



# The Gap Can Be Bridged

Attendance Insights on 700,000 California Students:  
A Report on the Results of Investing  
in a Systematic Approach



# 2018

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

of the 2018 Report on a Systematic Approach to  
K-12 Education's Biggest Challenge





# Executive Summary



*Students, this is a desk.  
You need to be in it every single day.*

*—A suggested paraphrase of Coach Vince Lombardi's famous first-practice comment to the Green Bay Packers in 1961, "Gentlemen, this is a football."*

## THE BOTTOM LINE

It's no longer a matter of polite disagreement or academic debate. **School attendance is an undeniable game changer**—the difference between a young person going on to have a productive life or a limited one.

Educators have spent more than three decades and many millions of dollars trying to close the achievement gap. The inescapable fact is that absent kids will have absent lives—devoid of achievement, self-esteem, or the rewards of civic involvement and community connection.

**This gap, at long last, can be bridged.**

It is not "a bridge too far." It's within the reach of every school district that prides itself on not just potential but on measurable, attainable results.

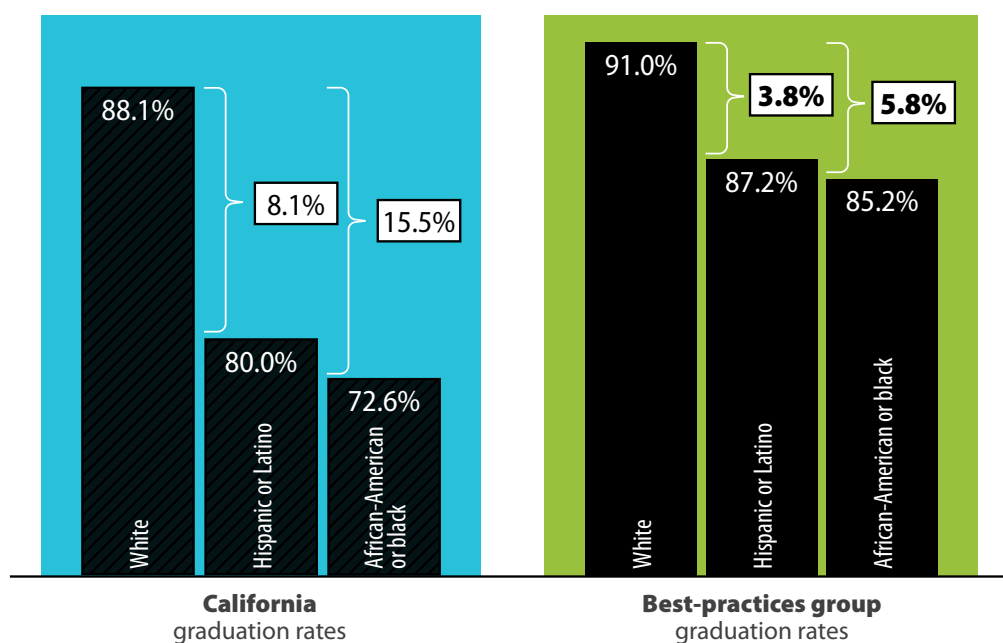
The key words:

- Here (in class); and
- Now (it's high time to attack this problem at its roots).

## WHAT WE'VE LEARNED THROUGH BEST PRACTICES—AND BY PAYING ATTENTION TO ATTENDANCE

Some very significant data point the way to a much more promising future for K-12 education. Here are our key findings:

1. **Graduation rates.** The best-practices group outperformed state and national graduation rates in each ethnic subgroup examined—and, most important, **simultaneously closed the ethnic gap at a faster rate than the state.**



In 2016, the white student best-practices group ended with an impressive 91 percent graduation rate. In addition:

- Hispanic or Latino students in the best-practices group graduated at a rate of 87.2 percent—which was a full 7.2 percent above the state’s rate of 80 percent.
- Hispanic or Latino students in the best-practices group closed the ethnic graduation rate gap to 3.8 percent.
- For the 2015-16 school year, African-American or black students in the best-practices group graduated at 85.2 percent—which amounted to a full 12.6 percentage points higher than California’s African-American or black student cohort graduation rate. It should be added that African-American or black students in the best-practices group showed even more dramatic results compared to the general population. **This group reduced the ethnic graduation rate gap to 5.8 percent** as opposed to the state, which still had a 15.5 percent gap.

- 2. One of this report's most significant findings proves** not only the robustness of the attendance solution applied, but also that a solution exists to bridge the achievement gap.

Not surprisingly, those using the identified best-practices approach outperformed the inconsistent-practices group in nearly every category measured. Yet even the inconsistent-practices group saw overall improvements!

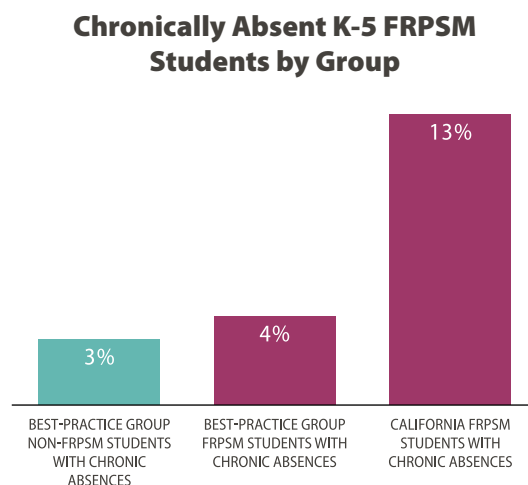
And when best practices were used over a three-year period, measurable, remarkable advances were made at every grade level in dealing with truant, excused and chronic absences.

Of special note: While best practices were equally applied to all students, they **especially benefited Hispanic or Latino and African-American or black students, topping the improvement gains in attendance of white students in almost every age group and category**. It's rare to see nontargeted solutions benefit these student groups more than white students. The results both lift all students while further closing the persistent, misunderstood achievement gap.

- 3. Using best practices reduced the attendance gap.** The analyzed school districts **successfully reduced the gap** between the number of chronically absent who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and those students who are not disadvantaged to less than 1 percent.

The *In School + on Track: Attorney General's 2015 Report on California's Elementary School Truancy & Absenteeism Crisis* found socioeconomically disadvantaged students in grades K-5 have a chronic absenteeism rate of 13.1 percent.

By following the identified best practices, the districts in this report reduced the number of students receiving Free and Reduced-Price School Meals (FRPSM) who were chronically absent to less than 4 percent. This represents an improvement of over 9 percent.



The pathway to success has never been more clearly illuminated: If these numbers were applied to California's entire socioeconomically disadvantaged K-5 student population, the number of students who could be prevented from becoming chronically absent drops from 234,287 students to 71,538 students—thereby saving 162,749 students from leading lives of constant disappointment.



- 4. Engaging students and families.** How school districts communicate information matters. Communicating in a positive manner and in a student's home language will measurably improve outcomes. The analyses show that families who received excessive excused-attendance notifications following that guideline were 64 percent to 84 percent more likely to change attendance patterns, rendering further interventions unnecessary.

Language	Efficiency of First Truancy Letter	Efficiency of First Excessive Excused Letter
Chinese	70.29%	84.42%
Hmong	42.72%	78.10%
Arabic	72.11%	77.97%
Tagalog	61.60%	77.19%
Mien (Yao)	61.11%	75.00%
Ukrainian	53.85%	74.51%
Vietnamese	69.51%	74.16%
Punjabi	67.44%	73.00%
Armenian	25.38%	72.45%
Russian	59.71%	72.12%
Lao	37.30%	71.15%
Spanish	46.92%	67.74%
English	47.84%	66.64%
Korean	52.27%	63.64%

## THE BACKSTORY

For more than 100 years, business gurus, comedians, celebrities, life coaches and how-to authors have said that 99 percent of success in life is achieved by “showing up.”

The Attendance Institute now has proof of that maxim's wisdom.

In a three-year study of more than 700,000 K-12 California students, we found that attendance—even more than rigorous academics, continuous testing and socioeconomic considerations—can have a profound effect on improving not just school lives, but also careers, family relationships and students' self-esteem.

Here's what we were dealing with:

- Eighty-three percent of students chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade do not read at grade level by third grade.
- Those students are four times more likely to quit school prior to graduation.
- These non-graduates are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than their peers who earned a diploma.
- Chronic absenteeism results in poor performance in relation to a student's peers.
- In addition, poor grades and chronic absenteeism make it more likely that students will quit high school. Their potential for incarceration and being a low-wage earner over the course of their lifetimes also increases.

**Attendance can break this cycle, regardless of race, financial health and culture.** It can be the catalyst for real and measurable improvement not just for academic success, but also for success throughout adulthood.

## WHAT WE DID, WHAT WE HEARD AND WHAT WE LEARNED

This report was commissioned by the Attendance Institute utilizing anonymized attendance data provided by School Innovations & Achievement, the education software and services firm headquartered in the Sierra Nevada foothills with branches in several states, including Texas and Oregon. It involved more than 700,000 students in 21 districts throughout California.

In the report, we analyze progress made by the local education agencies that made the commitment to increase student attendance—because forward-thinking leaders at each of the participating districts made improving student participation a priority. They







invested financially to implement software and services that tracked and analyzed attendance, then automatically communicated the findings to families.

That investment provided them with the data to review and continue to target improvements.

This report focused on 21 districts with high schools that participated in seven consecutive years of identified best attendance practices, beginning in 2009-10 and continued through 2015-16.

The average graduation rates of each ethnic group were compared to the national average and the state average.

The 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12 cohort graduation rates were included to determine the trajectory of improvement from the start of implementing identified best practices and to determine when changes for the better took place.

"It's not unlike a business using best practices to see what works and what doesn't," noted Dr. Dennis Wiechmann at Sanger Unified School District. "We took a year-over-year look for any opportunity to improve attendance." A similar effort paid off at Claremont Unified School District, where district officials saw referrals to the School Attendance and Review Board decline because families responded early to proactive interventions.

School districts that rigorously followed the best practices as identified by the Attendance Institute were able to enjoy the most positive (and most measurable) results. This included diligently training staff on the software that triggers letters and notifications to parents of student absences as well as regularly reviewing the data and sharing it with key groups.

Also noted, all of the districts in the study followed the basic practices:

- Standardizing attendance codes
- Automating attendance communications
- Tracking period absences versus full day absences
- Sending those communications in the students' home language—a tactical decision whose importance cannot be overemphasized



## WHAT WE'VE CONCLUDED

1. **Creating a culture around attendance** must begin with prekindergarten through third grade. A quality multimedia campaign that clearly communicates the importance of attendance is essential. In addition, educational material must be directed to the students as well as parents, with information needing to focus on the effects of poor attendance and where families can turn for support.

Because the transition years (grades 6-8) represent such a short period in which young people are undergoing rapid growth and development, this pivotal time span requires extra attention. Consequently, educational material must be directed to the students as well as parents.

2. **Consistency is essential to arriving at measurable outcomes.** Best practices are called those for a reason: They give districts that deploy attendance-improvement software and ancillary services the optimal opportunity to see what their challenges are and how to meet and conquer them.
3. **Don't be shy about shouting improvements from the rooftops.** Everyone wants your school district to succeed—your stakeholders are not just parents and students, but also the community at large, elected officials and the education community itself.
4. **Training staff in an attendance data collection system is essential** to achieve the best results.
5. **Understand the numbers.** Average daily attendance (ADA) only accounts for students present in a given time period. As a result, it's possible for a large percentage to be chronically absent (missing 10 percent or more of the school year) while the average daily attendance may show as high as 97 percent.



During 2015-16, one district examined for this report averaged 97 percent in attendance with chronic absences of 34 percent, 24 percent, and 27 percent in kindergarten, fourth grade, and 12th grade, respectively. This phenomenon occurs simply because on different days, different students make up the rate for those present.

The same principle applies to achievement measures. In a statewide study involving 3,171 schools and four grades (4, 6, 9 and 12), **achievement correlated significantly with building level attendance**. When using a multilevel calculation to determine if classroom presence was a value-added component in performance year after year, researchers determined that days present were statistically significant for improved grade point averages (GPAs).

## FINALLY ...

This report presents strategies that can be used in every school system to addressing the attendance crisis by dramatically reducing persistent absences—and it shows the unfortunate consequences for schools that fail to use them.

**In short, success in school and in life truly begins with showing up.**





