

Opinion: Calif. needs to address truancy

By Arne Duncan and Kamala Harris

Millions of desks sit empty in elementary school classrooms because of truancy each year, costing schools billions of dollars, wasting public resources and squandering one of the country's most precious resources: its young people.

We tend to think of truancy as something that starts in junior high or high school, but nationwide, about 1 in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students miss a month of school each year due to absences. In California, you could fill Staples Center in Los Angeles 13 times over with the 250,000 students who missed 18 days or more last year. About 1 million elementary school students in the state were truant – defined in California as three or more unexcused absences or tardies – during the 2012-13 school year.

Not surprisingly, students with high rates of unexcused absences fall behind. And teachers at schools with high truancy rates find themselves forced to teach the same material again and again.

Chronic absenteeism is especially damaging to disadvantaged students, who are already at higher risk of falling behind their peers academically. Missing school widens achievement gaps, and catching up can be difficult. Students who are truant in elementary school are more likely to be truant in middle and high school, when truancy is closely linked to an increased chance of a child dropping out.

Dropouts cost states billions in incarceration, lost productivity and lost tax revenues. Studies project that increasing graduation rates by just 10 percentage points would lead to as many as 3,000 fewer murders and nearly 175,000

fewer aggravated assaults nationwide.

The solution to truancy? It's straightforward: Hold accountable everyone who bears responsibility for getting kids to school.

School districts already have the tools, as well as the legal responsibility, to intervene when a child is truant. And it's clear that intervention helps. Truant elementary students whose attendance improves are half as likely to drop out in high school compared with students whose truancy continues or worsens.

School districts have long taken daily attendance, but they need to use the information they gather to create an early warning system that identifies children who are frequently absent. School administrators should contact guardians immediately when a child is truant and insist on a meeting to find solutions.

As needed, schools should connect families with social services, public health and community resources to address underlying problems. Parents must be held accountable, and law enforcement should support interventions that educate and bolster struggling students and parents. The business community should be enlisted to help create incentives to improve attendance, like rewards for schools and families with improved attendance.

California is one of only four states (along with New York, Colorado and Illinois) that does not collect individual student attendance data at the state level. That should change. These data are crucial for states to hold schools and districts accountable. Every state needs systems to track truancy, connect attendance to academic achievement and, where there are warning signs, intervene swiftly.

At the federal level, the Department of Education has invested in the revitalization of communities through its Promise

Neighborhoods program, and improving attendance has been a core strategy for some grantees. One of the department's largest investments in innovation is helping to expand a national program for at-risk students, which has improving attendance among its key goals. Other grants support school counselors and the creation of more positive school climates. And low-performing schools receiving federal funds to turn themselves around have commonly put resources toward reducing chronic absenteeism. All of these approaches can serve as models if they prove successful.

On Monday, a diverse group of local, state and federal leaders met in Los Angeles to discuss a new report by the California Department of Justice, "In School and on Track." It can be found online and will be updated annually to measure and compare the progress of California's counties and school districts.

The report provides a window into truancy's toll on the nation's economy, public safety and children. If state and federal leaders work together – alongside schools and parents – we can stop this waste of potential and get our children to class on time, every day. The price we pay otherwise is just too high.

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