

Trust in Truancy

Tackling the Attendance Policy Through Collaboration

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Key Terms

Truancy: In California, a student is truant if they are absent or tardy by more than 30 minutes without a valid excuse on 3 days in a school year.

Habitual Truancy: A student is habitually truant if he/she has been reported truant three or more times during the school year and an appropriate school employee has made a conscious effort to hold at least one meeting with the student and his or her parent(s).

Chronic Truancy: A student is chronically truant if he/she is absent without a valid excuse for at least 10% 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% 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.

(California Department of Education, 2021)

Demographics

Ravenswood City Elementary Enrollment by Ethnicity Source: California Department of Education, 2019	
African American	5.5%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.1%
Asian	0.6%
Filipinx	0.2%
Hispanic or Latinx	83.1%
Pacific Islander	8.1%
White	0.9%
Two or More Reported	1.3%
Not Reported	0.2%

Given its history and current knowledge of EPA and immigrant youth, immigrant families reside in RCSD.

Background

Currently, the state of California enforces a law, Education Code - EDC Section 41372, that essentially mandates schools and education to be funded in a way that meets this code's requirements (California Department of Education). Thus, California utilizes a student count mechanism called Average Daily Attendance (ADA) to calculate funding. ADA is the total number of days of student attendance divided by the total number of days of instruction. Each student's ADA is kept track of by their school and the student absence rate, or the "attendance-based formula," determines how much funding each school will receive for the given year (EdSource, 2018). The ADA system provides an incentive for students and schools to encourage students to attend, and it would present an unfairness to contain the same amount of funding to a school that is consistent with high attendance rates to one that is inconsistent with its attendance.

However, California is 41st in the nation in per-pupil funding. Due to the basis of school funds being on student attendance rather than enrollment, and due to low-income students having proportionally higher rates of absences due to uncontrollable circumstances, their schools—typically underfunded as well—receive even less funding which inherently leads to a lower quality of overall education for these students in addition to a decrease in feasibility for these schools to implement interventions or programs to improve the quality (Freedberg, 2019). Typically, immigrant families suffer from lower income levels and thus higher rates of absenteeism in school (García & Weiss, 2018). The lower amount of funds dissuades teachers and staff in effect due to the decrease in compensation and wages, and income segregation in the local neighborhoods, contributing to a lack of quality education without potentially better qualified teachers and staff. On an individual basis, because individual chronically absent students are out of school on different days, chronic absences could be masked by average daily attendance data. For example, a school with 90% average daily attendance for the year might have 30% or more of its students chronically absent but does not tell the number of students absent and the number of absences per student, which critically prevents the visibility of and the action for individual students' needs (Kostyo, et.al., 2018). Schools would also have to base their expenditure on the funding, though because it is impossible to predict how many absences will occur,

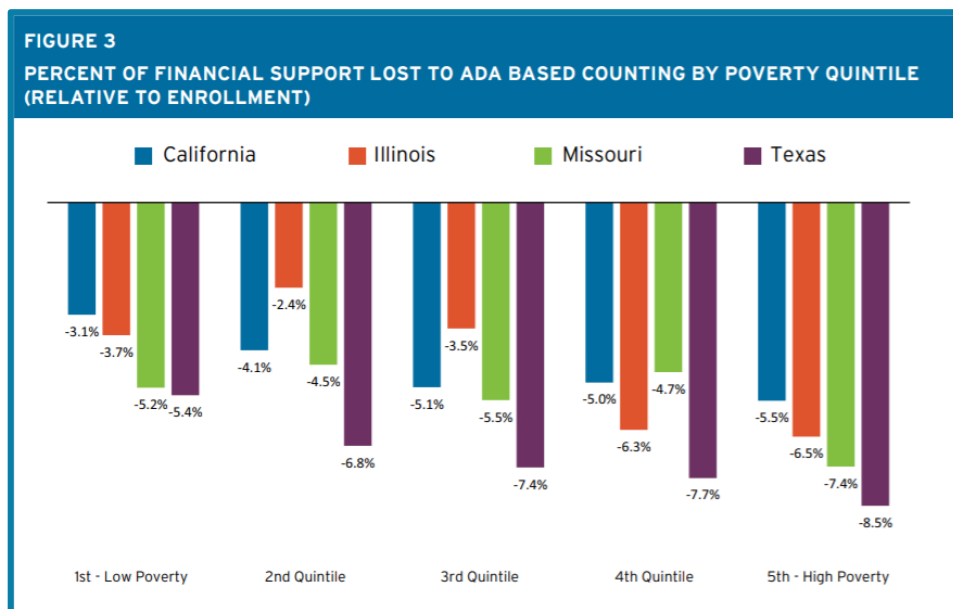
expenditures are commonly on the assumption of 100% average daily attendance and do not account for school closure days due to bad weather or illnesses which lower the ADA. Ultimately, it is primarily the low-income, underfunded school districts that suffer the most from state enacted policies as these districts rely on the state and state aid for a far greater percentage of their school budgets than do wealthier districts that have the advantage of local-funding and support (ChangeLabSolutions, 2014).

Truancy Policy

In the Ravenswood City School District in East Palo Alto, a district with a large low-income and immigrant population, the attendance policy states that if a student is deemed a truant, a school employee must make a conscious effort to have a meeting with the student and his or her parent(s) as Education Code - EDC Section 48200 states that you are obligated to send your children, to school, on- time every day. If the truancy continues and the student is labeled as habitually truant, they will be “referred to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB) for appropriate action.”

Final repercussions of truancy are a referral for legal action through Child Protective Services, Probation Department, or the District Attorney’s Office. The final legal results may include fines, court ordered parent education programs, or decreased financial assistance (Ravenswood City School District).

Contrary to the purpose of these actions, the truancy policy in RCSD seems to have little to no critical changes in attendance rates as seen in the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) graph for Ravenswood City Elementary. In fact, from 2014 to 2018, the number of students in attendance continuously decreases. This is crucial as what was stated prior, low attendance attributes to lower funding, which essentially affects the quality of education the student receives in terms of providing enough support to aid performance results in English language literacy and mathematics. Chronic absenteeism is one of the many factors that lead to students, as early as pre-kindergarten, not being able to read proficiently by the end of third grade and more likely to be retained in later grades, are less likely to develop the social skills needed to persist in school, are less likely to graduate from high school, and are



Source: ChangingLabSolutions, 2014

Consequently, schools, including those in California, implement an attendance policy within their district to **maintain** a consistent, ideally high, attendance rate through enforcing ramifications such as referrals and legal fines to **discourage** absences.

Truancy Policy Cont.

less likely to enroll and persist in college (Attendance Works, 2016). In its 2016 report, “The Condition of Education, the National Center for Education Statistics” attributed living in poverty during early childhood, in part, to lower levels of academic performance ‘beginning in kindergarten and extending through elementary and high school’” (Taylor, 2019). In addition, during the 2017- 2018 academic year, RCSD had a 14.3% chronic absenteeism rate of all its students, while Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD), a rather wealthier neighborhood and school district, had a rate of 5.1% the same year (Ed-Data).

The issue is that the policy in place for RCSD itself does not provide enough steps in between the three main points of action: holding at least one meeting with the parent and student, referring to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB), and taking legal action through the (CPS) Child Protective Services of the Social Services Department, the Probation Department, or the District Attorney’s Office that may lead to Juvenile court action. There is little action in between these stages in terms of contacting and addressing the attendance problem personally and figuring out the reasons behind the absences. In terms of accessibility, RCSD could improve outreach methods for providing resources and transparency as the district’s website, where the truancy policy information is located, lacks detailed and clear information. This is significant as many students and parents will refer to the website for information much more than searching for the policy with convoluted information, which may be difficult to comprehend for immigrant families if not translated, in the packets of papers sent home in the beginning of the school year. Based on the website page alone, it suggests that after solely one attempt at a meeting with student and parent/guardian, the student would be deemed a habitual truant, and shortly after, that student would be referred to SARB with a message of possible legal action.

With this statement alone, the policy appears more punitive than rehabilitative. Many studies reveal that punitive measures show little effectiveness as they do not address the root cause of decreasing attendance (Sutphen, et. al., 2010). Students miss lessons, are behind on schoolwork when they return, feel alienated, are most likely to drop out, struggle to find jobs, or get involved with the Juvenile Justice System, in addition to students of color being punished at a disproportionate rate compared to White students (Wallace, 2018). Determining the systemic and foundational issue rather than providing the band-aid and punishment would decrease the rates of absenteeism instead; thus, the RCSD Board of Education should address their Absence and Truancy Policy more thoroughly as they are the ones who manage the district’s policies/affairs.

Chronic Absenteeism in RCSD vs. PAUSD

Ravenswood City Elementary (RCSD)					
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
All Students	N/A	N/A	15.3 %	14.3 %	N/A

Palo Alto Unified (PAUSD)					
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
All Students	N/A	N/A	5 %	5.1 %	N/A

Chart Notes

Source

Data collected by the California Department of Education (CDE) through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). Aggregate data files are provided by the CDE – Data Reporting Office at: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesabd.asp>

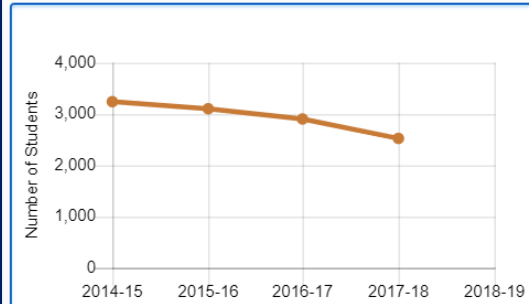
According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2020, the population in **East Palo Alto** was 29,519. Of that population, **12.6%** were living in poverty.

Graphs and Data

ADA and Performance Results in RCSD decreases correspondingly in the same years.

Average Daily Attendance (ADA)

Ravenswood City Elementary
CDS Code 41-68999-0000000



View Table Data

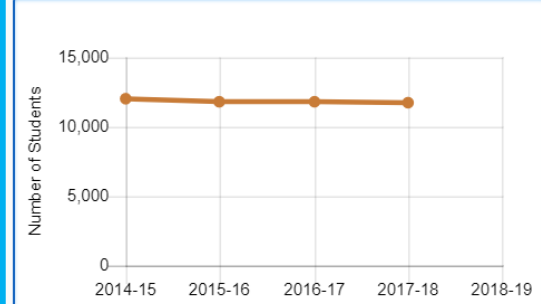
Average Daily Attendance (ADA)	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
ADA	3,241	3,103	2,903	2,524	N/A

Chart Notes Source

Data collected by the California Department of Education (CDE) through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). ADA displayed in this graph is from the CDE School Fiscal Services Division's Current Expense of Education calculation.

Average Daily Attendance (ADA)

Palo Alto Unified
CDS Code 43-69641-0000000



View Table Data

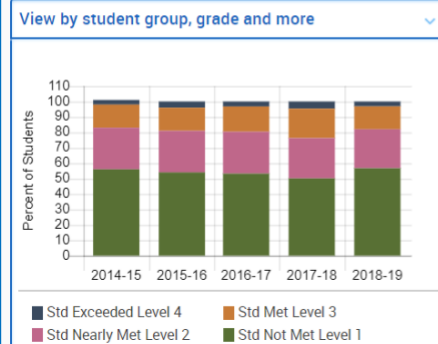
Average Daily Attendance (ADA)	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
ADA	12,024	11,805	11,806	11,738	N/A

Chart Notes Source

Data collected by the California Department of Education (CDE) through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). ADA displayed in this graph is from the CDE School Fiscal Services Division's Current Expense of Education calculation.

CAASPP English Language Arts/Literacy Results

Ravenswood City Elementary
CDS Code 41-68999-0000000



View Table Data

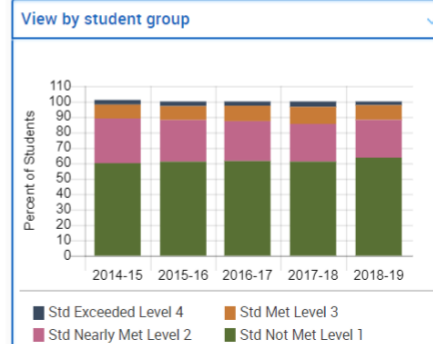
CAASPP English Language Arts/Literacy Results	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Std Exceeded Level 4	3%	4%	3.24%	4.63%	3.13%
Std Met Level 3	15%	15%	16.35%	19.1%	14.85%
Std Nearly Met Level 2	27%	27%	27.19%	26.16%	25.31%
Std Not Met Level 1	56%	54%	53.22%	50.11%	56.7%

Chart Notes Source

California Department of Education - CAASPP Office. Additional CAASPP data can be found at <https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/>. Downloadable research files are available at: <https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2016/ResearchFileList>

CAASPP Mathematics Results

Ravenswood City Elementary
CDS Code 41-68999-0000000



View Table Data

CAASPP Mathematics Results	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Std Exceeded Level 4	3%	3%	2.76%	3.5%	2.33%
Std Met Level 3	9%	9%	9.96%	11.05%	9.58%
Std Nearly Met Level 2	29%	27%	25.89%	24.42%	24.51%
Std Not Met Level 1	60%	61%	61.39%	61.03%	63.57%

Chart Notes Source

California Department of Education - CAASPP Office. Additional CAASPP data can be found at <https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/>. Downloadable research files are available at: <https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2016/ResearchFileList>

RECOMMENDATIONS

There have been multiple critiques in the form of model policies and issue briefs. We have collected and combined these critiques with our own suggestions and have produced the following recommendations to the RCSD Board of Education:

I. Schools should have **strategies that prevent attendance problems**. Such strategies may include:

1. Programs, classes, clubs, and/or activities that help develop students' feelings of **connectedness with school and school community**. Research literature has often recognized learning programs and activities outside of regular school hours have a strong correlation to positive outcomes such as quality youth development, increased school attendance and higher academic engagement (Hirsh et al., 2010). This is due to the ability for youth to engage with learning outside of the typical classroom setting in that they can practice active construction of knowledge, be involved with material that pertains to their community culture, get regular feedback on progress, interact and learn more from their peers, experience opportunities to rethink work and understanding as well as be recognized for their own work and knowledge, and much more (The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project).
2. **Engaging learning experiences**, during and after school.
3. **Incentives/rewards** for students that show improvement in attendance. Providing students and their families with rewards, such as certificates, and incentives, such as recognition of general attendance through school rallies and welcoming fellow students into the building each day, are additional ways to motivate students to improve their attendance. An important aspect of this, however, is not only recognizing good attendance, but improved attendance as well - since the acknowledgement of only good attendance can lead to the exclusion of students that have struggled with attendance in the past (Attendance Works).
4. **Outreach to students that show early signs of attendance problems**. Schools often emphasize the importance of education and its benefits, but rarely seem to nurture the relationship or feelings that students may or may not have with their own education. Having activities and learning experiences both in and out of school, that teachers and administration conduct, that help develop a student's personal connection to his or her education and form personal aspirations and goals for themselves, will benefit their attitudes towards attending school. In terms of improving student attendance, these outreach activities may include teachers simply contacting parents of students that seem to struggle with attendance to welcome them to school and/or check in or inviting students and their families to functions like back to school celebrations (Sanchez, 2012).

II. Schools, before contacting Social Services, the Probation Department, District Attorney's Office, and other departments for legal action, should take **more reasonable and less extreme approaches to ensure the safety of students**. These approaches may range from:

1. **Outreach to community agencies/partners** that may be involved with students' particular communities. Having activities and learning experiences both in and out of school, that teachers and administration conduct, that help develop a student's personal connection to his or her education and form personal aspirations and goals for themselves, will benefit their attitudes towards attending school. In terms of improving student attendance, these outreach activities may include teachers simply contacting parents of students that seem to struggle with attendance to welcome them to school and/or check in or inviting students and their families to functions like back to school celebrations (Sanchez, 2012).

2. **More collaboration with child welfare services** to ensure that the student and their family is receiving proper aid in education, nutrition, finances, etc. Having activities and learning experiences both in and out of school, that teachers and administration conduct, that help develop a student's personal connection to his or her education and form personal aspirations and goals for themselves, will benefit their attitudes towards attending school. In terms of improving student attendance, these outreach activities may include teachers simply contacting parents of students that seem to struggle with attendance to welcome them to school and/or check in or inviting students and their families to functions like back to school celebrations (Sanchez, 2012).
3. **Referral to physical and/or mental health services if needed.** These measures would be taken as soon as the student reaches the level of habitual truancy, in which school administration would work with community partners or outside services to formulate a course of action in order to make sure the student is referred to or given resources that would prevent them from continuing to be absent (Hanover Research, 2016).

III. Compared to school districts in Palo Alto, information, such as on the website, of the Ravenswood City School District's truancy policy is exceedingly vague. **More transparency would be better.**

1. For instance, Palo Alto Unified School District's policy on chronic absence and truancy entails information regarding efforts in addressing truancy, consequences of being truant, health related absences, and other records. In contrast, Ravenswood City School District gives vague summaries of what a truant is and proceeds to explain that students will be referred to the School Attendance Review Board and if truancy continues, legal action will be taken. **This lack of transparency and detail prohibits students and parents from learning about the consequences of truancy and how it may affect their everyday lives.** In addition, the policy should be informative, but with easy-to-understand wording, especially given the high rates of immigrant families in RCSD. In a HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series study, truancy notifications with simpler words and less government jargon reduced student absences by as much as 40 percent (Lasky-Fink, et. al., 2020). Allowing students, parents, and even the public access to a more thorough debrief of the truancy policy could be beneficial to everyone. This should be changed on the website or with annual reports or handbooks/guides that can be accessible to the public.
2. In combination to general transparency in schools' processes in addressing truancy and its consequences, there should also be clarity on definitions such as what counts as an absence, what is considered as truancy and what is considered as chronic absence (Kostyo et. al, 2018). This will allow for a better understanding, on the part of the students and their families, on what absenteeism is viewed as by their schools and what consequences may come of it.

With this policy reform, students will feel a stronger connection to their education, with the knowledge that their respective schools will present the resources they need to thrive in an academic setting.

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