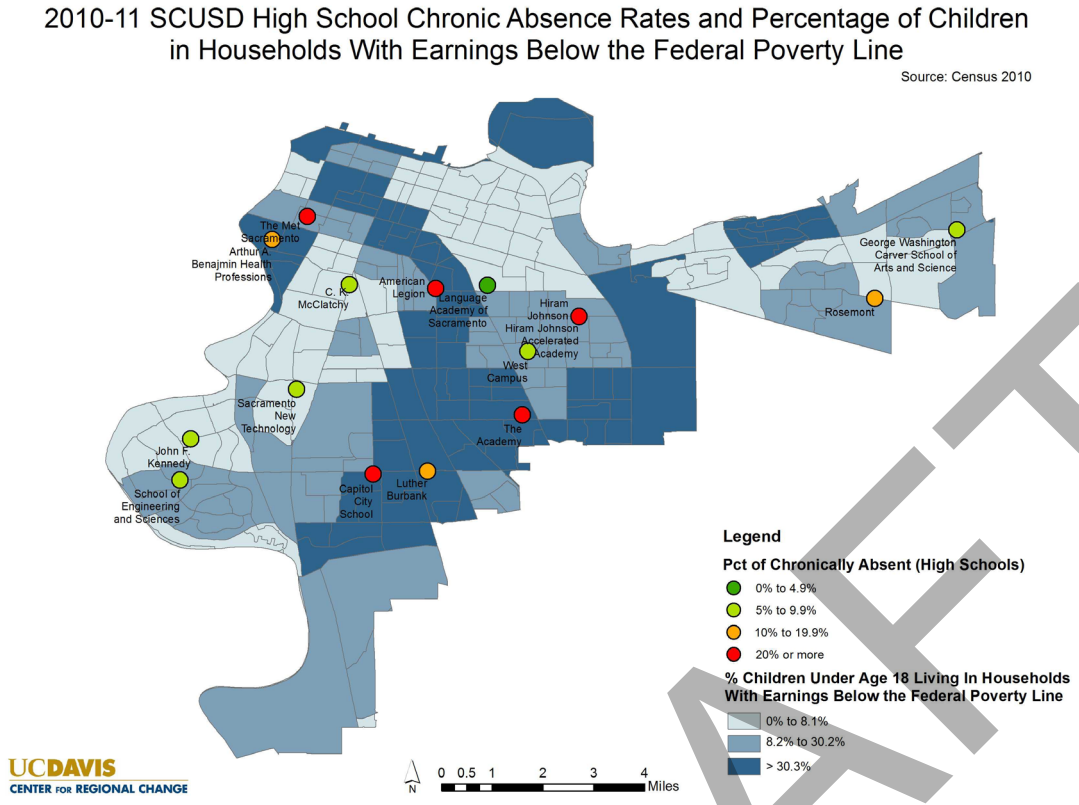

Figure 13. High School Chronic Absence Rates and Percentage of Children in Households With Earnings Below the Poverty Line

Chronic absence is uneven across schools at each grade level

These maps reveal that in 2010-2011, chronic absence was unevenly distributed across schools at each grade level in SCUSD. To some extent this likely reflects the variation in student populations across schools and the associations between population characteristics and chronic absence detailed earlier in this brief. However, it is also possible that chronic absence patterns play out differently at individual school sites in comparison with the district as a whole. Further examination of schools serving similar student populations with different attendance outcomes might reveal varying barriers to attendance, as well as school and classroom practices that can help reduce chronic absence.

Conclusion

This brief has described district-level chronic absence patterns based on 2010-2011 student data. Across the district more than 1 in 10 enrolled students, 5020 young people, were chronically absent or severely chronically absent in the 2010-2011 school year. These rates vary-- and in some cases are much higher, ranging up to 1 in 3 young people--across particular populations, neighborhoods and schools.

This brief has not identified the cause of chronic absence. Doing so would require additional information and different types of data analysis. However, understanding which young people are chronically absent and where they live and attend school provides a foundation for determining barriers to school attendance and either eliminating them or supporting children, youth, families educators and community leaders to collaborate on overcoming them.

Endnotes:

[1]This classification does not include students coded as “Non-Intense Speech Learning Disabled” and having “Specific Learning Disabilities.” Classification includes students with the following conditions (as per SCUSD codes): Autism, Deaf, Deaf-Blind, Emotionally Disturbed, Hard of Hearing, Mentally Retarded, Multihandicapped, Orthopedically Disables, Other Health Disabled, Traumatic Brain Injury, Visually Disabled, Established Medical Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, Established Medical Disability. Students with School code = “Home/Hospital” and “John Morse Therapeutic Center” were excluded from this analysis.
[2]Definition of “homeless” downloaded 8/17/12 from www.scusd.edu/homeless-services
[3]These results might be skewed by the fact that chronically absent students were less likely to be at school when the test was administered: 74% of chronically absent students took the test in comparison with 89% of their peers who were not chronically absent.
[4]Information on the Physical Fitness Test downloaded 8/17/12 from http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/pf/cefpft.asp
[5]Census block groups are larger than a census block and smaller than a census tract. They generally contain 600 to 3,000 people, with an optimum size of 1,500 people.(https://www.census.gov/geo/www/geo_defn.html#CensusBlock)
[6]A standard score, called a z-score, is used to compare each block group’s chronic absence rate to that of the entire district. It is derived by subtracting the district’s mean chronic absence rate from an individual block group’s raw chronic absence rate (calculated as numbers of chronic absentees per 100 students enrolled) and dividing the difference by the population standard deviation. The categories include below -1.5 standard deviations, between -1.5 and -0.5, -0.5 to 0.5, 0.5 to 1.5 and above 1.5.

Brief #4: Next Steps Toward Eliminating Chronic Absence

Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) schools, students, and the community as a whole are paying a high price for chronic absence. Across the district[1] more than 1 in 10 enrolled students, 5020 young people, were chronically absent in the 2010-2011 school year. These rates vary — and in some cases are much higher — across particular populations, neighborhoods, and schools. As a result, schools are missing out on millions of dollars of funding each year, student learning is likely compromised, and broader social costs are accruing. These findings suggest four types of next steps: (1) organize to use data effectively, (2) identify attendance barriers, (3) build partnerships to eliminate attendance barriers, and (4) promote attendance. These steps comprise a broad framework for action; detailed plans must emerge from a combination of local stakeholder insights and lessons-learned from other schools and communities engaged in addressing chronic absence.[2]

These steps comprise a broad framework for action. Detailed plans must emerge from a combination of local stakeholder insights and lessons-learned from other schools and communities engaged in addressing chronic absence.

(1) Organize to Use Data Effectively

School sites and the district office currently collect the data needed to identify chronically absent students. However, these data are not tracked, analyzed and disseminated in ways that facilitate action on the part of district and school leaders and other community stakeholders.

Important adjustments include:

- Track attendance in ways that enable analysis and reporting of chronic absence over time for the district, schools, and individuals;
- Track chronic absence rates for individual students and schools and share that multiple times per year with school leaders;
- Present regularly analyses of chronic absence in ways that facilitate engagement of potential community supports for students and families;
- Allocate adequate staff time at the district and school sites to analyze and act upon chronic absence data;
- Provide professional development to school leaders on approaches to analyzing and employing their student data to address chronic absence; and
- Implement accountability mechanisms that require timely attention to attendance problems.

(2) Identify Attendance Barriers

The analyses presented in this set of briefs suggest that the nature of key barriers (and combinations of barriers) to attendance may vary across individual students, grade-levels, populations and places. Additional quantitative and spatial data analyses are needed to identify these barriers. It is equally important for schools and community partners to engage young people, parents and other caretakers, and “front line” youth workers in identifying attendance barriers.

Key steps include:

- Build a systemic approach to engaging chronically absent students and their caretakers in identifying attendance barriers, designed to account for factors that may impede their engagement with schools;
- Build a systematic approach to assessing patterns of attendance barriers across populations and places.

(3) Build Partnerships to Eliminate Attendance Barriers

Schools are central to eliminating attendance barriers: they have access to students and caretakers, access to student data, staff-members with great insight into student experience, and the ability to implement policies and practices that either facilitate or impede attendance. However, schools are unlikely to have the capacity — in terms of financial resources, knowledge and networks, and authority — to address all attendance barriers alone.

Some solutions must be found beyond school walls, for example in regional transportation planning, faith-based organizations and ethnic networks with key relationships and cultural capacity, housing, health and social welfare agencies, and initiatives led by youth, community-based organizations, and/or businesses.[3] Building, and building upon existing, school-family-community-regional partnerships in a focused manner to address attendance barriers will likely be a key component of a successful strategy to eliminate chronic absence.

(4) Promote Attendance

Beyond identifying and eliminating attendance barriers, schools and their community partners must also focus on encouraging school attendance. Next steps should include:

- Early outreach to students and families with “unsatisfactory” attendance aimed, and
- School and community practices that foster a culture of attendance and engagement.[4]

Fortunately SCUSD, Sacramento and the Capital Region are rich in resources. All Sacramentans bear the costs of chronic absence, and therefore all have a stake in identifying and eliminating barriers to school attendance.

Endnotes:

[1]For the purpose of this calculation we excluded attendance data for students in Grade 13 (students taking an additional year to complete high school) and with School code = “Home/Hospital;” we were unable to include data for students attending John Morse Therapeutic Center and Yav Pem Suab Academy.

[2]For example, AttendanceWorks (www.attendanceworks.org) is a state and national initiative focused on addressing chronic absence.

[3]For example, by adopting a community schools approach, Grand Rapids, MI has employed community partnerships to provide outreach and case management for students with poor attendance; in response chronic absence has decreased and student achievement has increased (http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/grand-rapids/). Check and Connect sites make use of paid, trained mentors to work with students and their families when students show signs of disengagement from school (http://checkandconnect.org).

[4]For example, in New York City school-wide incentives, use of data and mentoring for students at risk of chronic absence have increased attendance and reduced chronic absence in pilot elementary and middle schools (http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/new-york-city/).